

Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?

By: BukuBuku

“Foolish mortals!” Yaldabaoth’s shadow fell over them like a death shroud, “The sin of rebelling against a god is severe. As punishment, I banish you to other worlds unknown!”

The whole world shifted as the black wind swirled around them, twisting and contorting to create broken fractals in the flow of time and space. Yaldabaoth pulled his hand across the air over them, a movement as if ripping apart the weave of fate itself.

Joker gasped as bizarre doors flickered into existence.

One, a monolithic set of stone doors engraved with an alien image, cracked open to reveal a terrifying eye swimming in a void. The next, a glowing white shoji door exuding a strange energy that prickled at their very souls. The third, a circular ornate gate set in the floor, the bulging eyes at the top drank in the scenery as its gaping mouth pooled with vile black sludge. The final was nothing more than a fluctuating cloud of black and purple mist.

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Interrogation Room

Chapter 1: Interrogation Room

Cramped, stale, and uncomfortable.

That would be the description of the cold interrogation room he found himself in. The hard chair dug into his back and the cuffs locked around his wrists were bound to the table, a few experimental tugs did nothing to soothe his sore wrists. Honestly, he would prefer his cell in the Velvet Room compared to this hole. He glanced at the one-way mirror on the opposite wall and grinned. There were eyes on the other side of that mirror, he dearly hoped that they were unsettled by his appearance.

His hair, while not that surprising, was a ruffled, curly mess. Grime and dust stained his face, and there was a spider webbing crack in his mask, right underneath his left eye. Despite everything, his costume remained mostly intact, except his shoulder still burned from the bullet wound. The police didn't seem to care about it, but they at least had the decency to wrap it up in gauze, he ignored the crimson splotch that stained it.

A simple Dia would have him all fixed up in no time, yet he couldn't breach the strange fog that clouded his mind when he called upon his persona. They were distant and slipped through his fingers like smoke whenever he tried to reach them.

The chains around his wrist clinked when he threw his head back with a sigh. Had it been seconds?

Minutes?

Hours?

That had passed since they threw him in here? He had lost count.

Suddenly, his heart skipped a beat as the door swung open and two people stepped inside. One, a plain-looking detective in a brown trench coat, and two, a cat-headed police officer. It was a strange sight.

Things hadn't made sense since their arrival, so he plastered on a confident smirk as the detective took the seat opposite of him. A thin folder was set on the table and the detective dug a small notebook and pen from his coat pocket. He looked exhausted, but there was a kind smile on his face.

"We'll try to keep this short. My name is Tsukauchi Naomasa." The detective said, "We haven't been able to find anything about you in our system. So, for starters, why don't you tell us your name?"

"Hmm?" His playful smirk fell into something cold, "Straight to questioning? No drugs or beatings this time? I have to say, detective, I'm a bit touched to see someone like you care so much."

Tsukauchi flinched back as if he was struck, "Were you mistreated by the police force before?"

His confidence returned like a thick veil that coated the room, he simply shrugged, but held back the wince from the burning pain in his shoulder. Tsukauchi and the feline officer exchanged uneasy glances, but the detective cleared his throat and plastered on a tense smile.

"We'll investigate it if you give us names. I want to assure you that you won't come to any harm while you're in our custody, and we'll even give you a lighter sentence if you cooperate with us."

"Yeah, tell that to the cowboy who shot up my shoulder," He tilted his head to the side, "And the only person I'll cooperate with is Sae Nijima."

Tsukauchi and the officer looked at each other in confusion, then the detective turned to him with a furrowed brow.

“Who?”

“You don’t know your own public prosecutor?”

“The name doesn’t sound familiar,” Tsukauchi glanced over at the officer, “But Officer Tamakawa will look her up for you.”

Tamakawa nodded and left the room doused in an awkward silence. Tsukauchi pretended to flip through his notebook and the folder had yet to be touched. He knew they should have a stuffed profile, but it appeared that they didn’t have anything on him. Still, the ear ringing silence dragged on longer and longer, and sheer boredom and curiosity finally got the better of him.

“Hey detective,” Tsukauchi glanced up at him, “I’ll make a deal with you.”

“Go on.” Interest sparked in his eyes, and he sat up straight with his pen at the ready.

“I’ll tell you my name if you tell me what you did with Mona.”

“Mona?” Tsukauchi tapped his pen against his pad, “Oh, you mean your cat?”

He gave Tsukauchi a blank look, and the detective sighed.

“Your cat is still cooped up in a different interrogation room. Don’t worry, he’ll be in good hands after all of this is over.”

“Oh, I’m not worried.” A small chuckle escaped before he could stop it, “Mona can take care of himself if it comes to that.”

The detective’s eyes widened, “You really believe that, don’t you?”

He didn’t answer, instead, a smooth grin slithered into his expression.

Tsukauchi sighed as his shoulders sank, almost as if he was used to dealing with odd situations like this.

“So, your name?”

Oh, wasn’t this the fun part? His smirk grew, and he leaned forward onto the table. The chains ground against the metal table, but that didn’t seem to bother the detective as he mimicked the movement.

“Joker.”

He expected the detective’s eyes to light up with recognition, or have some semblance of surprise. But no, there was nothing of sort, just a confused tilt of the head at the infamous leader of the Phantom Thieves. The detective wrote it down nonetheless.

“Joker? No offense, but I wouldn’t choose that name for a new villain.”

Joker reeled back, and the sudden movement startled Tsukauchi. He took in Joker’s wide eyes and his all knowing smirk was wiped clean from his face. Tsukauchi glanced at the one-way mirror, then back at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re saying you’ve never heard of me?”

“No, I haven’t.” Tsukauchi searched Joker’s face with a frown.

Joker was about to respond, but the opening door interrupted him. Officer Tamakawa looked troubled, and his fur stood on end as he picked up the sharp tension in the room.

“Did you find Niijima?” Tsukauchi asked as the officer approached the table.

“No. There isn’t, or ever was, a public prosecutor by the name of Sae Niijima. I even called around the surrounding prefectures to make

sure.” The cat turned towards Joker, “Are you sure you have the right name?”

Joker’s heart pounded like a war drum and his hands sweat beneath his gloves.

“Are you sure you didn’t give me any drugs?” He forced a teasing lilt to his voice, “Or maybe *I’m* not the one who felt the prick of a dirty needle.”

The officer rolled his eyes as he crossed his arms.

“So,” Tsukauchi ignored them, “This nonexistent prosecutor of yours isn’t going to help you. Your only chance at a lighter sentence is to cooperate with us, so I suggest that you answer my questions.”

“She’s a real person and a badass prosecutor at that,” Joker said as he relaxed back in the chair, “I’ve spoken to her several times.”

Tsukauchi’s head snapped up at that. He searched Joker’s face as if he tried to see through a lie, but found none. Tamakawa’s ears flicked, and he gave the detective an odd look before glancing back at Joker with suspicion in his eyes.

“When did you speak with her last?”

“Does it matter?”

“Possibly, but I see you won’t answer that either.” Tsukauchi sighed, and wrote the name down, “So Joker, what’s your quirk? “

What the hell was a quirk? It seemed to be a common term by the way these two ogled at him. Joker desperately lacked information about this strange place, and he could almost hear Oracle’s teasing voice in the back of his mind.

His heart lurched. He hoped his friends were alright, wherever they ended up.

“Information should be a fair trade, detective,” Joker said, his gray eyes pierced through the other man, “Why don’t you two tell me what your quirks are first?”

The detective pinched the bridge of his nose, then looked at the officer. Tamakawa gave Joker a bewildered look, his fuzzy ears twitched and swiveled like a real cat. What would Mona have to say about that?

“Well, mine should be obvious.” Tamakawa said, “Feline mutation quirks are pretty common in Japan.”

Joker filed that information away for later. If there were cat mutations, who knows what else there could be? He’s only been here a short while, but that could explain the many strange things he’s encountered if he was really outside the metaverse like Mona suggested.

“My quirk is pretty simple. It’s called Polygraph, so I’ll always know if you tell the truth or not.”

Polygraph, huh? Maybe he could work with this.

“Well, I have nothing fancy like that.”

“Don’t lie to us.” Tamakawa suddenly snapped, “There have been several people that witnessed the power of those creatures you control, and you even healed one of the injured during the incident! You can’t sit here and tell us that you don’t have a quirk.”

“I’m not a liar,” Joker tilted his head and smiled, “It wasn’t the work of what you people call quirks.”

“You-”

“He’s telling the truth.” Tsukauchi gaped at Joker, his pen hovered shakily over the paper.

“What? But that’s impossible!”

Joker smirked as he leered at the officer, “You have no idea what’s *really* impossible, do you?”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Enough.” Tsukauchi glanced at the officer, “Why don’t you step out and get some coffee? I can handle the rest.”

Tamakawa huffed, but he stepped outside without another word. Joker chuckled, and it was worth the pain to see the detective’s bewildered look.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Joker said, though his eyes sparkled with humor, “I just feel sorry for your friend. A good cup of coffee must be hard to get in places like this.”

Tsukauchi deadpanned, and shook his head with a sigh. The room was quiet for a few moments, and the detective used it to gather his thoughts.

“What did you mean when you said your powers weren’t like quirks?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Look, kid,” The detective scrubbed at his eyes, then folded his hands on the table, “We’re getting nowhere fast. I can’t help you unless you help me, so I suggest we stop going in circles and get some answers from one another. Does that sound good?”

Joker didn’t respond and chose to lean back into his chair instead. The front legs hovered a few inches off the floor, and although the chains pulled at his sore wrists, he chose to mask it with a lazy smile.

“... Alright.” Tsukauchi shook his head, “Then I’ll ask the questions. What do you know about the League of Villains?”

“Who?”

“The League of Villains. The ones you were with when you invaded the USJ?”

The chair landed on all fours with a solid *thunk* . It jarred his injury, but it was funny to see the detective flinch backward.

“First off, I never *invaded* that fancy dome of yours. Second, this league needs a better name and a less creepy leader.” Joker flared his bound hands, the blood-red gloves popped compared to the rest of his dark clothes, “Who in their right mind wears severed hands around their body?”

“Out of curiosity, what would you name it?”

“I don’t know.” Joker scrutinized the detective with narrowed eyes, “Maybe something cool, like the Phantom Thieves.”

No recognition, not even a tiny spark. The detective blinked, and then his shoulders shook with contained laughter. Joker pushed past the serpents that roiled in his stomach and swallowed down the sandy dryness that sprouted in his mouth. Did the Phantom Thieves fall out of existence a second time? He held back the shivers at the thought of his friends vanishing again, amidst panicked screams and pattering rain.

“Alright then.” Tsukauchi chuckled, but his smile fell just as fast, “Back on topic, you’re saying that you’ve never met Shigaraki Tomura before the incident?”

“Nope.”

Tsukauchi narrowed his eyes, “Then how did the League recruit you?”

“I was never ‘recruited’.”

“Okay. I believe you, but other people won’t be so open-minded, even if I tell them about my quirk. They’ll say you had to of know their plans or at least worked with one of their numbers, to have the date and time that Class 1-A would be there.”

Joker’s smile shook, but he kept up his facade. He could use this information for later. Right now, however, he had to clear his name. *Again* . Or find a way to escape, locate Mona and his weapons, and try to find the rest of his friends. He knew he had to step lightly here, but perhaps he could play to this detective’s good side. Detective Tsukauchi seemed like a decent guy, and maybe he could sprinkle in a bit of truth to get past his quirk.

“Look,” Joker pulled his lips down and furrowed his brow, “I’ve never heard of the League of Villains, or of the USJ, or even this U.A. school before today. All I know is that one moment I’m with my friends, the next we’re blindsided by an attack. I blacked out and I was in an unfamiliar place when I came to. Mona was with me, and aside from him, there’s no sign of my other friends.”

Tsukauchi stared at him in shock, “You were attacked by a villain?”

“I suppose you could call it that.”

“It?”

Joker shrugged, and he didn’t bother hiding the wince as his shoulder burned with a vengeance. Tsukauchi’s face softened, and he looked down to write in his little notebook. Tsukauchi missed the quick, triumphant twitch of his lips, and it was gone when he looked back up at Joker.

“Let me get this straight, you were attacked by a villain and knocked unconscious, then woke up during the USJ invasion?”

“Pretty much, quite a boring story without all the bells and whistles though.”

There was no way a normal detective would stay calm if Joker described the God of Control. If Yaldabaoth taught him anything, it was that he learned to play this game, and play it well. He was only lucky that their plan with Niijima paid off in the end, but this was different.

“Were you brought to the USJ *against* your will?”

Joker rolled his eyes, “That’s what I was trying to tell you before you slapped on these lovely handcuffs and gave me an agonizing bullet wound. Not necessarily in that order, mind you.”

Tsukauchi grimaced. At least the detective had the guts to look apologetic, and he glanced at someone behind the mirror. Joker followed his eyes, his confident smirk was reflected right back at him.

“That doesn’t explain your costume or your unregistered powers. It’s against the law to hide your quirk or participate in such activities without a license.” Tsukauchi said slowly, “But I concede that you could be just as much a victim as the students who were at the USJ. Do you want to tell me what happened before your arrival there?”

Joker snapped out of his one-way staring contest and raised a brow. This man was giving him a chance. Joker expected the sudden whisper of Lavenza’s voice in his ear, a promise of new power to be forged from this bond with Tsukauchi. But alas, Lavenza’s voice was silent. No confidant was being written, so did that mean his fate was malleable?

... Or did it suggest something much worse?

Tsukauchi would never admit that this boy’s stormy eyes had pierced straight through his heart. There had to be something more to this kid, he held an air of smooth authority that didn’t belong to someone his age. He could practically feel Nezu’s brain going into overdrive from behind the mirror.

Joker's confidence melted away into a guarded mask, and he sat up straight.

"You wouldn't believe me, even if I told you."

Tsukauchi leaned forward, his chair creaked and he never broke eye contact. He picked up his pen and smiled as a challenge rose up in those eyes of his, burning bright like a funerary pyre.

"Try me."

To Another World

Chapter 2: To Another World

Yaldabaoth pulls a fast one on our Phantom Thieves.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“So, this is the power that resists Ruin!”

“Did we do it!?” Oracle’s voice reached their ears, but then she gasped in horror, *“No, wait, it’s power level, it’s-!!”*

The God of Control fluttered his metallic wings to raise himself above the tower over the clouds. Joker was bent over panting, his friends spread out around him, equally exhausted from fighting for their lives, and for those of countless voices below them.

“Dude, it’s still not dead!?” Skull cried.

“H-how do we beat a god?” Queen whispered from beside Joker, face pale and voice shaky, “I thought we almost had him!”

“Get it together people!” Mona leaped in between Joker and Queen, “This is our final battle! What better target to take down than a god who’s grown too arrogant!? I will see my justice through for the sake of the people I care about!”

“Morgana...” Panther whispered in awe.

“The same goes for you guys too!” Mona turned to them with fire in his eyes, “If you’ve decided to take this world from him, then don’t compromise your own ideals!”

Fox stood fully, hand on his sheathed katana, "What an artful way to put it, Mona."

"Yeah!" Panther flailed her whip and stared at the God in defiance, "We won't go down so easily! We're going all out!"

"That's right!" Noir traced the rim of her hat with one hand, and waved her other in an elegant arc, "We've come too far to give up now!"

"My control shall not bow down to Ruin, nor shall the will of the masses overcome my power!" Yaldabaoth stared down at them, his voice resonating with the fabric of reality itself, "I am the ultimate truth of this world, and will not lose to the likes of you mortals!"

"Heh, the vanity of this god knows no bounds!" Arsene appeared behind Joker in a veil of blue flames, black chains writhed through the air around them, *"Show this failure what it feels like to be purged! Come, unleash my full power!!"*

Joker grasped the chains in front of him, the chill of its unnatural metal seeped past his gloves and sent a wave of goosebumps down his arm.

"Wait," Oracle said, *"He's doing something- GET DOWN NOW!!"*

Joker looked up at Yaldabaoth, and it was that moment of hesitation, that single second of pause. That. Cost. Them. *Everything.*

"NO!!" Yaldabaoth flapped his mighty wings.

A burst of black wind swept over the land, and the cries of his friends rang in his ears as the chain was ripped from his grasp. Arsene's horrible scream reverberated through Joker's soul, and terror flooded his veins when Arsene's presence grew silent for the first time ever. The voices far below have ceased their cheers, cut off from life like the snap of a thread.

Oracle fell from the sky as Prometheus was banished, and Skull jumped to catch her. They both tumbled to the ground as the other Phantom Thieves tried to regain their balance.

“What did he do!?” Mona shouted, “I can’t feel my persona!”

“Mine is gone too...” Queen muttered weakly.

“Foolish mortals!” Yaldabaoth’s shadow fell over them like a death shroud, “The sin of rebelling against a god is severe. As punishment, I banish you to other worlds unknown!”

Something changed in the air, like the snap charge of electricity after a thunder strike. No, this was more than that. The world shifted and changed and contorted, the weave of fate was unnaturally pulled by the God Of Control, creating fractals in the flow of time and space.

Joker’s teammates gasped as bizarre, otherworldly doors came into existence.

One, a pair of silver doors with alien markings, cracked open just a hair to reveal a large, terrifying eye. Another, a glowing paper door that would be at home in any vintage Japanese mansion. The third, a grand golden gate decorated with eyes and horned demons, bubbling black sludge dripped from its maw like tar. The final one was a fluctuating cloud of purple and black mist.

“What is...” Panther stepped back in horror, “What are these!?”

“No,” Oracle, still in Skull’s arms, was pale as a sheet, “This isn’t possible!”

Mona jumped on Joker’s shoulder, “What is it Oracle!? What do you see!?”

“It’s... These are...”

“You have no means of escape, humans.” Yaldabaoth said with a wave of his hand, “Accept your fate with dignity!”

The gates hummed with power as powerful gusts of wind ripped the Phantom Thieves away from one another.

“Skull, Oracle!” Fox cried as the two were blown into the glowing paper door, and it shut with finality.

“Everyone,” Mona dug his little claws into Joker’s shoulder, “Hold on!!”

“Joker!”

Joker whirled around to Queen, arm outstretched. Their fingers just brushed together, but she was ripped away in a violent gale.

“QUEEN!!”

Fox leaped to her aid, and together they fell into the towering silver gate. Joker swore the eye inside narrowed with glee before it slammed shut. Panther and Noir huddled in each other’s arms as they flew through the air, their screams vanished as they were swallowed by the demon gate’s black tar.

“Th-this can’t be happening!” Mona said, “Joker, we have to-!”

“Watch out!”

Joker pulled Mona from his shoulder and wrapped his arms protectively around him, the winds were too strong and threw them like ragdolls.

Yaldabaoth’s laughter would forever haunt him as he fell into the final portal, and his world turned dark.

Just to note, I haven't been able to play Royal yet, so as of right now the story will stick to the vanilla Persona 5.

Also, here's my discord server, in case anybody is curious!

<https://discord.gg/xhaN8YF>

Destiny Land

Chapter 3: Destiny Land

“Joker...”

Joker’s eyelids were heavy, his muscles sore as if he had just run a marathon. There was a familiar weight sitting on his chest, but he knew he wasn’t in his bed if the chilly surface at his back was any clue.

“Joker, c’mon!” Mona’s voice echoed within the darkness, *“Please wake up!”*

His eyes fluttered open, his vision filled with Mona’s relieved face.

“Ah, finally!”

“Mona?” Joker sat up and held his head with a pained grunt, Mona jumped off and circled around him, “Why are you in your normal form? Aren’t we still in the metaverse?”

“I don’t know.” Mona fluttered his ears as he huddled beside Joker, “This doesn’t feel like the metaverse, but you have your costume on. Can you still call your personas?”

Joker blinked and looked down on himself. His costume was fully intact, and he shivered as cold droplets pattered on his leather coat. They were in an alley, though it was deceptively clean of any trash. The smell of rain permeated the air and trickled down all around them, but there was something off about it as if their surroundings were somehow artificial. He pinched the bridge of his nose as his headache faded.

“Arsene?”

Relief shot through him when a presence bubbled up in his mind, familiar and reliable.

“Trickster.” The voice was soft and full of comfort, *“I am still here, as are the others. But we are weak right now and we’re not sure why. Call upon us if you wish, though we’ll be limited in our current state. Be careful.”*

Joker nodded, then turned to Mona’s expectant eyes, “They’re still here, but they’re weakened.”

“At least they’re still with you. Mercurius hasn’t responded to me,” Mona shook his head, then got to his feet, “Let’s move, we could be in danger here.”

“And the others?”

“I don’t know that either, but we all fell into different gates. If anything, we would have heard from Oracle by now.”

“Right...” Joker hauled himself to his feet, and dug out his phone, “What!?”

Mona cocked his head at him, “What’s wrong?”

“My phone is working as it would in the real world, but metaverse app,” Joker narrowed his eyes at his phone as he flicked through it, “It’s gone.”

“Ha! As if some app can compete with *my* power.” Mona stuck his nose to the sky and closed his eyes.

Several seconds passed and nothing happened. Mona’s tail twitched. Joker stuck his hands into his pockets and watched with a raised brow. Suddenly, Mona’s tail flopped to the ground and his eyes flew open.

“I can’t do it!” He cried, “Why can’t I-!?”

“Can you still turn into a car?”

Mona whirled around to him, “We can’t reach the others or go into the metaverse, and you’re concerned about me turning into a car!?”

“Maybe,” Joker smirked as he half shrugged, “It’s just a question.”

Mona sighed, then looked at the mouth of the alley.

“Well, let’s go try. I’m not really sensing anybody nearby, but let’s keep our guard up.”

“Naturally.”

Mona chuckled and led the way. Joker stepped forward but froze to look down at his feet. His footsteps still rippled with vibrant colors that trailed over the dull concrete, the rainy effect was always amusing to see when exploring the metaverse with his friends. The ground still felt as if he was walking on strangely solid air. They weren’t in the metaverse, so did this happen because he was still had his powers?

“Joker, are you coming?”

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and ran to catch up with Mona. The alleyway gaped open into a street, but there was neither a single person on the sidewalks nor cars driving down the pavement. Lamp posts were dotted up and down the avenue and made the rain glow gold.

“This is eerie,” Mona stepped into a ring of light, “... And no, I can’t turn into a car.”

“Well, let’s just-”

“Shh!”

Joker snapped his jaw shut and stared at Mona with concern. Then, his ears picked up something a few streets away. Battle cries and...

an explosion? Not an explosion, there was no heat or light, but vibrations of some form of heavy impact rumbled through the buildings around them.

“Let’s go!” Mona leaped onto Joker’s shoulder. “I’ll have to rely on you to fight because I can’t use my weapons in this form.”

Joker nodded and pulled his dagger from its sheath. They dove back into the alley and crept towards the sound of battle, at each turn they expected to be ambushed by shadows or at least see other people. There were none. Joker pressed his back to the alley wall, now just a few dozen feet away from the commotion.

“Are those other persona users?” Mona whispered.

“I don’t know. They look weird though.”

There were two figures standing in the rain, they looked to be a year or two younger than him. One was donned in a black cape, his black persona was connected to him like an ethereal umbilical cord. Joker looked past his feathery mask to the other one, who had a strange head shaped like a jagged stone. The vibrant red and yellow costume stuck out against the darkness. He was oddly skittish though, his hands wrung together and he bounced on his heels. His eyes darted around and then locked with Joker’s.

He waved frantically at his avian companion and pointed at him.

“Another villain. Come out and surrender!” He motioned to some thug who was on the ground, spider-webbing cracks surrounded him, “Or suffer the same fate as him.”

Joker stared at the avian boy’s.... beak? It was moving naturally as if it were flesh and blood instead of a mask. His persona grumbled and grew in size, it’s blazing yellow eyes bored into them with protective ferocity.

“Be careful, I don’t like this,” Mona whispered as Joker stepped out.

“I know.”

Rocky stared at Mona in shock, while Bird Boy glared at them with eyes like burning coals. Joker relaxed back, taking a non-threatening pose despite the dagger in his hand.

“Nice persona.” Joker said as he plastered on an easy smile, “What’s his name?”

“Silence!” Bird Boy snapped, “I don’t know who you are or what game you’re playing at, but it won’t work on us!”

“Suit yourself-”

Joker’s hand whipped to his gun, and two shots echoed through the rainy streets. The kids jolted into battle stances, eyes wide in fear, but they jumped at the sound of bodies collapsing behind them. Rocky whirled around the two weirdos at his feet, groaning in pain and clutching their wounds. A spiked bat and a crowbar fell from their grasp.

“It seems pretty dangerous around here,” Joker twirled his smoking gun around his finger, “Maybe you kids should get to safety.”

“Who are you?” Bird Boy asked as his hovering persona glared down at the pair of thugs.

“Nobody you should be concerned about,” Joker said, brilliant colors splashed around his boots as he dared take a step closer, “But I was hoping you would answer some questions for me.”

Bird Boy scoffed, “You come here, invade *our* field trip, and have the gall to ask questions.”

“Field trip?” Joker cocked his head to the side.

Rocky huddled closer to his companion, and pulled on his cape like a child would their mother’s skirt. Bird Boy looked at him, Joker

couldn't understand Rocky's wild hand movements, but he ended with jabbing a finger towards him.

"Fine." Bird Boy glared back at him, "Ask your questions before Dark Shadow gets impatient."

Joker eyed Bird Boy's persona warily, then exchanged glances with Mona.

"Where are we?"

"The USJ. I thought that would be obvious." Bird Boy stood straighter, though his eyes never dropped their suspicion, "You are quite clueless for an invading foe."

Joker held back a snort. The USJ? Universal Studios Japan? It might explain why the town looked so artificial, it was as empty as the time Haru rented out the entirety of Disney Land for her welcome party.

"Where's the exit?" Joker ignored the caustic glare and shook the water from his hair, "I don't know about you, but my feline friend and I hate getting rained on."

"And why should I tell you?" Bird Boy widened his stance, and his persona released a thunderous growl, "You want to report back to your master, don't you? You just want to defile our classmates even further!"

Rocky tried to calm him down by waving his arms, but he was pushed out of the way.

"Stay back, Anima! This snake shall plague us no more!"

"Joker..." Mona's claws dug into his shoulders, "Let's get out of here."

Joker tightened his grip on his weapons as he shifted on his feet. Rocky looked forlorn, his pleading eyes swiveled helplessly between the two.

“There! Finally, we found some 1-A scum to beat up!”

They snapped out of their staring contest and turned to the group of thugs slithering their way down the street. Joker frowned. These were the types of low lives that plagued every city, and a common target for the Phantom Thieves.

“I knew it!” Bird Boy’s persona reared back, “It was just a ruse to distract us! Dark Shadow, now!!”

Dark Shadow charged, and Joker’s iconic smirk stretched across his face. Mona tensed as the giant black beast bounded towards them like a train, Joker flipped onto the back of the monster. Dark Shadow howled with fury as he tried to fling the intruder off.

Several cries added to the patters of rain as thugs were tossed aside like ragdolls, but the rampage continued. Mona flailed as his partner laughed amidst the dusty clouds and shattered concrete made by the beast’s wrath. Joker chose the perfect moment to jump when all of the thugs were wiped out.

The creature bucked and sent his passengers flying. Joker flipped elegantly through the air, his coat flared dramatically as he landed on the nearest rooftop. He flashed a grin to the two kids gaping up at them and did a two-finger salute.

“Urp, Joker,” Mona dry heaved as he sagged over Joker’s shoulders, “Please, don’t ever do that again.”

“And where’s the fun in that?” Joker chuckled, “We killed two birds with one stone, so those kids won’t get hurt by those thugs.”

“I-if you say so...”

They turned tail and left the two children in the dust. Rain still fell in cold sheets, and his colorful footsteps bounced from building to building. They only got mere moments of peace before Mona’s ears flicked, and he looked back down at the soaked street.

“Joker, we have pursuers!”

“Well,” Joker laughed as he leaped over another rooftop, “They’re persistent for ones who just took down an entire mob of low lives.”

“Hah, they could teach Skull a thing or two!”

He grimaced at the sharp sting in his heart, but Mona was too busy looking down to notice. A few more rooftops flew under their feet, their pursuers still hot on their trail. Luckily, the dark beast couldn’t reach them from this height.

“What’s that over there?”

Through the curtain of fog and the chilly rain was a metal door, surrounded on all sides by a wall with a roof that rose over their heads like a dome.

“This place really is artificial,” Joker muttered, “Mona, I think I have a plan to get us through that door.”

“I trust you,” Mona nodded, his blue eyes sparkling despite his soaking wet fur, “Let’s go, Joker!”

“Arsene?”

A deep chuckle echoed within his mind, *“An interesting plan, but I hope I have the strength to pull it off.”*

“Don’t worry,” Joker thought with a grin, *“I already have a plan B, just in case.”*

Joker skid to a stop at the edge of a building and sheathed his weapons, then seamlessly hopped down to a fire escape. Water splashed under his boots as he rolled into his landing, ignoring Mona’s startled cries as they rushed back into the streets.

“Halt, villain!” Bird Boy’s voice cut through the rain.

Joker sent a smirk over his shoulder and laughed at the kid's heated glare. They reached the door and Joker tried to wrench it open.

"This thing is heavy!"

"Hurry up, Joker!!" Mona's tail flicked, sending droplets of water in his face, "They're almost here!"

Bird Boy stared them down from a block away, his cape billowing gently in the wind. The black beast burst out from his stomach, its screams of rage pierced through the winds, he charged with a nod from his partner.

"Joker-!"

"Arsene!!"

Heat exploded through the area as blue flames sizzled to life, the sheeting rain hissed and sputtered uselessly. Arsene stood behind Joker in all of his glory, black wings flared and his clawed hands reached up to meet the beast's assault.

The two behemoths clashed in the middle, and Bird Boy flinched back as Arsene's wild roar shook the dome like a roll of thunder, his surprise reflected clear in his eyes by the dwindling blue flames. Dark Shadow shrunk in size and Arsene pushed back with all of his power, but his strength was rapidly receding.

"Trickster! I can hold no longer!"

"Got it!"

Finally, the door opened just as Arsene gave his final push. The dark beast shook his head as Arsene vanished, and leered at the intruders with dwindling shock.

"I don't know what that was," Bird Boy said, "But this is your last chance to surrender!"

Joker turned to him a sly smile as the door swung open, allowing a curtain of light to spill into the rainy streets.

“Sorry, kid.” Joker reached into his pocket for a Vanish Ball, and threw it between Bird Boy and his persona, “This show’s over.”

Tokoyami shouted as a bright flash burned his eyes, and Dark Shadow retreated back into him. Koda had finally caught up to him after several seconds of blindness, his hands hovered over Tokoyami’s shoulders.

“I am fine.” Tokoyami blinked the remaining spots from his eyes, and frowned, “But it appears the villains have escaped.”

Koda whirled around to the door. There was no sign of the frizzy-haired boy or his cat, though the door lazily swung back and forth with spine chilling creaks. Koda signed with his hands, drawing his friend’s attention.

‘I don’t think they were villains.’

Tokoyami dusted off his cloak, “What makes you say that? They clearly had ill intentions, and even managed to hold off Dark Shadow with a demon of his own.”

‘Well, they seemed just as confused and scared as we were. It doesn’t fit with the other villains here.’

“You could tell all of that by a single glance?”

Koda nodded excitedly, *‘And they helped us with those villains, and didn’t try to kill us... ’*

“Perhaps...” Tokoyami glared at the ground, “But that boy just seemed confident and cocky to me.”

Koda's watery smile was hidden by his mask, *'You still can't argue that he saved our lives.'*

"I concede to that point." Tokoyami huffed, "Whatever the case, our way is now clear. I hope our classmates haven't come to any harm, or there will be a reckoning."

Koda nodded and followed his friend into the light.

He sincerely hoped that the frizzy-haired boy and his companion would be alright, but none of them were prepared for what the mysterious boy could do.

Blooming Villain

Chapter 4: Blooming Villains

The world froze in awe at the tower of blue flames rising into the sky, any who were still conscious gaped at the grinning boy shadowed by the twisting pillar.

“What... what is *that* thing?” Mona whispered fearfully.

“I don’t know.”

Joker and Mona were crouched on the outskirts of a grand plaza, hidden by the ring of verdant green that surrounded it. Many bodies were spread out over the shattered concrete, unconscious or groaning from their injuries. There, by a great broken fountain, was a giant black being. Not like the avian shadow that Bird Boy controlled, this one was solid and built like a tower of pure muscle. Blank eyes swiveled around like a doll’s, its brain was exposed to open air.

It sat upon its victim, a man in black clothes soaked in his own blood. The demon twisted the man’s arms, and a jolt of fear shot through them when they *snapped* like twigs. Screams ripped from the man’s throat, but he still had the strength to glare at the monster.

“What are you waiting for, Nomu?” A hoarse voice reached their ears, “Hurry up and kill him already.”

This thing, this Nomu, gurgled an inhuman sound and reached for the man’s head with its meaty hands. Joker sprung into action, but Mona leaped in front of him.

“Joker, no. We don’t know who they are or what’s going on between these people!”

“I’m not going to stand by and let someone die!” Joker snapped, his eyes wide at his partner.

“I...” Mona was troubled as he looked to the injured man in horror, then stepped aside, “You’re right. I’ll follow your lead, then. Hurry!”

Joker leaped from the flora, ignoring the leaves peppered in his hair as he called out to a particular persona, who answered with a growl like raging thunder.

“You wish to use my power then? One attack is all I have the strength for, so call my name and let me wreak havoc!”

Joker’s eyes blazed gold, “Go, Seth!”

The world froze in awe at the tower of blue flames rising into the sky, any who were still conscious gaped at the grinning boy shadowed by the twisting pillar. A dragon parted the flames like a curtain, pitch black with golden eyes like the sun. Its head was crowned by horns, with deadly spikes trailing down its spine to its long, jagged tail.

Seth beat wings powerful enough to conjure storms, and the flames were extinguished. He opened his great maw and roared, shaking the very foundation of the USJ. Glass crackled overhead, but luckily the ceiling didn’t shatter.

“You know what to do.”

Seth reared up, the Egyptian God of Storms and Chaos grinned in feral excitement, “With pleasure, Trickster!”

He took off like a freshly shot arrow, lightning crackled around him as he charged straight for the Nomu. Joker was startled when Seth tucked in his great wings and spun rapidly through the air, the energy swirling around him made him look like a speeding bullet.

Seth struck the Nomu like a train, and they both went flying across the plaza. Well, he had never seen a One-Shot Kill pulled off like *that*

before. Joker shook his head as he ran to the victim, swept him up in a fireman's carry, and bolted towards the gigantic staircase. He felt Seth's power dwindle away as he reached the foot of the stairs.

"Okay, that looked so cool." Mona emerged from the bushes as Joker carefully set the man down, "But did you really have to show off that much?"

Joker gave him a knowing smirk, but the man in black clothes glared up at them with coffee-colored eyes.

"Who... are you..?"

His voice was raspy and strained, he definitively had more than a few broken bones. The skin of his elbow was just *gone*, angry red muscle and tissue were bare for all to see. Joker smiled down at him as the intense citrine glow of his eyes faded back to a stormy gray.

"Nobody you need to worry about, hobo man." Joker unsheathed his dagger, and faint panic clouded the man's eyes, "It's going to be okay, you won't be in so much pain this way."

Joker knocked the man's head with the pommel of his dagger, and he went limp. Mona gave him an odd glance as he dug around in his pockets, and tossed him a Bead.

"Use this on him."

Mona looked at the Bead that rolled in between his paws, "Huh, why?"

"I don't want to take a chance of him dying," Joker stood and stepped in front of them, "And it looks like we have company."

Mona gulped as the Nomu slowly got back on it's feet, then hesitantly nodded. He broke the bead in his jaws and concentrated the healing energy on the hobo. Mona breathed a sigh of relief as

the man's injuries slowly faded away, crackled skin and broken bones fusing back together like nothing had ever happened.

"You!!"

Joker sauntered to the center of the plaza and smirked at the obvious leader. Wild blue hair bedraggled his appearance, but it was the dismembered hands all over his body that really called his sanity into question. Hateful crimson eyes bored into Joker as he stopped a decent distance away.

"Who are you? You're not one of my pawns or a student," He tilted his head and scratched angry red lines into his neck, "I don't know you. Are you a DLC character?"

"A DLC character?" He twirled his dagger as his other hand reached for his gun, "No, I'm the main player of this screwed up game."

Joker felt the man child's wrath suffocate him like a shroud, but kept up his nonchalant demeanor. A hint of green flickered through the corner of his vision. He didn't dare look, for he had to keep this man child's attention in case it was more students seeking safety.

"You..." The man child growled, "I'll show you who's player 1! Nomu, kill him!!"

A choked gurgle echoed across the plaza, and a flash of black loomed over him. Joker didn't even have time to flinch as he was struck in the face, his body flew through the air like a ragdoll and slammed into a tree at the other end of the plaza. The man's frenzied laughter penetrated his ringing ears, and he groaned as he slowly slid to the ground.

Joker blinked away the dust in his eyes and reached up to feel a tiny crack blossoming on his mask.

"I'll have to thank Yusuke for making that extra Null Physical card..."

Seth purred proudly in the back of his mind, *"The Trickster was most wise to use it on me."*

The Nomu didn't chase after him, so Handy Man must've thought it was a fatal blow. Joker shook his head to clear his mind when there was a snap of a nearby twig. Joker felt around for his dagger, but it was dropped when he was struck. His hand latched onto his gun the moment the bushes parted, revealing a girl with long green hair and round eyes.

She stiffened as she stared into the barrel.

"Are you a student?"

She visibly swallowed and gave a firm nod.

"Sorry," He lowered the gun with a sigh, "I thought you could be an enemy."

The girl poked her cheek and tilted her head at him, "It's okay, kero. Are you alright?"

Kero? Joker furrowed his brows. Another look at the girl gave him the odd impression of a frog, and she even had a green diver's costume to match her hair.

"Just peachy." He finally stood and wiped the dust off of his shoulders, "Who are you?"

"I should be asking you that," She tilted her head the other way, her unblinking eyes drank in everything about him, "My name is Asui Tsuyu, but my friends call me Tsu-chan. We saw what you did for Aizawa-sensei. You aren't a villain, are you?"

"Villain, huh? Not really, but some people see me as one." Joker said with narrowed eyes, "What did you mean by 'we'?"

Asui stepped aside, and there was a shaking purple midget huddling behind her.

“You... you have to be some kind of demon to have survived that things attack!” The midget jabbed a finger towards him.

“Technically,” A smooth smirk split Joker’s face, “You aren’t wrong about that, kid.”

The purple midget paled. Asui didn’t seem fazed, but she looked behind her friend expectantly.

“Mineta,” Asui said, “Where’d Midoriya go?”

The purple runt whirled around, “I-I don’t know! He was right behind us!”

Joker cursed under his breath and took off through the foliage. The world spun and he nearly fell on his face, but he caught himself and staggered onwards. That hit must’ve taken more out of him than he realized.

“Wait, kero!”

He ignored Asui and barged back into the main plaza. Fear sunk into his stomach as he saw the giant black monstrosity clutching another green kid by his forearm. He aimed his gun with practiced ease, and gunshots rang out. The Nomu’s arm and shoulder spurted with blood, but Joker’s smirk fell as the creature didn’t budge.

The green boy gaped at him as the Nomu’s injuries healed, the bullets were pushed out and clattered uselessly on the floor. Handy Man turned to him in shock.

“You’re *still* alive? So you’re not just overpriced DLC or an NPC, but a secret boss?”

Joker was about to reply when a cloud of black and purple mist materialized behind the Nomu and Handy Man. Joker recognized it with a startling realization.

“Shigaraki Tomura,” The sentient mist paused to glance warily at him, but didn’t deem him as a threat.

“What is it!? I’m busy here!”

“A student has escaped. It’s only a matter of time before heroes show up. We should flee before it’s too late.”

Shigaraki growled like a mad dog, “Kurogiri, I would kill you right now if you weren’t our warp gate!”

Joker grimaced. Heroes? Villains? Warp gate? None of these things made sense to him. He took a colorful step forward and locked eyes with the sentient mist cloud.

“Hey Smokey, what’s your connection to Yaldabaoth?”

The pair looked at him as if they forgot he was there.

“Who?” Kurogiri asked.

“Yaldabaoth. A giant sentient chalice, or perhaps he appeared to you as an old man with a long nose? He’s not that hard to miss.”

Shigaraki waved him off, “Don’t try and confuse us with random bullshit!”

“He doesn’t matter, we should flee before-”

Shigaraki stepped forward, and Joker felt the sickening grin from where he stood.

“No, I want to have fun first. I want All Might’s pride reduced to dust! Maybe we should kill some of his students or this secret boss. Yeah, that’ll do.” Shigaraki motioned to the captive student in the Nomu’s arms, and stared at Joker with a bone-chilling smile, “You won’t fight back if you don’t want him to die!”

“Shigaraki-”

“Stay out of this, Kurogiri!”

With that, Shigaraki charged. Joker sheathed his gun and flung himself to the side as the man swiped at him. His instincts guided him through a dance of death, the gift of agile grace was rewarded to both dance partners. Joker’s mind whirled with a plan to set Midoriya free. It was only a matter of time before one of them made a fatal mistake.

Seth’s fading laughter pulled the curtain back for different power.

“I shall become Master’s new mask!”

Joker slipped under another swipe and backflipped to safety, Shigaraki’s annoyed anger only made him grin. But Joker only had eyes for the mountain of muscle and his captive.

“Nomu, meet Cerberus.”

Shigaraki flinched when Joker’s eyes burst with a yellow glow, and a savage howl echoed through the plaza. A beast with magnificent snowy fur came into the world bathed by blue flames, and the villain in front of him whirled around at thunderous footsteps. Cerberus, his long metallic tail thrashing like a whip behind him, swiped his massive paw at the Nomu’s arm. Claws of steel ripped through muscle, and Midoriya was set free, the useless chunk of flesh landed beside him in a dull thud.

Wide green eyes stared into the impossibly large white beast with a mix of fear and awe.

“Green child get to safety!” Cerberus said, “Master will take care of rest!”

Cerberus’ eyes flicked to Joker, he disappeared in a veil of blue fire with one last blood-curdling howl.

“I did good, Master?”

Joker smirked as Midoriya jolted to action, and fled from the Nomu as it's arm regenerated.

"Yes, very good." Joker said as his eyes regained their natural steel.

Cerberus purred at the praise. Shigaraki twitched and convulsed in rage, and he pulled at his hair as he curled in on himself.

"I *hate* people like you!" He casually brushed the ground, and it turned grey and sick within seconds, "Now quit ruining my plans and just die already!"

Shigaraki struck as fast as a viper, Joker tore his eyes away from the deadened earth as the shadow of Shigaraki's hand fell over his face.

"It's game over, secret boss."

Several things happened at the drop of a hat.

There was an inhuman yowl as Mona leaped on Shigaraki's head. The man cried out as Joker rolled into his getaway, Mona was kicking and scratching wildly as strands of pale hair fell to the ground.

"Get off!!"

Mona leapt before Shigaraki's hands could reach him, but they were separated by an eruption of ice. Pain stabbed through Joker as frozen crystals swallowed up his legs and torso, and encased his arms. Cerberus howled in agony within the depths of his mind, and Joker wasn't far off from joining him. The edges of his vision turned black as the chill cut him to the bone like a knife. Nearby explosions were nothing compared to the mind-numbing static.

He felt an unfamiliar presence approach him and speak, but the words were garbled. There was silence, like the expectant pause for a reply, then angry footsteps pounded against pavement, and Joker was forced to look into heterochromatic eyes. The scarred boy

latched onto the front of his tailcoat, his mouth was cut into a sharp frown.

A hand on his shoulder pulled the scarred boy away, Joker recognized the head of fluffy green hair. The pair of voices spoke and traded glances at him, and Joker held in his relief as the dual-colored boy reached out and melted his ice.

Joker fell from the icy crypt and landed on his knees, panting. Cerberus' weak whimpers sparked anger, and he glanced up with thinly disguised rage. Midoriya's shoulders tensed, but his friend remained stoic.

"I don't know about this, Midoriya," The ice boy said, "We don't know who he is."

"B-but he saved Aizawa-sensei's life, a-and he saved me from the Nomu! I don't think he's with the villains..."

Joker caught his breath as he scanned his other surroundings. The ice had encased most of the Nomu, which slowed its regeneration. The floating mist was being held down by a deranged blonde with smoking hands, and Shigaraki seethed at them with hatred in his eyes.

An inky shape jumped in between Joker and the two kids, fur raised on end. Mona's ears were flat on his head as he hissed like a little demon. The kids blinked down at Mona, then exchanged confused glances.

"I'm fine, Mona." Joker said as he stood.

Mona looked back and narrowed his eyes, he scanned over Joker with disbelief. It was always the same look of concern he got when Joker was directly hit with one of his weaknesses.

"I take it that's your cat?" Candy Cane asked, his voice laced with suspicion.

“Yeah,” Joker said, “He’s a bit overprotective, as I’m sure you could understand.”

Mona huffed and jumped on Joker’s shoulders. He didn’t lose the angry glimmer in his eyes as he stared the two boys down, and Joker tagged out Cerberus for Seth. The dragon breathed a blazing hot breath of anger down Joker’s neck, and other faint voices comforted Cerberus.

The Candy Cane boy didn’t trust him, and Joker wouldn’t risk his health a second time.

“Hey, guys!”

Mona bristled as another student with spiky red hair ran towards them, waving his arm. He stuttered when he saw the odd pair and approached his friends warily. Good, at least these kids weren’t completely stupid. Joker shoved his hands into his pockets as Midoriya gave him a watery smile.

“Kirishima! I’m glad you’re okay!”

“Y-yeah man, you too!” Kirishima’s eyes never left Joker, “Who’s this?”

The three kids glanced at him, and Joker’s easy smile slid on like butter.

“The name’s Joker.” He tilted his head, and Mona rubbed protectively against his fluffy hair, “This is Mona.”

Candy Cane scoffed, but Kirishima gave him a sunny grin.

“Cool names! I’m Kirishima!” He slung his arm over Midoriya and the other stepped out of range, “This here’s Midoriya, and that one is Todoroki!”

Joker hummed and Mona narrowed his eyes while his tail twitched. Have they not heard of the Phantom Thieves before? Their code

names should be infamous.

“No... it wasn't supposed to be this way!”

They turned towards Shigaraki, who's nails drew blood as they trailed down his neck.

“I'm so sick of everything not going my way!” He glared between Joker, the students, and the kid holding down Kurogiri, “Nomu, free our warp gate!”

Joker tensed as he readied to move, but the fates didn't grant him such luck.

The whole facility shook with an explosion, and all eyes turned towards the top of the stairs. A giant plume of dust masked the figure slowly approaching, each of his massive footsteps were as loud as war drums. Joker and Mona shivered at the raw *fury* exhumed by the man emerging through the dust cloud. He was as massive as the Nomu, with blazing golden hair and a dangerous smile that dripped with pure malice.

“It's alright now.” The man's deep voice cut through the air like a sword, “Why? Because I am here!”

“What's that-”

Joker was cut off as the man suddenly disappeared. The next thing he knew, there was a yellow blur in front of him and a burst of pain in his stomach. Mona cried out as he was torn from his partner, and the foliage devoured him for the third time that day. He coughed and forced himself to sit up, trying to blink past the burn of tears in his eyes. Did that man just *punch* him?

Any remaining thugs had been knocked unconscious, the Nomu was batted away, and the students were huddled in a group at the foot of the stairs. Asui and Mineta held their unconscious teacher.

“Joker!” Mona whisper-yelled through the bushes, “Are you alright?”

“Just *fine* .” Joker wiped the dirt from his cheek, and Mona shrugged past the bushes to reach him, “You know Mona, I don’t think this place likes us very much. I’m getting pretty tired of being called a villain or getting punched by ridiculous muscle men.”

“That’s an understatement.” Mona looked him up and down, “Are you going to heal? You took quite a few hits already.”

“I wasn’t injured by that.” Joker shook his head, “Seth has Null Physical.”

“I’m not talking about Seth,” Mona sighed, and Joker ignored the guilty pit in his stomach, “I know Cerberus is weak to ice, and that kid didn’t even seem to care that you were in such intense pain. Don’t doubt my skills, Joker.”

“I would never,” His voice oozed with sarcasm, but he smoothed his expression, “But I’ll be fine until we make our escape. We don’t know where we are or if there are any sources to replenish our items, and I would rather not expose ourselves by casting healing magic.”

Mona considered his words, and nodded, “Good idea. Now, let’s get out of here, while they’re distracted.”

Joker pulled himself into a crouch and they crept low to the ground. The students gaped at the epic fight between muscled behemoths that shook the ground and struck them with gusts of wind, oblivious to the two Phantom Thieves inching closer. A pair of viridian eyes glanced towards the trees every few seconds.

A massive black shape flew overhead, and a crash echoed through the facility as the Nomu was blown away. Literally. Mona stared at the hole in the roof with comically wide eyes.

“This place is crazier than most palaces.”

Joker snorted but did a double-take at the plaza.

Shigaraki and Kurogiri stood several meters from the muscled blonde, but something wasn't right. The giant grinning man wasn't moving, and steam wafted unnaturally from his skin. Mona looked between Joker and the hostile group in the plaza.

"Joker, don't even think about it."

"Something's wrong with him. He took out that Nomu thing, but he hasn't stopped the other two yet. Shouldn't they be easy for him?"

"Maybe." Mona shifted on his paws, "Don't you think we've gotten in enough trouble? The big guy can take care of himself."

Joker chewed the inside of his cheek, and his body moved by itself when Shigaraki suddenly charged. His hand whipped for his gun and he stood to take aim, but he never fired. Gunshots cracked through the air.

"Joker-!"

Pain exploded through his shoulder, crimson splatters painted the earth as another blinding shot ripped the gun from his hand. He collapsed on the ground as he grasped his injury. Mona jumped on top of him, his voice and a myriad of others all howling in his ears. Several figures in white cloaks approached them.

Mona was ripped away by his scruff, and the *snap* of handcuffs trapped Joker's wrists together. For some reason, the personas' chorus of voices fell silent. He felt his costume flicker as if it were on the brink of vanishing too, but Joker willed it to stay through the haze of burning pain.

They were dragged from the bushes, and the next several minutes were a blur of colors and voices, the wail of sirens pierced the air. Joker barely felt the sun on his face as they surfaced. The pop of green snapped him out of his reverie, and Joker grinned at the

students surrounded by authorities, they only had small cuts and bruises from the looks of it. Midoriya bolted from the paramedics when they met eyes, but was held back by police.

He recognized several of the students he encountered so far, including Rocky and Bird Boy, they all glanced at him with varying expressions as he was shoved in a police car. If this were any other time, concern from someone like Midoriya would be touching, and the students reminded him of people back home.

Back... home?

Many of these kids reminded him of his friends, or of the victims, they'd saved. A few, like the glaring blonde, were akin to those who's heart he would steal. It was all familiar, yet alien at the same time.

Right now, as the police car drove off into the unknown, Joker didn't know how to feel about that.

Escape!

Chapter 5: Escape!

If Aizawa didn't know better, he would say the cat even looked smug.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“What do you think of the kid?”

Coffee colored eyes glanced at Toshinori in disinterest.

“Honestly, I can't get a read on him,” Aizawa said, “And shouldn't you be in the hospital?”

Toshinori shuffled on his feet, pointedly ignoring the bandages underneath his oversized shirt.

“I wanted to be here for this. Some of our students have defended this boy's actions, and there has to be a reason why.” Toshinori turned to him with a knowing glimmer in his eyes, “You're here because you feel like you owe him, don't you?”

Aizawa scratched at his stubble with a frown. His body had been completely healed, and not even a power like Recovery Girl's quirk could have done that in a pinch. He felt more awake than he had in a decade. Did this boy have *that* strong of a healing quirk, or was it something else? He read the reports and saw one of the beasts for himself, but there had to be something more to it.

“Is he... meditating?”

Nezu leaned forward in his chair, which had been practically glued to the one-way mirror ever since Tsukauchi started talking to the kid. The boy had his eyes closed and refused to speak even after

Tsukauchi asked what happened before. He tapped his foot. Nezu's eyes caught the vibrant ripples of color, it as if there was an invisible puddle of paint under his boots. Tsukauchi frowned and glanced in their direction. The detective stood and left the kid alone in the interrogation room, it only took a few seconds for the door to open.

"What's the verdict?" Aizawa droned.

"I don't know." Tsukauchi closed the door behind him, and sighed, "He's.... a mystery, and he won't say another word."

"He claims we won't believe him, despite the fact that he knows your quirk. What a marvelous conundrum." Nezu swiveled his chair to look at them with a mad grin, "He wasn't lying about anything, was he Tsukauchi?"

"No," Tsukauchi scrubbed his eyes, then approached the mirror to stare at Joker, "He wasn't at the USJ voluntarily, and he told the truth when he said he was attacked. It worries me. He doesn't want our help, and even suggested that he was abused by the police before."

"Indeed. If only he would spill his secrets. And since he's not in the system..." Nezu looked at Aizawa, "Does his name ring any bells? Something from the underground perhaps? The way he said his alias bothers me, it was as if we were already supposed to know it."

Aizawa looked up in thought and he was drawn to an odd flicker in the vent. He narrowed his eyes, but it must've been his mind playing tricks on him.

"Not that I can remember." Aizawa said, "I'll ask around, though. Maybe one of the information brokers know something."

Toshinori crossed his arms and stared at the ground.

"Something bothering you?" Tsukauchi asked.

“It’s just..” Toshinori glanced at them as a dark look flashed in his eyes, “The boy has shown *multiple* powers and not just that. Mastery in parkour, knowing how to use a blade, and he obviously received training with firearms. I can’t help but think that he’s connected with All For One.”

“But that man is dead.” Nezu said softly.

Aizawa glanced between the others and decided not to question who they were talking about.

“I know. If not All For One, then perhaps one of his underlings is still kicking. I want to know if this boy is involved in any of it.” Toshinori peered through the glass, “Maybe he was a victim or an unwilling test subject, but no matter the case, those creatures he controlled were strange and powerful.”

“He used a *dragon* of all things to get the Nomu away from me,” Aizawa said, “Koda and Tokoyami told us of a humanoid being with jet black wings, and Midoriya was saved by a giant white lion with a metal tail.”

“We’re lucky he chose not to harm our students.” Toshinori said with a sigh, “But other than that, he’s been the opposite of helpful, and his quirk is one of the strangest I’ve ever seen.”

“He didn’t use a quirk.” Tsukauchi tapped his chin in thought, “He didn’t lie when he said it wasn’t the power of quirks, so where would he get powers like that? Or is it those weird beasts that have all of the power, and they just listen to him?”

The temperature of the room plummeted, and three grown men experienced the hair raising fear of Nezu’s fury.

“Strange, unnatural creatures. An extreme skill set. Inhuman durability.” Nezu slowly swiveled to face the boy, who finally opened his eyes and glanced at the window as if he felt it too, “Any inkling about him is scrubbed clean from the system, and he claims to have

been attacked by a villain. Was it an attack, or a daring escape on his part? Everything in front of us points towards a most heinous crime.”

“Which is...?” Toshinori was almost too scared to ask.

Nezu folded his paws together, and frowned, “Illegal experimentation.”

The room was drenched with tense silence, but they didn’t have time to marinate on it as the door was thrown open by a panicked officer.

“Detective Tsukauchi, the cat is gone!”

Tsukauchi blinked, “The cat..?”

“You can’t keep track of one cat?” Aizawa asked with a raised brow.

Tsukauchi ran a hand down his face, “Do you know where it ran off to?”

“No,” The officer shook his head, “We haven’t been able to locate it.”

“Surely it couldn’t go too far?” Toshinori said.

Nezu whipped towards Tsukauchi, “Did you test this cat for a quirk?”

“No...” Tsukauchi’s eyes widened in horror.

“The vents.” Aizawa tore himself from the wall as everyone stared at the grate over their heads, “I thought I saw something in there earlier.”

Something dropped into the interrogation room and a strange hissing noise leaked through the mirror. The kid had the gall to grin at them before the room was filled with smoke.

“Eraser-!” Tsukauchi shouted.

“On it!”

They burst from the room, Aizawa kicked open the interrogation room door just as a thundering crash shook the station to its core. The smoke cloud still clung to the air, but Aizawa reached for his scarf at the flicker of blue flame and sunlight. Ominous gold eyes shown through the smokescreen.

Joker stood at the edge of the destroyed wall, his cat perched on his shoulder. The handcuffs were abandoned on the table and the kid clutched the evidence bag full of his stuff. A bloody bandage lay at his feet.

If Aizawa didn't know better, he would say the cat even looked *smug*.

~15 minutes earlier....

“Argh! Curse these tiny paws!!”

Morgana contorted himself as he tried to unlatch the mechanism trapping him in this small crate. The police officers were stupid enough to leave him here, in a small room, *unsupervised* . But he wasn't worried about himself right now.

That pure jolt of panic from being separated from Joker never left, he just *knew* how the police treated him before. His stomach soured at the thought of his best friend being drugged and beaten again. He wouldn't sit still and let these strange people do something to him!

“Come on... just a little more....”

His paw slipped and the mechanism snapped back into place. Morgana cried out as he batted the metal in frustration, he barely had enough room to turn a small, nervous circle.

"Such puzzles are child's play with my power." A musical voice echoed.

"Mercurius!?" Morgana flinched, but relief swelled within him like a tide, "I've been trying to summon you, but I haven't sensed you since we got here. Where have you been?"

"Apologies, Magician. I was in a dark place after Yaldabaoth's attack, and I could not find you until now."

Morgana sighed in relief at the familiar presence tied to his soul, magic flooded his veins, and a sudden burst of energy sparked through his body. Spells were a mere whisper away. Morgana expected the change but frowned when he stayed in his normal cat form.

"Why haven't I changed forms...?" He shook his head, "No, we can think about that later!"

Morgana pushed a bit of magic into the air and a sudden gust knocked his cage off of the table. The cheap crate broke just enough so he could slip through the infuriating door.

"Ha, as if they could keep *me* locked up." He whispered with a flick of his tail.

This room was bare, with only a table, a one-way mirror, and a few chairs. Morgana glared at the crate, then vaulted up on the table to search for a way out. Aha! The air vent! A little more wind magic freed the grate from the rusty nails, and he crept through the cat-sized vents with relative ease.

Now, the hard part.

Dust tickled his nose as he passed another vent, where muffled voices filtered in through the grate. Morgana inched closer and peeked out, stripes of light colored his fur. The oddest bunch of people stood in the room below.

"What's the verdict?"

"I don't know. He's.... a mystery, and he won't say another word. It worries me. He doesn't want our help, and even suggested that he was abused by the police before."

"Indeed. He claims we won't believe him, despite the fact that he knows your quirk. What a marvelous conundrum." Morgana gaped at the literal mouse sitting in a chair like a toddler, *"He wasn't lying about anything, was he Tsukauchi?"*

"No," The man in a brown trench coat stared out of the one-way mirror, *"He wasn't at the USJ voluntarily, and he told the truth when he said he was attacked."*

"If only he would spill his secrets. And since he's not in the system..." The mouse looked at the hobo, *"Does his name ring any bells? Something from the underground perhaps? The way he said his alias bothers me, as if we were already supposed to know it."*

"Joker must be in that other interrogation room..." Morgana whispered, *"But we'll need our stuff back, it has to be in here somewhere."*

Morgana looked down into the room, and froze when the hobo locked eyes on him. He ducked down, his ears flat on his head, and passed the grate before he got caught. He wandered the small maze of steely tunnels. The meandering officers were none the wiser to the little guest above their heads as Morgana finally found what he was looking for.

"Honestly, what is all of this crap used for?"

Two officers were on either side of a table, where a small duffel bag was loaded with their confiscated goods. The metal of Joker's weapons glimmered from the bottom of the pile, and one of the officers held the Crystal Skull in his hand. The officer must've felt it's ominous power and tossed it back into the bag with a shiver.

“Target is in sight, everyone.” Morgana whispered.

He expected Joker or Oracle’s immediate reply, or perhaps a quip from Skull.

He only received silence. It left a bad taste on his tongue, but he ignored the heartache as he focused on his objective.

“I don’t know man, why don’t you go ask the kid?”

“Tsukauchi has taken over his case, you know how he gets whenever kids are involved. Besides, we’ve got strict instructions not to mess with this stuff until the analysts get here.”

“Well, they don’t have to tell us twice. Some of this garbage gives off a creepy vibe. ”

“Yeah, let’s go check on the cat,” The other said, *“... You don’t think they’ll be mad if it’s left alone for too long, do you?”*

Morgana held back the bubble of laughter as the officers exchanged glances, then left the room in haste. Heart pounding, Morgana pushed open the grate. It rattled on the ground, he hoped nobody was too close to hear it.

“Hurry, time turns rather quickly.”

“I know!”

Morgana gracefully jumped onto the table and gripped the bag’s straps with his teeth and dragged it to the edge. The vent was so high up, he would never make that jump with all of this weight.

“Watch and learn this world’s new tricks, Magician.”

Emerald winds swirled around him and he was launched into the vents with a startled cry. Morgana’s jaw dropped and the straps fell from his mouth.

“How did...?”

“My power works differently in this plane of existence, but the reason is unknown. Now you can use magic without summoning my full form.”

“A different plane of existence?” Morgana asked, but Mercurius remained silent, so he filed it away for later, “I’m coming Joker, just hold on!”

He grasped the evidence bag and pushed forward to his partner.

Joker stared back at his own reflection.

Somebody was staring at him through the window, if the raised hairs on his neck were anything to go by. He wondered how long he had been locked in this maddening room. His stomach turned with hunger, and his sore muscles grew even more so the longer he sat in this hard chair.

His costume was *this* close to disappearing, and it would if he broke his concentration. The pounding headache was worth it though. There was no way he’d let these people do whatever they want with him, and who knows what would happen if they figured out his identity. Joker stiffened as an icy cool sensation washed over his body like a refreshing spring. The burn of his gunshot wound and his sore muscles faded until they were gone completely.

He would know the soothing aura of a Mediarahan anywhere.

“Psst!”

Joker looked up at the vent, where he could see the glimmer of Morgana’s eyes. The vent opened and a tiny ball was dropped into the room. Joker felt the rising panic next door and flashed them a feral grin when the room filled with smoke.

Morgana hopped down onto the table with the bag of items in his mouth.

“Mona, you’re a lifesaver!”

“I know I am.” Morgana said with a smirk, he quickly dug through the bag and gave Joker the Eternal Lock Pick.

The lock pick tore through the cuffs in record time, and the flood of voices returned to his mind when they clattered on the table. He snatched the bag from the table and tore off the bloody bandage just as Morgana jumped on his shoulder.

“Arsene-”

“Got it!”

Arsene burst into existence, and he spun through the air and kicked the wall with his heeled boots. The door flung open just as the wall exploded outwards, dust intermixing with the smokescreen. Wind graced their faces as they looked out into the bleeding sky, and they turned to see a group of people staring at them in shock. Joker felt the sprig of guilt when he looked into Tsukauchi’s frightened expression, but it was covered by his smooth grin.

He gave them the two finger salute, “See ya.”

“Wait, kid!”

The hobo’s voice echoed out into the streets as he jumped. Wind howled in their ears as they jumped from the third story, colorful splatters splashed across the concrete as they rolled into their landing, and took off in a frantic sprint.

“Joker, they’re on our tail!”

Joker looked over his shoulder, the hobo ran on the rooftops, his silvery scarf flailing behind him.

“You’d think *some* people would be more grateful.”

“Let him try to outrun this!”

Morgana closed his eyes as they passed a group of civilians, who leapt out of his way with startled cries. Suddenly, there was a green flash of light that trailed up their bodies, and Joker’s senses sharpened, his footsteps pounded faster against the concrete. Joker laughed, even as police sirens howled through the air and drew closer to them.

“So,” Joker ran across the street, cars honked and brakes screeched, and he took off into an abandoned alleyway, “Mercurius came back?”

“Yeah! I still can’t change forms though,” Morgana dug his claws into Joker as they turned another sharp corner, “But we can talk about everything later!”

A figure dropped down in front of them, and Joker slid to a stop to glare at the hobo. Police sirens were so close, the sound of engines and doors slamming shut echoed through the mouth of the alley. Joker got in a familiar battle stance while Morgana bristled on his shoulder.

“We’re not going to hurt you, kid.” The hobo held up his hands in surrender, “So just turn yourself in.”

Joker narrowed his eyes. Despite the rapid pounding of his heart and how his muscles screamed for him to run, this man in front of him was being genuine. This man had the same air as Tsukauchi. Yet, Lavenza’s voice was still silent, no new confidant was created. Joker brushed away the thought with a cold smile.

“Sorry, old man,” Joker said, “But I won’t be going anywhere with you, especially when the result always ends up in either a cold cell or attempted murder.”

Footsteps were behind them, and Joker whirled around to face Tsukauchi and few police officers with their hands on their guns. He put his back to the wall, a spark of panic rose in his heart. They were surrounded. Tsukauchi took another step closer, his eyes so gentle and trusting.

“Please, don’t make this so hard on yourself, Joker.” He said, “We can help you, but only if you allow us to.”

Morgana nudged him and motioned up to a fire escape. The hobo cursed under his breath when Joker suddenly charged at him and whipped out his scarf. Joker threw himself into a roll to avoid it.

“Hold on!” Morgana whispered in his ear.

Joker’s stomach flew into his throat as he was flung into the air by a burst of wind. He grabbed the fire escape railing and pulled himself over it. Metallic footsteps came from underneath them, and Joker growled in frustration when the hobo followed them up.

“No, don’t shoot-!”

A bullet whizzed by his head, and he whirled around to stare at Tsukauchi in horror. The detective had grasped the arm of the officer, and he looked up at Joker with dismay. Joker didn’t give them a second glance as he jumped onto the rooftop and continued their frantic sprint to freedom.

“Joker, are you alright!?”

“It missed,” Joker said as he hopped over to the next rooftop, “I’m fine.”

Morgana’s eyes softened, but then he looked back over his shoulder.

“*Seriously?* ” He said as the hobo chased after them, “Do these people ever take a hint!?”

They continued this chase until the sun departed under the horizon, and a purple hue dyed the city. Sweat beaded on Joker's brow and he was growing tired, they would be captured again if this kept up.

"Enough!" Arsene yelled, *"I grow tired of this pest!"*

A well of power exploded within him, and Arsene appeared in a tower of blinding blue fire. Morgana cried out in surprise, but Joker kept running. Arsene spread his wings as the hobo jumped back and shielded his eyes, his demonic howl was etched into the night air and reached even the smallest ears from several blocks away. Winds whipped as he beat his massive wings and, with no handhold, the hobo was blown off the rooftops.

Arsene stayed for a few seconds more, hovering ominously in the air before he disappeared.

"I don't think I've ever seen a persona that angry before..." Morgana said in awe.

Joker smirked as they hopped a few more rooftops, and then jumped down into a cramped alleyway. The sickly sweet aroma burned their noses, but they crept past the garbage and hung at the edge of the alleyway. There were no sirens or police cars, and the streets had only a few people. Better yet, that hobo seems to have lost their trail thanks to Arsene.

"You think we finally escaped?" Morgana asked.

"Yeah, hopefully."

Joker ducked back into the alley and finally released his hold. His costume was consumed by azure ashes and he was returned to his regular clothing. A plain white shirt, dark jacket, jeans, and boots. It was the clothes he wore before Yaldabaoth merged Tokyo with the metaverse, before the Phantom Thieves set out to destroy a god, before...

Before they were banished to this weird place.

Thankfully, Joker still had his glasses perched on his nose. Morgana sat next to him and curled his tail around his legs. Joker slowly fell against the wall and slid down onto the ground.

“... Now what?” Morgana asked softly.

Joker set the duffel bag in front of him and dug through their items. His phone was still there, and he smiled when it unlocked for him. There were no new messages or missed calls, and the battery was in the red.

“Nobody has contacted us yet.”

Morgana hummed, and looked up to the star-speckled sky, “We can worry about that tomorrow. How about we try to get some food, and find a decent place to sleep? You must be exhausted.”

Joker zipped the bag shut, and stood. They escaped police custody, now it was time for the next challenge.

Where to sleep in this strange new city?

Hoped you guys enjoyed the chapter!

What are your favorite personas? Mine is Cerberus, always get super excited to see him in SMT/Persona games.

Beneath The Mask

Chapter 6: Beneath The Mask

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“What if...” Morgana hesitated, but took a deep breath and stared Ren straight in the eye, “What if we were sent to a different world?”

Our boy will need a hug after this is all over.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“I’m hungry...”

“I know, Morgana. We’ll get some money, then figure something out.”

They walked down the lonely sidewalk and passed underneath countless light posts on their way to an ATM. It took a while, they had to huddle outside of a library and leech from the wifi there, then trail halfway across the city for one of the few 24 hour ATMs.

“We should be able to find a decent apartment with the funds we stocked up,” Morgana whispered, “Ooh, maybe we can have the whole fridge stuffed to the brim with sushi! Some salmon and some mackerel too! Oh, and of course we can’t forget tuna!”

Ren laughed, “You won’t miss living in Leblanc?”

“Well...” Morgana hummed as his tail flicked back and forth, “The attic was a decently sized room and it served our purposes well, but to have a *whole* apartment to ourselves? Just imagine what we could do!”

Ren waited for the green light, despite there being no cars on the streets, and passed another block. Finally, the ATM came into view. It was sheltered in its own tiny building and lucky for them, nobody else was using it. Ren pushed the door open as he plucked out his wallet.

Morgana was lost to dreams of sushi as he put his card in and waited patiently.

“That’s strange...”

“What’s up?”

“There’s been an error.” Ren examined his card, “It’s not accepting it.”

“Hmm, the machine doesn’t look broken. Did you do it wrong?”

Ren deadpanned but tried a second time. Unease slithered down his throat and settled in his stomach like a rock, and he tried for a third time with the same result. He slid the card back into his wallet and tried another, but it just didn’t work.

“Why isn’t it working?”

Morgana double checked to make sure nobody was around. He blinked at a camera and nudged Ren’s face, then looked pointedly out the door. Ren packed away his wallet as they stepped out into the cool night air, but that didn’t help the sense of dread that sank into their hearts like a blade.

“Ren, I think I know what’s going on.”

Ren tilted his head to the side as Morgana jumped off of his shoulder, “You do?”

“Mercurius said something strange when he came back to me. He said that our power works differently in *this* plane of existence. Now, it kind of makes sense.” Morgana looked over to a nearby park,

where a hint of pink blossoms could be seen, “Think about it. It was Christmas day when we went to fight Yaldabaoth, but it’s obviously spring here. Nobody we’ve encountered knew who we were. There are people with a variety of strange powers and even stranger looks, yet they don’t use personas as we do.”

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“What if...” Morgana hesitated, but took a deep breath and stared Ren straight in the eye, “What if we were sent to a different world?”

Ren paled, “It’s.... would that... would that even be possible?”

“Maybe. Cognition of the masses can be powerful, and Yaldabaoth had control over it. Perhaps these worlds were created through his power, too.”

“So, this is an illusion?”

“No,” Morgana shook his head, “I sense that this place is as solid as the city of Tokyo back home. The people, the places, its all real. It would explain why we can’t go to the metaverse anymore, it’s possible that our allies all fell into different worlds too. Yaldabaoth created multiple portals, after all.”

Ren scrubbed at his eyes as a headache bloomed, “Great, just when I thought things couldn’t get more complicated.”

“When did the odds ever beat us down?” Morgana gained a mischievous gleam to his eyes, and hopped back to his perch on Ren’s shoulder, “We’re Phantom Thieves, and you’re our leader. We’ve accomplished so many things, what does this world have that we haven’t faced down already?”

Ren straightened the bag on his other shoulder and smiled at Morgana.

“You’re right, but we still need to know more of what we’re dealing with. I get the feeling we can’t do much without money, though.”

“How much did we have saved back home?”

Ren felt his spirits plummet, “Almost 4 million yen...”

They had saved up that money for *months*, and only got so much thanks to a few choice targets in Mementos and Ann’s confusion skills. Both Futaba and Haru helped him set up multiple accounts to hide it, and they would’ve all split the money evenly when their time as Phantom Thieves came to an end.

“... And how much cash do you have on you now?”

“4000 yen.” Ren grimaced, “I spent almost all of it getting supplies.”

“Well,” Morgana sank over his shoulder, “We can kiss our sushi apartment goodbye.”

“We’ll have to make do for now.” Ren closed his wallet and shoved it in his back pocket, then walked down the barren street, “We’ll get some food, then find a cheap place to sleep.”

“You know, you could always get a job.”

“One thing at a time, Morgana.” Ren stared at him with a raised brow, “I don’t know if my ID would work in this world, and I don’t exactly want the authorities to find us either.”

“Then we find ways to work around it.” Morgana said with a nod, “If worse comes to worst we could sell off some of our items from the metaverse. We could probably get a good price!”

Ren frowned, “Maybe.”

They fell into silence as they found a 24-hour convenience store. He grabbed a few meat buns on sale, a bottle of iced coffee, and a small

can of cat food for Morgana. The cashier didn't even bat an eye as they paid for their items and left. They had 3200 yen remaining.

They stood outside to eat while Ren accessed the store's wifi.

"There's an internet cafe nearby that doesn't mind small pets." He said as he finished one meat bun and grabbed the next, "1600 yen for twelve hours, but it's the cheapest place around here."

Morgana hummed, but he was too busy stuffing his face with tuna pate to really care. Ren saved the location to his phone and exited the map, but his finger paused over his message icon. The bun suddenly tasted like ash, and he hesitantly clicked on it. He read through the Phantom Thief chat room, and his stomach churned.

[Joker]

Anybody there?

It's been a wild ride so far, but Mona and I escaped without further injury. I hope you're all okay too.

The little loading circles were agonizingly slow.

Then, an error popped up.

"Server not found?" He shoved his phone in his pocket with a scowl, "Great."

Morgana looked up from his meal, "Ren, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He brushed it off with a false smile, "Are you finished?"

Morgana licked his chops and nodded down at the empty can. Ren packed away his food and took care of the trash, then they set off towards the cafe. It wasn't too hard to find an internet cafe called the Raven's Nest, the little bell on the door rang with soft clarity. The

place was homey, with a soft wooden interior that reminded him of Leblanc.

The man behind the front desk looked relatively young, with a shock of silvery hair, electric blue eyes hidden by heavy glasses and a narrow face that reminded him of Yusuke. He glanced at the duo, then straightened as if he was electrocuted. His eyes blinked owlishly several times and plastered on a strained smile as they approached. A few seconds of silence passed, then the man cleared his throat.

“What can I do for you?”

Ren exchanged glances with Morgana, “We would like the twelve hour package, please.”

“Right. That’ll be 1000 yen, then.”

Ren paused as he dug out his wallet, “The website said 1600?”

Morgana gave him a scathing glare, but he ignored it.

“Yup. This season has been rather slow, so I put out discounts to try and draw more customers.” The man scratched the back of his neck with a nervous smile, “I guess I forgot to update the website?”

Ren nodded and handed the money over.

“My name is Kaito by the way.” He nodded past the next door, “We have vending machines and such before the cubicles, and the shower is free for first time customers. Just let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, and don’t mind Miss Aiba. She’s my only other customer right now.”

Ren nodded and passed through the door, but neither of them caught Kaito's sigh of relief. There was a small lounge with a few chairs and a couch on one wall, and vending machines tucked into a small kitchenette on the other. At least it had a fridge and a stove.

"Well, we could do worse." Morgana whispered.

"It's a roof over our heads." Ren bypassed the lounge and went into the next hallway, "For tonight at least."

The muted lighting cast a spell of silence, their breathing suddenly sounded as loud as crashing ocean waves. There were rows of doors on either side of the wall, all of them were open except for one at the end. It was close to the bathroom, and Morgana's ears picked up faint sounds within. Ren dove into the closest cubicle and shut the door. Morgana jumped onto the plush cushion as Ren unloaded the bags beside the door. There was even a hook where he could hang his jacket.

It was smaller than his cell in the Velvet Room, but a lot more comfortable.

"You think Futaba would be jealous of this setup?" Morgana asked, he set his front paws on the desk and tilted his head, "This looks like a decent computer, but I don't know much about them."

"She would probably tear it apart and add her own little touch to it." Ren smiled fondly as he plopped down in front of the screen, "Well, let's see what we can find out."

Immediately, the feed was filled with news of the USJ, but he filed those tabs away for later.

Neither of them was prepared for the swell of information. Ren couldn't even begin to guess how a shining baby brought forth 'quirks' in this world. There were laws in Japan that forbade public use of them, but they were just scratching the surface, and the rabbit hole expanded.

Quirks. Quirkless. Heroes. Villains. Vigilantes. Technology that has stagnated for... 200 years!? Ren brought up the calendar, and his jaw dropped.

"This place is in the year 2218, huh?" Morgana looked at Ren, eyes wide in disbelief, "And 80% of the people here can have any combination of powers based on their genetics. That's pretty terrifying if you really think about it."

"Tsukauchi said his quirk was called Polygraph. Ironically, I don't think he was lying." Ren ran a hand through his hair, "I wonder if that's why Kaito was staring at us weird. Maybe his quirk tipped him off about something."

"Maybe." Morgana sighed, "I don't like any of this. We'll have to be extra careful, Ren."

Ren snorted, "Like we weren't ever careful before?"

"Well, I think we'll do a better job without Ryuji screaming our secrets from the rooftops." Another stab to the heart, but Ren covered it with a lazy smile as Morgana stretched, "I think I'll go scout around outside. I want to secure escape routes and get a lay of the land in case that Kaito guy pulls something."

"Are you sure? There's still a lot we don't know about this place, and we shouldn't get separated."

Morgana rolled his eyes, "Please, it's just a quick trip around the block! What could it hurt?"

"Alright." Ren shifted on the cushion, and then stood with a long sigh, "But I want you to come right back if you see anything weird."

"Yes, *mom* ." Morgana playfully narrowed his eyes, "Are you doubting my skills, Ren? Did you already forget who broke us out of that station?"

He deadpanned, "Of course not."

"Good."

They made their way to the front desk while Kaito looked up from his phone. His large eyes peered straight into them as Ren opened the front door.

"My shift will go on for a while," Kaito said as he glanced back at his phone, "So I'll let him back in if he scratches at the door."

Morgana forced himself to meow in agreement. Ren held back laughter when Kaito blinked at them several times in confusion, Morgana simply held his nose high in the air as he walked out.

Ren smiled, "Thanks."

Kaito nodded and avoided looking him in the eye as Ren made his way back to the cubicle. He felt eyes on him, his hand paused over the handle as he glanced towards the end of the hall. There was a flash of a pale magenta eye peeking through the darkness of the last cubicle before the door slammed shut.

Ren buried his unease as he stepped inside his room for the night, and sank back into the cushion painted by the screen's pale light. Several seconds pass. A shiver ran down his spine at the unnatural silence. For the first time in ages, he was *alone*. His personas had been quiet for a while. The adrenaline from the USJ mess and their escape from the police faded, and his body suddenly felt a thousand pounds heavier.

This silence was too loud.

His mind flashed back to Yaldabaoth. The God of Control had toyed with them, used them as puppets, and then threw them away. Ren failed, didn't he? He was supposed to protect *everyone*, and now there was a possibility that they would never get to return home. They were so far apart and he didn't know how to fix it!

The screams of his comrades rang in his ears, their faces contorted in fear were burned into his memory. They were cast away, far out of reach from his hand.

Ren had *failed* .

No, it wasn't only that.

Joker had failed. He let down the Phantom Thieves and the rest of Tokyo, they counted on him to defeat Yaldabaoth and he just...

Froze. Like a deer in headlights.

Something twisted in his heart like a blade, and he suddenly couldn't breathe. The air was stolen out of his lungs, the walls seemed to close in on him. His clammy fingers grasped the front of his shirt. He felt a bone-chilling cold spread in his chest, and his body wouldn't stop trembling.

His agitation didn't go unnoticed.

"Little one..."

"Big brother? Are you okay?"

"Don't lose heart, Mask Bearer. Please calm yourself!"

"Something upset Master! Let me hunt it down and devour it!!"

"I'll take whoever caused your distress and drown them in a sea of filth."

The voices were masked by the buzzing static, or was it the dizziness that made the world all fuzzy?

"Breathe, Trickster. It is alright, we are all here alongside you."

Arsene's voice was far away amidst the fog, but Ren forced himself to take a deep, ragged breath, *"Good, now let it out."*

He pressed the air through his throat, and Arsene repeated his instructions several times. Time didn't matter to one lost in their own mind, and thus it was nearly half an hour before it passed, his personas' constant presence swept away the panic like a stormy gust.

Ren hugged his knees closer and wiped the blurriness from his eyes. That's strange, when did he start crying? He pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the incoming headache and glanced at the time. Midnight was just approaching.

"Thank you, everyone." He muttered to nobody, "I'm alright, now."

The flood of voices sent their last encouragements before they disappeared. Only Arsene stayed. Ren knew he would be there until he fell asleep, he always was. There was a scratch at the door. Ren set his glasses on the desk before he scrubbed the remaining tears from his face, then stood to open the door. Morgana pranced in and sat on the cushion.

"You wouldn't believe how many cat cafes are nearby! There are even sushi restaurants around here! Well, I saw several escape routes too if we happen to-" Morgana's voice died in his throat when he looked at Ren, his ears perked straight up, "Hey, are you okay?"

Ren smiled, but Morgana saw the exhaustion etched into his face.

"I'll be fine."

More silence. Ren didn't like it, and tried to shove down the bubble of emotions locked in his throat. Finally, Morgana relented.

"If you say so." Morgana's ears drooped, but he tactfully changed the subject, "Did you learn anything while I was gone?"

Ren plopped down and Morgana eagerly settled on his lap. There was an article on the screen, discussing the 'mysterious vigilante' that appeared during the USJ incident. Ren clicked out of it.

“Nothing that important.”

Morgana’s tail flicked, but he didn’t say anything for a few tense moments.

“I was able to clear my thoughts while out walking, and I think we should go investigate the USJ.”

“Why? The security is probably through the roof right now.”

“Perhaps,” Morgana flicked his ear and looked back at the screen, “Yaldabaoth must’ve sent us there for a reason, though. I don’t know if he knew of the invasion going down or not, but it has to be worth something to go back there, right?”

“I guess,” Ren said as he idly pets Morgana, “I tried to look up its location, but no luck. I don’t remember the way there either.”

“Hmm, then it must be classified information. We were injured and scared, so I don’t remember much. You think the school files would have something?”

“Are you thinking of breaking into U.A.?”

“Maybe. At least think it over, it’s not like we have anything else to do.” He suddenly perked up and glanced at Ren, “Oh, I got another idea while I was out!”

“Yeah?” Ren blinked down at him, “Don’t keep it to yourself.”

Morgana snorted, “It has to do with your personas. Mercurius was right about our powers being different here, and I was wondering if it would be possible to summon one of yours without your costume appearing. Just think how helpful it could be, to appear normal while your personas are in the physical world.”

“I think a few of them might enjoy causing chaos without us getting caught.”

Ren made to stand but froze when Morgana jumped up and placed both of his front paws on his chest. He head bumped Ren's chin, and Ren couldn't keep a smile from his face.

"Let's try it tomorrow. We're both too exhausted to stay awake much longer."

"You could say that again."

Ren turned off the computer screen and fell back onto the cushion. A warm weight lay over his aching heart.

"Good night, Ren."

"Sleep well, Trickster."

Ren muttered something, but the darkness had already pulled him in a dreamless slumber.

Kaito set his phone down with a sigh.

His quirk allowed him to see many things, a simple glance at somebody and he would experience the people they've met, places they've been, even some of the food the other person had tasted as if he had experienced it for himself. The visions were always crystal clear, and in all of the 28 years of his life he could never turn it off.

But when those two walked in...

It was like watching an old movie reel, but the edges were burned or frayed, and important pieces were lost to a wierd static. He saw fantastical and *impossible* sceneries, and monsters that reminded him of several myths he's read online. Something wasn't right here. The final few images were exactly like the USJ attack that's been on the news. Were those two the mysterious vigilantes that appeared? Why did the cat pretend that he couldn't talk?

He should call the police, but something made him hesitate.

The kid had a sense of *loss*, such a great sadness within him, and he couldn't bring himself to turn him in. It was the same for that Aiba girl. His business wouldn't last much longer under spontaneous discounts and free showers, but they were in desperate need of a roof over their heads. His bleeding heart wouldn't take no for an answer.

They could stay, as long as they didn't cause trouble.

He didn't know it at the time, but giving the kid and his cat a single chance would pay him back tenfold.

Poor Ren, don't feel bad, buddy.

ALSO! We passed 1k hits? Already?? You guys are awesome, thank you so much! ^^

Brotherhood

Chapter 7: Brotherhood

Let's check up on another pair, shall we?

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Makoto collected her things and neatly put them in her bag, then waved farewell to her coworkers. She walked the empty halls and made her way to the stormy gray skies outside, the air heavy with sticky moisture.

“Another rainy day, huh?” She whispered to herself.

She walked down the stone steps and made it to the streets, but her eyes were too focused on the sky to see the figures walking towards her. She was jolted out of her reverie when she knocked shoulders with a boy younger than her, with golden blonde hair and a red overcoat. His yellow eyes bore into her with irritation.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!”

There was the gleam of a silver watch hanging from his pants pocket, and she instantly knew who it was. Part of her job was memorizing important people, and these two were especially infamous lately. She bowed her head.

“My apologies, Fullmetal.”

Fullmetal glared at her, then rolled his eyes and stomped away.

“B-brother!” The walking suit of armor had a voice that was far too young, “I’m sorry, he’s in a really bad mood today.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Makoto said with a soft smile, “Everyone has off days.”

If she didn’t know better, she would think that the suit of armor was almost blushing. He nodded frantically, and Makoto watched as he caught up with his shorter companion.

“Brother, you shouldn’t be so mean to people! She was really nice about it!”

“Shut up, Al! She was the one who bumped into me first!”

“Why are you like this, Edward?”

Makoto huffed with laughter as they vanished into Central Command. It was odd, how the suit of armor’s steps sounded hollow. She shook her head and continued on her way, either it was just her imagination, or it was a common occurrence in this world. Old styled cars hummed down the roads and people walked the streets, their clothes were strange at first, but she was growing used to them.

She explored through a maze of cobblestone streets and made it to a familiar apartment building just as raindrops pattered around her. The cold keys jingled in her hands as she unlocked the door, then stepped in with a relieved sigh. Her heavy blue overcoat was shrugged off and hung on the hook beside the door, and she slipped off her boots before finally stepping into the kitchen.

“You’re back already?”

Yusuke looked up from where he hovered over the table. The kitchen was a mess, papers and books were piled high on the table and around the floor, glyphs and maps were secured by tape. Several loose sketches covered any bare spots on the walls, so much so that the wooden interior didn’t show at all. Any iota of information about this new world was posted somewhere in this tiny space.

“Yusuke, I left almost seven hours ago.”

Yusuke tilted his head, dislodging a few hairs from his bangs.

“Oh, my apologies.” He straightened his hair and blinked at her, “Did you have a good day then?”

Makoto pulled out the nearest chair and sank into it, “It was.... something. I actually ran into another State Alchemist today.”

“Oh?” Yusuke’s hands twitched as he grabbed for a pencil, “What was he like?”

“One was short and angry, the other was just a walking suit of armor, but he was a lot calmer.” She said with a chuckle, “Other than that it was a rather boring day, but an office job is safer than being out in the front lines. I did manage to grab a few new books to add to our collection, though.”

Yusuke’s eyes brightened as Makoto handed her bag over. He eagerly took a heavy tome out and cracked it open.

“Have you made any progress since this morning?” She asked.

“Some.” Yusuke looked up from the book, and glanced at the intricate circles taped on the walls, “I learned that ice alchemy is rather common, so I should be able to hide a majority of Susanoo’s abilities. But I haven’t encountered anything resembling nuclear energy, so hiding your persona’s powers might be a bit more difficult.”

Makoto hummed as he tapped her finger on the paper-laden table, “Maybe we could disguise it as something else. There might be alchemy dealing with light, or we could use it as a unique type of fire.”

“Maybe. I’ll continue my research and let you know what I find.” Yusuke’s eyes fell back into the book, “I also made some coffee. I tried to imitate the way Ren made it, but I am no master of coffee pouring.”

“Thanks.” She said softly.

Makoto stood from the chair and traversed through the towers of books, and reached one of the few clear spots on the counter. The coffee was still warm as she poured herself a cup. Yusuke tried, but nobody would ever be able to replicate the intricate flavors of their leader’s coffee. She tried to ignore the sharp stab in her chest when she thought of everyone, and wondering if they were safe or not drove her crazy.

The first few days in this new world were.... difficult, but hearing their persona’s voices after the second day made things a little better. They agreed to a solid plan after the first few nights spent on the streets, thankfully they were settled in this apartment within two weeks.

Makoto took a job within this world’s military to get an understanding of how their government worked, and to earn money for both of them to rent this tiny place. She would lay low and keep an ear to the ground for any news of their comrades. Makoto would talk to the people and learn rumors and stories from surrounding lands.

Yusuke did what he did best. People watching, understanding the art and culture, sketching anything he could to add to their growing wall. Makoto pointed out that Amestris highly resembled Germany, which only sparked a long and colorful speech on the artists from that country.

But more importantly, they were a team.

They both studied the strange force of nature called Alchemy. This force had its own laws and balances, and it was the sole source of power within the country they found themselves in. His art skills worked hand in hand with drawing the transmutation circles, while she did her best to dig up information.

One thing was clear, though.

They could *not* be discovered. Their personas were unique and held a range of powers that matched what several State Alchemists could do. If they were caught....

She didn't want to think of it. They could be used as experiments or imprisoned, possibly *worse*, and then they might not ever find a way home.

"Are you alright?" Yusuke asked, as if he sensed her unease, "I apologize if the coffee isn't up to standard."

"I'm fine," She tried to smile, but it came out forced, "I'm just wondering what our next move should be. I can't help but wonder how Joker would handle this."

"Indeed, this whole situation is troubling." Yusuke peered into her for several seconds, then sighed as he set the book down, "He would lead us without hesitation, with that suave and confident aura he always projects."

"Yeah. I can almost hear Morgana calling us a bunch of wet blankets right about now."

"Or Ryuji getting impatient and just going all in, guns blazing. Ann would try and follow along, calling him an idiot all the while."

"Yeah...." Makoto frowned as she stared into her mug, then took another slow sip.

"They are alright, you know. We Phantom Thieves are resilient and resourceful. Everyone fell into those gates in pairs, so nobody is alone. We will get through this, *all* of us, in one piece."

"You're right." Makoto set her cup down and approached the largest map on the wall, "And then we can repay Yaldabaoth tenfold for what he's done."

Yusuke smiled, "Exactly. So, what were you thinking earlier?"

"It's nothing." Makoto absorbed the names printed on the map, then turned to Yusuke, "I was thinking of trying to use my skills to go up a rank or two in the military, but that would be risky."

"Hmm, we could gain more useful information, as long as you don't stand out too much." Yusuke grasped his chin in thought, and frowned, "But we have to make sure not to get attached to anything in this world. We were never meant to exist in this place, and that in itself could have some dire consequences."

"I know." Makoto said as she set her hands on her hips, "I bet everyone will have some good stories to tell."

"Indeed. You can tell them all about that Lieutenant Colonel that shows everyone pictures of his daughter."

"And how you chased a small family out of a store because you wanted 'to capture the spirit of consumerism in a strange land.' I bet the others will have a good laugh at that."

"W-well that's..." Yusuke turned a shade of red and cleared his throat, "How else are we supposed to remember them after we return home?"

"You're right. I could tell them of the Colonel that wanted the women in the military to wear short miniskirts. I heard his second in command nearly shot him for that. I'm sure that story could cover up your embarrassment. In any case," She glanced at the bags under Yusuke's eyes, "You should get some rest, I can take over for a few hours."

"... Are you sure? You've been working all day."

"Yusuke," He tensed at her sharp tone, "Did you even sleep last night?"

"I was working on an exquisite portrait of a woman I saw at a nearby cafe." He looked away and fidgeted with the edge of his sleeve, "So

no, but-”

“But nothing.” She grabbed his shoulders and pushed him towards the hall, “Don’t make me pull a Morgana on you and tell you to go to bed.”

“Very well...”

Yusuke slumped in defeat and wandered into his bedroom. Makoto sighed after a few moments of silence, then she glanced over to the mountain of books on the table. Reading would take her mind off of things. She found herself glancing over the same passages several times, her brain didn’t comprehend the words, and there was a sudden burn of tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Ren.” She whispered, “Please be alright. I don’t know what we would do if we were stuck here forever and I never got to see you again.”

The warmth of her persona’s presence did nothing to soothe her heartache.

But she held on, the promise of being reunited with her friends was one that burned into her very soul. She and Yusuke would return home and see them again.

No matter what.

Obviously, Makoto and Yusuke are a little farther along in their time line, so they are doing a bit better than Joker and Mona at the moment.

There will be a chapter every once in a great while checking in on the other Phantom Thieves, but it will mostly stick to Joker and Mona's adventures in MHA.

The Poem Of Everyone's Souls

Chapter 8: The Poem Of Everyone's Souls

Ren froze when he noticed his audience.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The human psyche is a delicate thing.

It shifts and molds and grows like the seasons, gains new flavors and textures as one travels through life, but Arsene had never seen one so bare. Blackness permeated the space around them like an empty night sky, it smothered his senses, and he only caught quick flashes of eyes or scales or the odd feather or two from the other personas. That peaceful song had gone silent. It has been this way ever since Yaldabaoth sent down that black wind and banished them.

"... Is big brother going to be okay?" A small, innocent voice echoed through the inky blackness.

"He's hurting." Another said, Arsene couldn't see who it was, but recognized the bubbly voice, *"And I know not how to make him feel better."*

"Master will pull through!" Cerberus, who lounged nearby, would howl it to the moon if he could, *"After all, he has us!"*

"Of course he'll be fine," This one's voice was dainty, yet commanding, as she floated on invisible winds with sparkling gossamer wings, *"I would never follow a weak man. Otherwise, I wouldn't bother being here."*

“Careful what you say, Titania.” Arsene growled, his great black wings flared a warning, “We all swore a vow to the Trickster, ‘I am thou, thou art I’. It is a promised bond that can never be broken.”

“Of course. I meant nothing by it, Arsene.” She teased, “The Trickster shall have us at his back for the rest of eternity, but don’t you sense that something else is wrong with him? Do you not feel the sorrow in his soul? You were the First, you should know better than everyone else.”

Arsene saw her faint form glide through the darkness towards him.

“Everything has been turned on its head since we got to this new world. We are different in this realm Yaldabaoth has banished us to, no longer bound by the sea of human souls.”

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“We are.... ourselves? No longer one copy amidst many. I feel whole for the first time in ages.”

Arsene hummed as he looked down at his clawed hands. He curled them into fists. It’s true. In the old world, they were nothing but whispers and hollow shadows, only solid and powerful while in Palaces or Mementos. Here, in this new world, they were all *alive* . They were changing. Were they naturally becoming more corporeal, or was there something morphing within the Trickster that caused it?

Perhaps it was the odd energy of this new world that was the catalyst.

“Lady Titania has a point,” The innocent one said, “The Magician’s persona said that our powers will work differently.”

“Ooh!” The bubbly one giggled, “Won’t this be fun? Who knows what we’ll experience in this new world!?”

"As long as Master can be happy." Cerberus wagged his metal tail like an excited pup.

"See?" Titania whispered in Arsene's ear as she slid her arms around his shoulders, "There's no need to be so worried, Arsene. Everything will fall into place."

Arsene huffed, ignoring the intoxicating scent of sunshine and early morning dew as he freed himself from her silky grasp. He missed how she pouted at him. Not that he cared too much about her wiles.

"We'll wait and see, anything can happen at this point in time." He said, tucking in his wings and tracing the rim of his hat, "It's all we can do for now."

Suddenly, there was movement, the largest amongst them all stirred in a rustling of golden scales. Great crimson eyes stared down from above, a growl resembling a great earthquake rumbled through the mindscape.

"Uh oh," The bubbly one whispered, *"We woke up grandpa. Sorry, old boy."*

Another grumble, then a snort blew down on them with the raging power of a typhoon. Arsene held the tip of his hat so it wouldn't blow away, and his elegant feathers were ruffled into an unsavory mess. The old one wasn't even sorry as he slipped further into the blackness to sleep in peace, the tip of his magnificent tail was the last thing they saw of him.

Arsene silently cursed to himself as he straightened out his messy wings, then turned to the others who were laughing at him. They gained a sudden seriousness as he studied them with burning eyes.

"We should adjourn this little meeting before we disturb anybody else." He shook his head with a sigh, "The Trickster is bound to wake up soon, he'll need all of us for support. Go and get some rest while you can."

Everyone hummed in agreement, then they vanished amidst endless darkness. Arsene was alone now. For once, he was thankful for the quiet, so he could get his thoughts in order. Is this how the Trickster felt when leading the Phantom Thieves? The other personas had a quiet respect for him, being the First one to manifest. He was purely Joker's other self.

Sure, the other personas teased him and pushed his buttons sometimes, but it was in the same friendly demeanor that the Phantom Thieves had for their leader. Arsene tapped his chin in thought.

"I wonder where this new path will lead us, Joker. I don't know where it'll go," He whispered to himself, "But I'm eager to see it through to the end."

Ren peeled his eyes open with a groan.

His muscles were as stiff as a board, his bones creaked ominously as he forced himself into a sitting position. The clock sitting on the desk was a few minutes shy of 7:30 in the morning. Soft snores drew him to the other warm spot on his side. Morgana slept on his back, paws in the air, his foot occasionally twitching in some odd dream. Ren gently poked him in the side.

"Hey, Morgana."

The cat grumbled as he opened an eye, "What...?"

"I'm gonna go shower and see what we could scrounge up for breakfast."

"Okay." He closed his eyes and relaxed back in the cushion, "I'll be up in a few...."

Ren chuckled as Morgana nodded off with an adorable snore. His joints cracked as he stepped out and wandered towards the end of

the hallway, the other tenant's door was firmly shut and he didn't hear a peep out of it. He shut the bathroom door, making sure the lock clicked as he studied the small space. It was clean, for the most part. Piles of miniature toiletries were lined on the counter, alongside some plush towels.

Ren approached the mirror and leaned over the sink, he was pale and the bags under his eyes haven't lessened any. His steely eyes stared right back at him.

"Arsene?"

There was a tiny flicker of gold that surrounded his pupils like a glittering puddle.

"I am here, Trickster." Arsene said softly, *"As are the others."*

"Good," Ren sighed in relief, "Have you recovered your strength?"

"We should be asking you that," There was a soft ruffling of feathers, *"But yes. A decent night's sleep has done us all good."*

"I'll be fine, but we should keep our guard up. Yesterday was bad enough."

"Understood."

The gold in his eyes faded, and Ren sighed. He wished everything that happened yesterday was just a bad dream, that he would wake up in Leblanc's attic to find that nothing was amiss. He shook his head and backed away from the sink, then turned to the shower. The hot water soothed his sore muscles and he was out in less than fifteen minutes, he would have to wear the same clothes, but that wouldn't be a big deal. He smuggled away some of the toiletries and a fresh toothbrush, then made his way back to his room.

Morgana was still asleep, so Ren left him in peace as he packed the items away. He debated on eating the leftover meat buns and coffee,

but decided against it. He stalked out of his room and went to the lounge area. It was still empty, so he was free to raid the kitchenette. Ren opened the closest cabinet and smirked.

“Instant curry?” He snatched up the plastic packets, “It won’t be as good as Sojiro’s but...”

He’s done this a thousand and one times already, Sojiro had taught him everything on how to make a batch of homemade curry, but the instant stuff would have to do. His practiced hands followed the motions, and he even found extra spices and the tools to hand brew fresh coffee. It wasn’t much longer before the kitchen gained a heavenly aroma. The curry was steaming hot as he ladled it over rice and poured the coffee into a mug.

Ren froze when he noticed his audience. It was a girl half his height, with droopy raspberry hair dangling all the way to the floor. Hollow maroon eyes studied his every movement, her clothes were wrinkled and had odd stains on them. A pang of sympathy lurched in his chest.

He’s seen those empty eyes before.

Futaba was in a rough patch when she contacted the Phantom Thieves in desperation, the pain had cut so deep into her heart that she was on her last strings. Ren didn’t want to think about how it would end if they didn’t succeed in stealing her heart. That exact same hopeless stare bore into him again.

“I made some breakfast if you’re hungry.” He said with a genuine, soft smile, “And brewed some coffee, but I can make you tea if you’d prefer that.”

The girl said nothing, only stared ominously. He hummed, then walked to the other side of the lounge and set the meal on the coffee table. He motioned to it, then stared back at her.

“Feel free to help yourself.”

He caught some semblance of surprise on her face as he got a second helping. He paused with the warm dishes in his hands and glanced towards the other side of the room. Perhaps Kaito would like some too? Maroon eyes stared at his back as he wandered to the front desk. The man gaped at him when he set the meal down.

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast, in case you haven’t had any yet. Take it as a thank you for giving us the discount.”

Kaito glanced between Ren and the tantalizing plate. Ren held back laughter as Kaito took his first bite, then stood from his chair with a bug-eyed look.

“This is good!” He said, “I didn’t think we had the ingredients for homemade curry.”

“It’s not. It’s the instant stuff, I just added my own touch to it.” Ren said with a tiny smirk, “The other tenant must’ve thought so too because she watched me make it.”

“You…” Kaito nearly dropped his spoon, “Miss Aiba actually left her cubicle?”

“Yeah.” Ren raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

“She hasn’t come out in months! I wouldn’t have given up if I knew she would come out for some decent curry.”

Ren hummed as he tucked that information away for later. Another mark that made this Aiba girl similar to Futaba. Far too similar for his liking. Ren left Kaito with the food as he made his way back to the kitchen. The short girl froze like a deer in the headlights, but he smiled when he saw that her plate was half cleaned. He took the last of the food, washed the dishes, then went back to his cubicle to eat.

“There you are!” Morgana said as he plopped down, “Hey, where’s my breakfast?”

“They didn’t have any cat food, so we’ll have to pick up some after we leave.” Ren set the coffee mug on the desk, “What have you been looking up while I was gone?”

Morgana sulked, his tail twitching, but he turned to the screen.

“I was looking up this U.A. school. It’s almost infamous at this point. Just this year alone they hired the #1 hero in Japan, had a break-in, and now this villain attack.”

Ren chuckled as Morgana tapped away on the keyboard.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” Ren said, despite his smirk, “I just find it weird how you can use a mouse and keyboard when you’ve had troubles trying to open locked doors before.”

“Hey! It’s not easy to work a lock pick with these tiny paws!”

That only made him laugh harder, much to Morgana’s ire. It took him a moment to reign it in, but Morgana’s next words were like a nail in the coffin.

“Have you thought about what I said?”

Ren frowned, “About what?”

“The school!” Morgana rolled his eyes and hopped away from the computer, “The USJ is one of their facilities. I thought it would be best if we tried to get information straight from the source, we could blend in with the journalists currently storming the school gate. It’ll be perfect!”

“What if we get caught? I’m sure that’ll be a fun headline.”

“They only saw you in your mask and costume,” He said with a flick of his ear, “I don’t think they’ll notice as long as we don’t draw attention to ourselves.”

It didn’t sit well with Ren, but what choice did they have? Morgana had a point, besides there was only so much information they could learn from the safety of an internet cafe.

“Fine. I still don’t like it though.”

“You don’t have to.” Morgana said with a soft smile, “I don’t like this situation more than you do, but we have to do whatever we can to get back home.”

Ren grimaced, then nodded. They were silent after that, looking up articles here and there as Ren finished his breakfast. The computer was turned off and they gathered up their things, Ren made sure to swipe his glasses before they left the cubicle. Morgana was perched on his shoulder as they crossed the kitchen, where the pink-haired girl had fallen asleep on the couch, plate wiped clean. There was even a smudge of sauce on her lips. Ren silently grabbed her dishes, ignoring Morgana’s curious stares, and set them in the sink.

Kaito looked up from his coffee when they emerged.

“Checking out already? You guys still have a couple of hours left, you know.”

Ren shrugged, “We have a few errands to run, so we can’t stay.”

“If you say so.” Kaito blinked, then stared into his coffee mug, “The discount will last for a while, so feel free to come back if you need a place to sleep.”

Ren nodded his thanks before leaving. The streets were filled with men in business suits, parents walking children to school, small groups of wandering teens, and the occasional dog walker here and there. Cars thrummed down the streets, and there was even a hero

posing with fans down the way. They did read that they were like celebrities, but this was ridiculous.

“This place is a lot different compared to the daytime.” Morgana whispered.

A few people gave him odd looks, but he ignored them as they ducked into the maze of alleyways. They turned a few corners before Morgana spoke.

“So, what was with that girl?”

“What girl?”

“The girl in the internet cafe? The one sleeping on the couch.”

“Nothing.” Ren stopped and stared into Morgana’s eyes, “She just reminded me of Futaba before she joined the Phantom Thieves, so I shared food with her. Is that bad?”

“Of course not.” Morgana said as he hopped off his shoulder and landed on a garbage bin, “But we probably shouldn’t stand out too much as is.”

“I know,” Ren said with a frown, “I couldn’t just leave her like that. What’s the harm in showing a little kindness? Besides, we can’t go stealing hearts as we could in our old world, so how else was I supposed to help?”

Morgana studied him for a moment. Ren held his gaze, unflinching. Finally, Morgana sighed and sat down on the bin with his tail curled around his feet.

“I understand. So,” His tone changed, and he smiled at Ren, “Here seems to be a good place to practice.”

“Practice?”

Morgana leveled him with a deadpanned look, "You should learn to summon your personas without your costume appearing, if that's even possible. I'll keep a lookout using Mercurius' new powers."

"What new powers?"

"I'm... not really sure yet," Morgana said, then he looked to the other end of the alley, "It's like I can feel the wind around us as easy as breathing. I can sense them, and anything that disturbs them. I couldn't even do that in Mementos, so this will be good practice to me too."

Ren hummed, then set down the bag of items at his feet.

"I need one that won't stick out too much."

"In this world of strange powers?" Morgana tilted his head, "I don't think it would be too hard for anything to blend in."

"Tell that to Mara."

Morgana wrinkled his nose in disgust, "You don't still have him, do you?"

"No," Ren said with a shake of his head, "I sacrificed him before we faced Yaldabaoth."

"Good riddance. Just choose a smaller one then, and we can go from there."

Ren scanned through his personas, who waited eagerly at the precipice of his mind. Something that would blend in, or that was small and 'normal' looking. Ren snapped his fingers as he called the perfect name.

"Yatagarasu!"

Blue flames erupted around him as his costume burst into the real world, the whoosh of steady wings beat in his ears. Ren held his arm

out for the bird to perch on. He was larger than a regular raven and there was a slick green sheen to his dark feathers. Perhaps people wouldn't give him a second look if it weren't for the necklace of magatama around his neck or the fact that he had three legs.

But hey, nobody's perfect.

"The Trickster has chosen wisely," Yatagarasu's voice was as elegant as the rising sun, "Where shall my wings lead us?"

"Nowhere just yet." Morgana said, "We can't exactly blend in when Joker's in full costume."

Yatagarasu tilted his head as if he were trying to solve an intriguing puzzle. He shifted on Joker's arm and puffed up his feathers.

"Trickster, can you feel our bond?"

"Without a doubt." Joker said, "I can feel it with all of you."

"Good, now close your eyes," Joker did, and he listened to Yatagarasu's comforting voice, "Visualize our bond as if it were a thread that connected us together. Excellent! Imagine this thread to be as fine as a thread of silk."

Joker pictured the emerald thread twisting in the darkness, brows creasing as he thinned it down to be as fine as a single strand of hair. Suddenly, there was a strange tug, and his eyes flew open to blue cinders dancing around in the air.

Yatagarasu still sat on his arm, but his costume was gone. The noble bird looked as proud as he felt.

"Woah..." Morgana gaped at the both of them, "Was it really that easy?"

"I had no doubt in my mind that the Trickster would pull it off!" Yatagarasu said with a sharp nod, "But it was easier to accomplish

because I am one of the weakest masks. The bigger or more powerful the persona, the finer your control will need to be.”

“Alright, I’ll have to find somewhere to practice with the others.” Ren said as he straightened his glasses with his free hand, “But how did you know to do that?”

The raven lifted one wing in a semblance of a shrug, “A new world dawns new instincts, Trickster. I cannot explain how I knew.”

“Well, this took less time than I anticipated!” Morgana stood with an excited gleam to his eyes, “Do you think you could be our eye in the sky, Yatagarasu? We don’t know what we’ll come across when we approach U.A.”

Yatagarasu glanced at Ren, who nodded and held his arm higher in the air.

“Very well. Let me be your guiding wings.”

The dignified bird soared from his arm and vanished over the rooftops with powerful wing beats. There was an odd stir in Ren’s chest, this connection with Yatagarasu was strong and stable, and he somehow knew where the persona was despite being nothing but a smudge in the air.

“Follow me, Trickster!”

Ren jumped, “Yatagarasu?”

“Indeed. The skies are giving us favorable winds today. I know where we must go.”

Morgana blinked at him, “Can you still speak telepathically to him?”

He nodded, and Morgana positively beamed. Morgana leapt off the garbage bin and pranced to the end of the alley.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” He said, “We have some detective work to do!”

Ren sighed, then followed after them.

Maybe this will be fun after all.

Hey guys, hoped you enjoyed that chapter!

So, Titania and Yatagarasu are officially added to the list, and there were a couple of hints as to what the others could be.

Crossroads

Chapter 9: Crossroads

“What’s the Sports Festival?” Ren whispered to himself.

“You don’t know what the Sports Festival is? What, have you been living under a rock?”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Do I have to stay here?” Morgana whined.

“I think you’d stand out more than me.” Ren raised a brow as he tucked the item bag behind a dumpster, “We can’t risk getting caught now.”

“But don’t you need someone to watch your back? Who knows what those reporters will do to get their story! What if they do something crazy and I’m not around to support you?”

“Don’t worry so much. Yatagarasu is flying overhead,” Ren said, “He’ll back me up in a pinch. Besides, I need you to protect our items. You think you can do that?”

He flicked his tail and huffed, before sitting next to the bag with pouty ears.

“Just don’t take too long, okay?” Morgana stared at him with an inscrutable expression, “We don’t want to risk them recognizing you either. Even without your costume, your hair is pretty distinct. We don’t have the Metaverse to protect our identities anymore.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful,” He waved as he stepped out of the alley, “I promise.”

The streets next to the ridiculously large school were lined with cafes and small shops, perfect for tired students to hang out after class. It didn't take a genius to decipher the pandemonium in front of the gate, reporters were clustered together and cameras were shoved into the faces of two figures. It was easy for Ren to swipe an extra notepad and pen from an unsuspecting reporter, and took on the role of a nervous intern.

"Is it true that the attack by the League of Villains was an attempt on All Might's life!?" One woman shouted.

Ren was about to shoulder his way to the front when a familiar voice froze him in his tracks.

"An incredibly stupid move on the League's part," The hobo droned, "And you all know how that ended."

Ren cursed under his breath as the hero was bombarded with other questions, the yellow cockatoo of a man stood beside him, sweating nervously underneath his grin. If *he* was here, then Ren had to be extra careful. He moved off to the side and hid behind a line of cameramen to avoid the dark hero's eyes.

"Yatagarasu, how's it looking?"

Ren almost felt the wind beneath the bird's wings as Yatagarasu banked to the left, looking no more than a dot gliding across the sky.

"This place is expansive, Trickster," He said, "I would compare the main building to Madarame's Palace in size, perhaps a bit larger. The grounds stretch far beneath me, and I see a forest and several other structures off in the distance."

Just what kind of budget did these people have? And this was *just* a school? There was so much they didn't know, and that could cost them dearly unless they did something about it.

“What news do you have on the vigilante that appeared during the attack?” A woman with a ponytail shoved a microphone in the heroes’ faces, “Is it true that he escaped from police custody?”

Ren snapped his attention towards them as the hobo glared at her, but the media shark was unfazed.

“No comment.”

“Sources say that his quirk can control a variety of demons, as there was a civilian video released to the public yesterday. The vigilante was able to escape because a great winged being burst to life and cut off the hero chasing him! In fact,” The woman simply grinned and inched closer, “You look just like that hero, Eraserhead.”

Ren grimaced. There was a video? How? Was it from some person with a powerful quirk? These people and their quirks were starting to give him a headache. But he smirked as Eraserhead’s eye twitched, he had no time to answer before another vulture descended upon him.

“I have an insider comment that says the vigilante healed someone during the attack! Does this vigilante have multiple quirks, then!? If his quirk is unregistered, then are you going to press additional charges on him!? How are the police planning to recapture him!?”

“No comment.”

“Now, now!” The vultures cried in outrage, and the yellow cockatoo waved his hands frantically. “No more questions! This will be your last warning to vacate the premises before the police are notified!”

They turned and walked into the school, but the ponytail woman followed after them.

“Wait! One last question!” She cried, “Is the Sports Festival still on, or is it canceled?”

Cockatoo stopped as Eraserhead walked on without him, grumbling.

“Principal Nezu will make an announcement about that after the students resume their classes! You’ll have to wait until then!”

They dove into the safety of the school, but the vultures weren’t giving up. The woman stepped past the threshold and alarms blared out into the streets. A gate slammed shut like steel jaws, she screeched like a banshee and kicked at it repeatedly.

“Damnit! They just had to go and fix this crummy gate!”

“Stop being greedy!” Another pounded it with his fist, “The public demands answers!”

Well, it looks like they weren’t getting a decent story today. There was one thing that caught Ren’s attention though, he wrote it down and placed a question mark beside it.

“What’s the Sports Festival?” He whispered to himself.

“You don’t know what the Sports Festival is? What, have you been living under a rock?”

That question drew other eyes to him.

Ren looked over to a tall man standing a few feet from him. He was strange looking, despite his easy smile, with mismatched pupils and an angular face. His wavy black hair hung loosely over one side of his face.

“W-well, I only came to Japan recently.” Ren plastered on an innocent face. “My parents are Japanese American you see, and I decided to come here to earn money for my grandparents.”

The other eyes turned away in disinterest, but the man’s smile twitched, his eyes sharpened like a blade. Ren felt goosebumps break out on his arms and his guard shot up, but he didn’t drop his facade.

“Is that so?” The man purred, “Well, then I’ll enlighten you. The Sports Festival is an annual tradition that U.A. holds, its an open event for the public and is broadcast all across Japan. The students participate in athletic stunts, with the final rounds always ending in a tournament. People mainly just watch it because the hero courses show off their skills.”

“And anyone can just walk in?”

The man’s easy smile turned to a sly grin, “Well, I wouldn’t expect villains to just waltz up to the place, and the security will be crazy tight, but yeah. Open to the public as long as you buy a ticket. U.A. makes most of its money from that alone. I bet the 1-A stadium will be packed because of the USJ incident though.”

“Thanks for the info.” Ren said, “And when would it usually be held?”

“About two weeks from now,” The man hummed, “Depending on if they cancel it or not, but knowing U.A. they’ll keep it going. Have to show those villains that they can’t mess with them or something along those lines.”

Two weeks. They had two weeks to come up with an invasion plan, and then somehow pull it off without tipping off the crazy security. It’s nothing they haven’t dealt with before, but this was the real world, not the metaverse.

“I can see those gears turning, kid.” The man produced a business card and handed it to Ren, “I like you, so here’s my card. Contact me in case anything *interesting* happens, alright?”

Ren took the card, which read Tokuda Taneo, a freelancer for Juzo News. He was about to thank the man, but he was gone by the time Ren looked up. Ren swiveled his head to no avail, he just up and disappeared. He could teach the other Phantom Thieves a thing or two about stealth. In any case, he got some good information, so Morgana should be happy enough not to scold him.

Other reporters were still kicking at the door, but they could only beat a dead horse so many times before they eventually figured it out. He flipped the notepad closed and tucked the card into his pocket, then stalked away from the irate reporters. The dot in the sky followed.

“How are you holding up?”

“I am fine, Trickster.” Yatagarasu said with a hint of amusement, *“I do not bear the title of Amaterasu’s Messenger because of weak wings.”*

Ren chuckled, *“Good, keep an eye out while I inform Morgana of what we learned.”*

“Roger.”

Morgana still next to the item bag, but his ears perked up when Ren walked into the alleyway. He jumped up and pranced towards him like an excited kitten.

“So? Learn anything interesting?”

“I found a way into the school,” Ren said with a smirk, “And we have plenty of time to plan.”

Morgana was all ears as he told him everything, including a potential new contact within the media.

“But I see a problem.”

“Oh?”

Morgana shook his head, “U.A. isn’t a palace, so we can’t just go in and scout out everything as we could before. It’ll have to be a one time gig. We can’t mess up.”

“Hmm,” Ren looked up as Yatagarasu flew between the spaces of the buildings, “We can have Yatagarasu scout it out for us. It won’t be perfect, and we won’t know the indoor layout of the buildings, but it’ll be better than going in completely blind.”

“Good idea,” Morgana said with a smile, “I think it’ll be good to get a decent layout of this city, too. If we’re going to pull off something during the Sports Festival, then knowing the ins and outs of the surrounding area is crucial. Besides, we have to get used to this place one way or another.”

“If we can even get a ticket. We only have 2200 yen left and I doubt that’s enough.”

“True...” Morgana’s ears and tail drooped, “But one thing at a time. We’ll figure it out, we always do in the end. Right, leader?”

Ren nodded, “Right.”

He swept up their item bag and tossed it over his shoulder, with Morgana resuming his usual perch on the other. They crept from the alleyway and out to the city. The streets were filled with ambient life, from laughing kids running about without a care in the world to small families out for a walk. Ren jotted down unique places or landmarks, then they stopped at a verdant park for lunch. They split the last meat bun, and Morgana complained nonstop about it not being tuna.

“I’ll get you all the tuna you want when we fix our tight finances,” Ren said, “Sound good?”

“I’m holding you to that promise!” He said as he devoured the bun with gusto.

Ren snorted as he finished off his not so iced coffee, then they moved on. They idly passed through a shopping district and noted anything interesting, the occasional side glances were brushed off as they made their way through the city.

“There’s a hero the next street over. He’s not one I recognize from our previous encounters.” Yatagarasu warned, *“Be careful.”*

“What’s wrong?” Morgana whispered as Ren stopped in his tracks.

“There’s a hero nearby.”

Morgana flicked his tail in thought, “We should go see what they’re about.”

“Are you crazy?” Ren slipped into an alley when the coast was clear, “Do you want us to get caught?”

“It’s not just buildings we’re scouting,” Morgana nodded, “Any person of notable value should be on our list as well.”

“I...” Ren sighed and ran a hand through his hair, “I guess you’re right.”

“Aren’t I always?”

Ren deadpanned at him, then looked up to the sky.

“Where exactly?”

“Continue through that alley and take a right at the end, Trickster. The hero is posing with a growing number of fans.”

He stalked down the alleyway with practiced steps, keeping them silent and unknowable. It became obvious, as they grew closer to the street, that this hero was popular. A crowd of women were swooning around a hero dressed up in flashy knight’s armor, so bright that it reflected the sun’s rays with blinding accuracy. White hair rained down his back and his eyes were a piercing blue, his complexion pale and spotless.

This hero had a woman on each arm and smiled brightly as they took several selfies with him.

“Hey, it’s my turn!” One girl said, stomping her foot.

“I just got here, so wait in line!” The one on the hero’s right arm said.

“Ladies, please,” The hero smiled gently, and some of the women looked close to fainting, “There’s plenty of me to go around! I-”

The whole street froze as an explosion erupted down the street, plumes of dust and debris rained down as civilian screams rang through the air. The hero shrugged from his fans’ grip and surged into action, his cerulean cape flared dramatically. Ren wasn’t the only one to crowd around the scene, screams of terror turned to cheers as the silver knight materialized a flowery rapier in his hands. Some thugs emerged from the debris, clutching a few bags of cash.

“Surrender villains!” He swung his weapon in a singing arc, “Or fall under my valiant blade!”

“Is this supposed to be like a bad play?” Morgana whispered.

“Who knows...” Ren said, “Let’s see what happens.”

The first thug charged with a battle cry, the silver hero smirked before there was a flash of light. The crowd gasped as the knight appeared on the opposite side of the criminal, there was a second of silence before the thief collapsed like a ragdoll.

“Give up yet?” The hero called to the two other thugs, “Or do you want to suffer the same fate as your friend?”

They looked in between each other, then dropped the bags and got to their knees.

“Is it me, or was that too easy?” Ren muttered.

“Yeah, something doesn’t feel right with that man.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes at the hero as police sirens screamed in the background. He scanned the crowd, and stiffened.

“Ren, three o’clock.”

He glanced over to a familiar head of green hair, his eyes sparkled like stars as he feverishly wrote in a notebook. The kid looked fine, but Ren hoped there wouldn't be any lasting effects from the USJ.

"Let's get out of here before he sees us." Morgana said.

They turned away, leaving the chaos behind to find quieter streets. Morgana remained silent for a while, even as the sun began to set. Ren wandered aimlessly until the aroma of salt permeated the air, the crash of waves was hypnotic.

"Who knew there was a beach here?"

Morgana snapped out of whatever thoughts were plaguing him and glanced towards the stretch of sparkling sand dyed by the last rays of the sun. It was beautiful, with crystal clear waters and a pier stretching out over the waves. Despite this, it was barren.

"Ah, to have the sea breeze under my wings again." Yatagarasu said, "It certainly brings back memories."

Ren smiled as he looked to their eyes in the sky, then climbed down the set of stairs along the sea wall. He was half tempted to take off his shoes and sink his toes into the sand, but Morgana nudged his face and looked over to the pier.

"What's wrong, Morgana?" Ren said as sand gave away to the wooden pier, "You've been quiet since that hero fight."

Morgana jumped from his shoulder and onto the railing, curling his tail around his feet as he looked out to the purple waves below.

"You can't tell me that the hero didn't feel off."

"Well, no." Ren said as he leaned on the railing next to his partner, "He honestly felt like a mix between Kamoshida and Shido. It almost made me sick."

He hummed, "We're still Phantom Thieves, but I wish we could do something about it."

"That doesn't mean we can't," Ren looked pointedly to the mystical bird floating gracefully on the breeze, "We still have our powers, we can investigate."

"I know, but..." Morgana pressed his ears flat to his head and sulked, "I'm torn. We were never supposed to exist here, our actions could have consequences that could change the course of this world's history. But if people are suffering, and we sit here and do nothing about it, then what does that make us?"

"What if," Ren tapped his finger on the railing, "We continue our work?"

Morgana scrunched his brow, "What exactly are you getting at?"

"The Phantom Thieves aren't done for." Ren nodded with certainty, "We resume our job in this world, establish contacts and get more information, and then maybe we can find a way home, too. If we build a reputation, then it'll be easier for our friends to find us in case they make it here."

"It won't be easy."

"Nope."

"There aren't Palaces or Mementos to invade, or stealing Treasures to change people's hearts. We'll have to do it another way."

"I know."

"Then it sounds like we have the makings of a plan." Morgana snorted, and there was finally a smile in his eyes, "But why don't we call it for today? The sun's already set."

Ren looked up to the starry sky. When did it get so late? He sighed and turned away from the oceanic view, Morgana didn't take to his

usual perch and walked beside his feet. The beach was left behind as they made their way towards the internet cafe, but they made a quick stop into the adjacent alleyway.

Ren held out his arm, and Yatagarasu gracefully dove through the air to land on it. He winced when three sets of talons dug into his arm.

"You did well today." Ren said with a smirk, "I'm proud of you."

"This one is always eager to serve, Trickster." Yatagarasu puffed up his chest, the magatama bounced against his slick feathers, "I will always be your faithful wings."

With a burst of blue cinders, Yatagarasu vanished. Ren straightened his glasses with a sigh, he felt several presences welcome Yatagarasu back into his mind. He ignored their voices, for now. Morgana followed silently as they went to the front and entered.

"-And I'm telling you I don't have that kind of cash this month. Business has been tight."

Ren and Morgana froze at the group crowding around the front desk. A familiar silver clad hero leaned over the desk with a sickening smirk on his face, three thugs surrounded Kaito, who had a dark glare. Ren frowned, these looked like the same thugs from the incident earlier.

Unfortunately, the bell on the door caught everyone's attention. The knight absolutely beamed, it made Ren's stomach turn.

"Well, look! You have a customer right here." There was a sharp *tap* of metal on wood as the hero summoned his sword, "I think you're bullshitting me. You're just hiding the money, aren't you? Or do you want him to pay for you?"

Kaito's eyes went wide as two thugs surrounded Ren like sharks, Morgana leaped to his perch with his ears down. Arsene bubbled to

the forefront of his mind, growling low like a roll of thunder, but Ren held him back.

“F-fine! I’ll pay your damn fee. Just don’t hurt the poor kid.”

“Good.” The man smiled, a sickly sweet thing that made Ren tense.

“Don’t pay him.” Ren snapped, drawing eyes back on him.

The knight sauntered away from the front desk and stopped in front of Ren, he smelled of roses and summer wind. The man took delight in being a full head taller than him, he tapped his white sword on the ground between Ren’s feet.

“And what exactly can you do about it? How about you hand over that magic bag of yours then? I’m sure you have plenty of goodies in there. No?” He leaned in closer and tilted his head, “What’s your quirk, kid?”

“I-I don’t have a quirk.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then the hero burst out with musical laughter, the thugs around him joined in. Kaito went pale and stiff as a board.

“Then nobody will give a damn if you die.” Something dark entered the knight’s expression, and Ren felt a bone-chilling cold as the sword came to his neck, “Isn’t that right, quirkless scum?”

Joker’s eyes sharpened and the air became heavy, the thugs stopped laughing and the hero actually took a step back in shock. Arsene’s power was at his fingertips, but that would draw unwanted attention.

“Look, I’ll pay!” Kaito fumbled with keys and unlocked something under the desk, “Here, just take it and leave us alone!”

The nearest thug swiped up the small bundle of cash and tossed it to the knight, who caught it without even looking. He banished his

sword and slowly thumbed through the bills, before turning to Kaito with a frown.

“Fine, I didn’t want to get blood on my sword anyways,” He shoulder checked Joker on his way to the door, “But I expect you to pay, *with interest*, next month.”

With that, they left, but not without throwing sneers at them. Morgana, fur still raised, glared at the door as it shut. Kaito looked all but defeated as Joker took a deep breath, then slowly approached the desk.

“Who was that guy?” Ren asked.

“How can you not know who he is?” Kaito took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes, “He’s the #21 hero in Japan, Silver Falcon.”

“A hero that treats people like that isn’t much of a hero at all.”

“Yeah, well...” Kaito smiled, but he looked so tired, “He has some of the police in his back pocket, so they won’t do anything even if we call them. Everyone who owns a decent business around here has to pay him a monthly ‘fee’, otherwise he gets lowlifes to ruin their store with constant attacks. Of course, he ‘rescues’ them.”

“And nobody does anything about it?”

“I tried. We all *tried* . But dirty law enforcement and airtight lawyers made sure that it never reached the light of day. He only got worse after that, so a lot of people have given up hope.”

“I saw him when exploring the city,” Ren said with a sharp frown, “Those were the same thugs he arrested after an incident.”

“Hired to put on a show, to make him seem better than he actually is. Probably bailed them out after.” Kaito’s brows pinched together, and he shoved his glasses on his nose, “I paid his damn fee, so I won’t see his ugly face for at least another month. Hopefully.”

Ren and Morgana exchanged significant glances as the silence stretched.

“So, did you want to stay here again?” Kaito asked.

“That was the plan,” Ren said as he dug out his wallet, but stopped when Kaito held up his hand.

“You can stay for free tonight.”

“Are you sure?” Ren furrowed his brows, “After that guy basically robbed you?”

“Think of it as an apology for getting you mixed up in that mess. Plus, anyone who can keep a straight face when there’s a sword at their neck deserves respect.”

“I... thanks.”

Kaito waved them off, “Don’t mention it.”

Ren didn’t know what else to say, so he wandered past the door and into the lounge. Aiba was nowhere to be seen, but her door was closed when they entered the cubicle area. They claimed the same cubicle from last night and locked the door, Ren dumped the item bag by it and slipped off his shoes.

“Ren.”

“Yeah?”

“I think we need to do this.” Morgana had a fire in his eyes as they sat in front of the computer, “You know who our first target is?”

“Oh, *definitely* .”

A dangerous smirk split his face in half, Morgana wouldn’t admit that this look plus the light reflecting off of his leader’s glasses made for a rather terrifying image. They had all of their work cut out for them.

After all, they had a falcon's wings to clip.

Nobody messes with our boys and gets away with it. Nobody. How will they deal with him without being able to steal hearts? Well, we'll have to wait and see, but it'll be glorious ;)

Honestly, it's sort of the pun with the fic title.

Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?

No, no they don't, but that doesn't mean there aren't other ways....

Phantom

Chapter 10: Phantom

Ren smirked as an idea came to him. Arsene and the others burst out laughing within his mind space, and that alone made the plan absolutely perfect.

“We’ll have to wait until later tonight, but-”

He told Morgana his plan and the cat grinned from ear to ear.

Kyogi Munashisa relaxed back in his office, it wasn’t as lavish as he would like, but he had to keep up appearances. He just did the final tally of the funds he collected the night before, a satisfied smirk bloomed on his face.

Mr. and Mrs. Chen were short after all. He knew of a cut-purse that was looking for a quick dollar, perhaps another play could be staged, with him as the shining knight of course. A few broken china pieces ought to set them straight, but if it didn’t, then he would find other means to shut down their pathetic cafe for good. There was a knock on his door, and he scowled.

“What?”

It opened, and in walked his secretary. A tiny, frail woman with a neat bun and a perfectly tailored suit. He wouldn’t allow messy things to ruin his image, and he reminded his employees of that several times.

“Sir, I came to inform you that one of our proximity alarms went off late last night.”

Kyogi raised an eyebrow, “And? What was it?”

“W-well, the cameras didn’t pick anything up, the only thing of note was a cat in one of the alleyways-”

“A cat.” He bit out, and she flinched, “You’re wasting my time over a cat?”

“That, and the security guards caught some strange flickering with a few of the cameras, and we think-”

“Is anything missing?”

“No, but-”

“Did anything get *damaged* ?”

She bit her lip, “No...”

“Then why the hell are you wasting my time over nothing?”

He swiped up the cash and typed the code to his safe, throwing in the money without another glance. His secretary jumped out of his way as he stomped towards the door.

“I’m going for a patrol,” He cast icy eyes on her, “Don’t bother me with something like this again, or you’ll be jobless.”

She bowed her head, “Y-yessir.”

He left the room, slamming the door behind him. The woman just barely held back tears, she dabbed her eyes with the end of her sleeve before returning to her desk. Anger and spite were such distracting things.

If either of them looked hard enough, then they would’ve seen that the safe had been relieved of its goods.

Ren yawned as he turned off the stove, the curry bubbled nicely and sent a mouth-watering aroma through the internet cafe. A healthy

scoop was poured over a bed of rice, then he grabbed the mug of fresh coffee. He took both items to the front, where Kaito played on his phone. Did the man never go home? Or did he live here, too?

“You really didn’t have to, but I appreciate it.” His eyes lit up as Ren set the meal down in front of him, “Have you worked with food before?”

“I worked at a cafe.” Ren shrugged as the man took a heaping bite, “The Boss there taught me everything he knew.”

“I see. Not that it’s any of my business,” Kaito hummed as he savored the flavors, then peered at Ren thoughtfully, “But where did you go last night? You were almost gone until sunrise and came back with a suitcase.”

“I...” Ren forced his smile to wobble, “I couldn’t sleep after what happened with that ‘hero’, so I went for a walk, plus my cat needed food.”

“A walk.” Kaito sighed, and poked at the curry with a thoughtful frown, “Alright. I’ll believe you, as long as trouble doesn’t follow you through the door. Am I understood?”

Ren nodded and left the man in peace or rather, before he got into any trouble. He helped himself to breakfast and washed the dishes after, but he stared at the curry pot as the clatter of dishes went quiet. There was still enough for another serving. Did Aiba eat yet? With a shrug, he used the rest of it to fill the final plate, along with a hot mug of coffee and ventured forth. He stood outside her cubicle, the frantic *tap tap tap* of a keyboard came from inside.

He knocked, and it stopped.

“Miss Aiba?” Ren said softly, “I made some more curry and coffee if you want it.”

Silence. Not even a shuffle of cloth or small footsteps, but the spike of anxiety was palpable through her door. Ren's heart lurched, it was like trying to save Futaba all over again, only this time there was no otherworldly Treasure to steal and fix everything. He swallowed thickly.

"You don't have to come out if you don't want to. I'll just leave it by the door."

He set the dishes down gently and went to the bathroom. He shut the door with a long sigh, then stared at himself in the mirror.

"Sometimes just showing kindness is enough." Arsene's voice filtered through the unease nesting in his chest, *"But the girl also has to reach out, so don't fret if she doesn't grasp for your helping hand."*

"I know."

Arsene sent a wave of comfort, then his presence faded. Ren's clothes were starting to smell, but he pushed the thought away as he showered. Their funds were dangerously low as it is, so sticking with dirty clothes for a few more days wouldn't hurt anything. He shook his hair dry after he got dressed, but he was surprised to find the dishes were gone when he stepped out of the bathroom.

"What took you so long?" Morgana said as he shut the cubicle door.

"Making breakfast, then took a shower."

The cat sat on the suitcase stocked full of evidence. Dirty money and the handwritten receipts to go with the exact amount, a list of thugs for hire, fees for bailing out the same criminals over and over. Evidence of the damages done to several establishments were stuffed in there too, along with the names of all of the victims. Now, it was only a matter of what to do with it.

"Anything on the news?"

“Nope.” Morgana looked over to the computer, “I checked several news sights, and there’s no mention of a break-in at Silver Falcon’s Hero Agency.”

Ren chuckled, “A cat surfing the web with tiny paws.”

“Hey!” Morgana shot up and swiped at him, “Be grateful that these tiny paws make sure that you never get in trouble! Although, we are pretty lucky that we got off scot-free.”

“Or lucky that their copy machine had plenty of ink. How idiotic do you have to be to keep all of your evidence in your own office?”

“Maybe he’s just so arrogant he doesn’t think he can get caught. We’ve encountered more than enough narcissistic people to know how they think.” Morgana looked to the case as he sat down, “I’ve been thinking of what to do with it.”

“And?”

“We should give it to the police.”

Ren narrowed his eyes, “Really? And you think they won’t question where we got it?”

“Ren.” Morgana deadpanned, “We could just drop it off anonymously at the door, not literally hand it right to them.”

“Or...”

His partner tilted his head, “Or?”

Ren smirked as an idea came to him. Arsene and the others burst out laughing within his mind space, and that alone made the plan absolutely perfect.

“We’ll have to wait until later tonight, but-”

He told Morgana his plan and the cat grinned from ear to ear.

The aromas of stale coffee and old cigarette smoke were ingrained in the walls of the police station, the clacking sound of hurried footsteps on linoleum wasn't as common this time of night, either. Disgruntled criminals came and went to be processed, bodies bruised and throttled out of their wits by heroes.

Overall, Yamiko didn't hate her job.

Sitting behind the front desk of a police station was boring, but it was easy and safe. The only excitement they got recently was when that vigilante escaped the interrogation room, and her friends wouldn't shut up about it. An officer nodded at her as he passed.

These officers were boring too. Too normal. Too formal and stiff. They kept their heads down, but one could see their shifty eyes if they looked hard enough. Her nose smelled something rotten, yet she knew better than to stick it in places where she wasn't wanted. Besides, any violence was bound to mess up her nails. Yamiko set the fresh polish aside and waited for them to dry. It's been a quiet night so far, peaceful and so dreadfully dull. They expected the rest of the night to follow as such.

Oh, how they were wrong.

The front doors were blown off of their hinges in a sudden burst of heat and light, startled cries escaped their lips as a wall of magnificent blue fire blocked the exit. Hungry flames licked at the walls as a shadow bled into the flames. A clawed hand parted the cerulean fire like a curtain, it grasped the door frame and pulled itself inside.

Yamiko shrieked as a winged demon stepped inside, breaking the seamless linoleum with a single step of its bladed heels. The thing wore old fashioned clothes, its black-tailed corset and white ruffled tie dancing with the light of the ethereal pyre. It towered over everyone else, even without the top hat that nearly touched the ceiling. The slick ebony wings at it's back danced with a rainbow of

color. It took a few more steps, the *clack-clack crunch* of its steely boots over the glass was like nails clawing down a chalkboard.

“F-freeze!” An officer drew his gun as the sweltering heat spread, “P-put your hands on your head and get o-on your knees!”

The horned demon turned to the officer, pitch-black face aglow with flowing volcanic eyes.

“Eek!”

The gunshot made everyone dive to the floor, but there was a clatter of metal as the bullet fell to the ground, the sound so loud it pierced through the blood roaring in their ears. The demon looked down and brushed away the dust from its crimson coat, unharmed.

The officer whirled around to his cowering companions, “C-call for backup!!”

“I’m trying!” One said, tapping his phone so hard that the screen cracked, “But our phones are out and the radios aren’t working!”

The demon snorted, before turning its gaze to the front desk. Sweat broke out on Yamiko’s brow and she crawled under the desk. Whimpers bubbled up in her throat, but she held them back by biting her lip and covering her mouth with both hands. Could the demon smell her fear? She clenched her eyes shut and curled into herself. She rocked back and forth as footsteps of steel stopped at the desk, inhuman growls sent icy shivers straight up her spine.

Ding ding.

Her eyes shot open and she jumped out of her skin.

Ding ding.

Was that thing ringing the bell? Carefully, she peeled herself from underneath the desk and peeked over the edge. It held a clawed

finger over the little silver bell, then tilted its head at her like a curious child. The demon raised its other arm and Yamiko flinched back.

Yamiko wasn't prepared for death! She just managed to start a new life in the city! What would her parents think, how would her children go on without her-

Her thoughts came to a screeching halt as it held out a sleek suitcase. The demon motioned for her to take it, but fear encased her in ice. A long sigh escaped in the form of fiery breath and it released the suitcase. She jumped as everything on the desk rattled.

Yamiko sobbed in relief as the demon stepped back, took off its top hat, and *bowed* to her. Shivers ran up her spine when she saw that the suit was hollow, it had no head or body. Just a floating mask of steel and fire for a face. It stood to its full height and put on its hat, running a finger under the rim.

Then, it just vanished in a flash of blue cinders. The only evidence it was ever here was the glimmers of broken glass and a single ginormous footprint, the sweltering heat was gone like the snap flash of winter. There wasn't even any fire damage.

Sirens howled outside and the slam of car doors echoed in the ear-ringing silence, but it was already too late.

Tsukauchi stared at the massive footprint in disbelief, it was embedded in the floor by several inches, with spider webbing cracks all around it. The flash of several cameras was around him as they took in every iota of evidence. He carefully stepped around glass shards and made his way outside. There was a woman with long dark hair being comforted by paramedics, a shock blanket draped over her shoulders.

"Excuse me," Tsukauchi said as he dug out his notebook and pen, "Is she well enough to answer a few questions?"

"I am." Her voice was shaky.

True .

The medics stepped away to give them privacy.

"Can you recount what happened?"

She did, in terrifying detail. It sounded like the same humanoid monster that blew Eraserhead off of the rooftops, the man still kicked himself over letting the vigilante escape. They've been scouring the city for the last few days, but it was like he just up and vanished.

"You said the creature-"

"It wasn't just a *creature* !" She suddenly snapped, eyes wide, "It was a demon! You should've seen its eyes, detective! They were like scorching hellfire."

"I see." Tsukauchi grimaced, "And did you see what was in that suitcase it left behind?"

"N-no." She clutched the blanket closer and shivered, "The commissioner snatched it before I could, he took one look inside and went as pale as a ghost. I thought he was going to be sick."

"Do you know where he went?"

Her eyes flicked to something behind him. Tsukauchi turned to see the commissioner hastily whispering to another police officer. He thanked the woman for her time and walked over to them. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but the officer clammed up as he approached.

The commissioner was a rather short and pudgy man, with balding hair and thin glasses hanging off of his bulbous nose.

"Oh, Detective Tsukauchi!" He said with a smile, "What can I do for you? Do you know where that *thing* ran off to?"

“No, sir.” Tsukauchi noted the sweat on his brow and how he was flustered, “We have some of our best people working on it, but I was hoping to ask you a few questions.”

The commissioner dismissed the officer, who nodded and left them in peace.

“Go ahead.”

“Several witnesses say that the demon left a suitcase before it vanished. Do you know what was inside it?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that! It’s already been taken care of.”

True .

“Okay, but I need to know what was inside. I’m in charge of tracking this monster and it’s partners down, so I need to know why it broke into a police station and left it there.”

“The contents don’t matter.” *Lie.* “Don’t you worry your little head about it, it was nothing important. Honestly, I think it just dug up utter garbage and delivered it as a prank.”

Lie.

“You-”

“If you excuse me detective, I have more important work to do.” The man walked past him and extracted his phone, “Like fixing up my police station!”

Something wasn’t right. Joker didn’t seem to be the type to do something like this without a concrete reason, the commissioner blowing him off and then lying to him made his instincts go haywire. What was in that suitcase? Did it have something incriminating?

He jumped as his phone went off, the screen lighting up with a familiar number.

“Anything?”

“No.” Aizawa growled, *“I covered several blocks while Nezu combed through camera footage, but there’s no sign of him. He’s like a ghost.”*

“... Or a phantom.”

“What?”

“Nevermind.” Tsukauchi shook his head, “Why would he risk coming back here after he escaped? It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Especially after that officer took a shot at him,” Irritation oozed from the phone, *“What happened to him, anyway?”*

“He got demoted and stuck on a desk job for two months,” Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes, “I pushed for him to be fired for shooting at a teenager, but the board thought that was too far. I guess firing at a vigilante, even if he’s just a kid, was a good enough reason for him to keep his job.”

“Figures.”

“Anyways, something interesting has come up. The commissioner was lying about what was in the suitcase, and I don’t think he’ll disclose it to us.”

“That’s...” Aizawa sighed, *“That’s definitely fishy. What do you think of it?”*

“Honestly? I’m not sure. Was it evidence to a crime? Blackmail?” His head pounded with a growing migraine, “I think the kid is trying to tell us something. I just hope he doesn’t do anything drastic before we can figure it out.”

“But with the evidence conveniently vanishing...”

“We won’t know for sure. I’ll update you and Nezu in case anything else happens.”

“Likewise. Be careful detective.”

Tsukauchi hung up and scrubbed at his eyes. He glanced back at the glass carnage and suddenly wanted nothing more than to go home and curl up in bed. Alas, the paperwork for this incident would probably take all night. He looked up to the heavens, where a single bird circled above without a care in the world.

Why do vigilantes always have to be so difficult?

“I hope they catch him soon,” A young woman murmured.

“Vigilantes,” Another man scoffed, “I hope they lock him up and throw away the key.”

“But why would he attack the police, momma?” A little girl pulled at her mother’s sleeve, “I thought he saved people at the USJ? Are the heroes gonna hurt him?”

“Hush, dear.” The mother patted her daughter’s head, “We don’t know what crazy schemes are going through his head. Attacking innocent people like that...”

Word of the attack on the police station spread around like wildfire. Ren stared up at the pictures flashing across the news station, then pushed up his glasses and turned away. Morgana hummed as he stared at the crowd amassing beneath the giant screens.

“Kaito was right,” He whispered, “There were dirty police in that station. They must’ve gotten it in time.”

“Then we go through with Plan B, as expected.” Ren said as they went down the street, “Yatagarasu overheard Tsukauchi say that the commissioner was lying. He suspects something, so the next step is

delivering the real evidence to him. We just need to get in contact with the detective somehow.”

“That’s awfully risky.” Morgana looked up to their eye in the sky, “He did say that he was the head of the team trying to track us down, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s exactly why we should try to find him.”

“Even when they took a shot at you?”

“Tsukauchi wasn’t the one holding the gun.”

“Just because he didn’t fire the gun doesn’t mean he’s any less guilty.” Morgana scrutinized him for several seconds, then sighed, “Ren, why do you believe in him so much? He could be just as crooked as any of these other cops.”

Ren passed another street, the air turning fresh and salty before he answered.

“I think I would’ve formed a Confidant with him back in the interrogation room.”

Morgana stiffened, “Did you hear Lavenza’s voice?”

“No.”

Oh boy, was *that* one long talk. After the truth of Igor and Lavenza came out, and his friends were freed from their cells, he told them everything. The Velvet Room, the Confidants, Lavenza’s voice, even the little butterfly that had visited him after he got captured.

“I felt the same connection with Eraserhead too,” Ren frowned and shook his head, “I don’t really know what to make of it.”

“Maybe you did feel that way,” Morgana said with narrowed eyes, “But I don’t trust them at all.”

“We don’t have to. They get one chance.”

Morgana grimaced but didn’t say anything more. Ren climbed down the stairs and onto the sand, then they followed the seawall to a gnarled piece of driftwood. He tossed the wood aside, then felt around the stones and pulled a loose one out. Resting inside the hollow was an old bag.

“At least the real evidence is still in one piece.” Morgana said, “Now we just have to expose them.”

“Which, we’ll do tomorrow. Let them think they’ve won, for now.”

Ren threw the bag over his shoulder and turned to watch the fiery waves. His eyes caught movement, and they glanced over to see Midoriya standing in the sand, admiring the blazing colors painted into the ocean. Ren and Morgana ducked their heads down and fled before he saw them.

Eventually, the exhausted pair trudged their way to the Raven’s Nest long after the sun sank into the horizon. Ren felt a pit in his stomach. They only had 1800 yen left, so this could be the last time they had a roof over their heads for a while.

Kaito, ever glued to the front desk, glanced at them in surprise.

“Long day?”

“I guess you could say that.” Ren muttered, “The usual twelve hour package, please.”

“Alright,” Kaito crossed his arms, “Go ahead and get some sleep.”

Ren blinked, “But I haven’t paid?”

“You get another night for free, kid. Congratulations.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes as Ren blinked several times.

“Why? We didn’t get hassled by a villain this time.”

Kaito peered at them for several seconds. Ren wondered if this was the same feeling others got when he glared at them with his full power, that shiver up the spine or the way his heart pounded was terrifying. Finally, Kaito ran a hand through his silvery hair.

“Because you’re trying.” He put his hands on his hips and sighed, Morgana went rigid on Ren’s shoulder, “I don’t know how far you’ll get, but that’s more than the police ever did.”

His shock alerted his personas, who whispered a variety of threats and painful deaths should the man make any sudden moves. Joker forced himself to stay calm.

“How did you know?”

Morgana looked ready to either attack or bail, so Joker put a soothing hand on his head.

“It’s my quirk.” Kaito pointed to his eyes, “I see visions about peoples’ past and no, I can’t turn it off even if I wanted to.”

Morgana’s tail flicked, his claws stabbed into his shoulder.

“You two are an enigma to me. I don’t know where you come from or who you actually are,” He smiled gently, “But that’s not my business. I’ve sheltered people with a variety of backgrounds before, and you guys aren’t any different. Magical enigma or no.”

“You aren’t going to turn us in?”

“I would’ve done it the first night, but I see that you’re still here.” The man shook his head, “As I said before, you’re welcome to stay as long as you keep the trouble away from my door. Your secret is safe with me.”

Ren released a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Morgana looked in between them, tail still flicking wildly.

“Okay, there has to be a catch.”

Kaito blinked at Morgana in shock, “I was wondering if you’d ever actually talk to me.”

Morgana hopped off Ren’s shoulder and onto the front desk. He peered into Kaito’s eyes as the atmosphere was charged with magic, Morgana’s fur began to glow with a vibrant green as the air shifted. An emerald breeze blew right into Kaito’s face, blowing his hair back.

“What’s your angle, then? If you know us like you say you do, then you also know what we’re capable of.”

“Morgana!” Ren hissed.

“Our leader is surprisingly merciful when it comes to things like this, but if you ever-”

Morgana was cut off as Kaito lifted a hand to pet him, the winds and magical static died just as the light around Morgana’s fur. The cat actually *purred* as Kaito ran his hand through his soft fur.

“I know that people haven’t been kind to you,” Kaito said softly, a strange gleam appeared in his eyes, “But you have my word that you can rest easy here. As long as you don’t bring trouble, that is.”

Kaito withdrew his hand, but Morgana was frozen in place. Nobody moved for several seconds as the gears ground away in Morgana’s head. Then, the cat snorted, taking a seat to lick his front paw as if he didn’t just threaten the man’s life.

“Alright, I’ll hold you to that.” Morgana said as he set his foot down, “I don’t easily forgive people who hurt my friends, so don’t say that I never warned you.”

“Of course,” Kaito motioned to the door, “Now go get some sleep, you look like you need it.”

Morgana jumped off the counter and pranced happily towards the door. Ren shifted his weight and looked Kaito in the eye.

“Anyone who can stare an angry Morgana in the face has my respect.”

“Well,” The man blinked as slow as a cat, his lips twinged in a half-smile, “Now we have mutual respect for one another.”

Ren bowed his head and followed after Morgana, who pranced through the lounge with his head held high.

“The Magician is frightening when he wants to be.” Arsene said, *“I don’t doubt the power in his tiny paws.”*

“You’d be a fool to mess with those who are masters of spellcraft,” A brush of Titania’s silky dress passed through Ren’s mind, *“You might just get burned. Or frozen. Perhaps even cursed. You know all about curses, don’t you Arsene?”*

Arsene grumbled but didn’t reply.

Ren rolled his eyes as they walked across the lounge, he was almost dead on his feet. Aiba’s door, as usual, was closed as they went into their own cubicle.

“Man, I’m beat! Ready to call it a night, Ren?” Morgana looked over when he didn’t answer, “Ren? What’s wrong?”

He pointed towards the computer monitor, where a note was taped to the bright white screen.

I know who you are and what you did.

Meet me on the rooftop in ten minutes or suffer the consequences.

King, Queen, and Slave

Chapter 11: King, Queen, and Slave

A King meets a Queen, and a Slave is put in his place.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Manami clutched her laptop to her chest, her heart pounded as a breeze swept over the barren rooftop.

She paced back and forth. Was he coming? Her note wasn't too threatening, was it? It wouldn't frighten the boy away, right? Her thoughts swirled like a dizzying whirlpool. She didn't hear the soft voices floating from the alley or the creaks of a nearby fire escape.

"It's been almost ten minutes..." She whispered to herself.

"Nice night, isn't it?"

Manami cried out and whirled around. The boy stood at the edge of the building, his black tailcoat danced in the wind, but the sharp eyes behind that mask stabbed right through her heart. He wasn't happy, by the way he peered through her, but she couldn't blame him. She composed herself and cleared her throat.

"It is." She said, "I take it you got my note?"

Manami could slap herself from her own stupidity. What else would he be here for!?

"Yeah, I did. It was kind of hard to miss, after all." He took a few steps closer, splashing the roof with beautiful reds and violets, "You better explain what you want, before we do something that we'll both regret."

“W-well, I...” Manami looked down at the laptop, “I-I wanted you to help me! I heard about the USJ and I just knew that you were the vigilante the moment I first saw you. I... I posted the video, with your demon scaring off that hero?”

The boy frowned and narrowed his eyes, she was already on thin ice, and she could practically feel the cracks spreading.

“I tried to find out more about you, but there wasn’t anything on record! Not one thing! Then I decided to follow y-you using the cameras because I’m a skilled hacker. I compiled everything to my laptop a-and when I finally had enough, I was going to blackmail you into helping me, but...”

The vigilante put a hand on his hip and leaned on one leg, “But?”

“B-but you were so nice to me, and even gave me a home cooked meal. Nobody’s ever been that nice to me before.” She felt the shameful burn of tears in her eyes and stared at the ground, “And I saw what you were trying to do with Silver Falcon. Just... here, it’ll be easier to show you.”

She opened up her laptop and held it out to him. He glanced between her and the laptop, before slowly taking it.

“And I have backups and several other servers,” She said as she jutted out her chin, “So the evidence will be there even if you destroy my laptop.”

He actually *snorted*, a wry smile was on his lips before he could smooth out his expression. There was a hint of something else in his eyes, almost like sorrow? It was gone just as fast as it came, so maybe it was just her imagination. She carefully stepped around him and peeked at the screen, he was watching the video she captured from the corner of an apartment building. The looming demon still gave her the chills, and she had been in awe when it’s powerful wing beat blew Eraserhead away. There were also a few snippets of him summoning that raven while he was in costume.

He flicked through several files and videos, before looking down at her. His eyes were still like daggers, but they didn't hold the same intensity as before.

"What all did you do?"

"I made the cameras in Silver Falcon's Agency replay the same fifteen second loop, otherwise you would've been found out for sure. Then when you sent that demon-"

"Arsene."

She blinked at him, "What?"

"His name is Arsene. He doesn't like being called a demon."

Manami bit her lip, and nodded, "T-then I did the same thing when Arsene went to that police station to drop off the evidence. I even scrambled the radio and cellphone signals so they couldn't call for help."

"I find it hard to believe that you'd do all of this because you wanted to blackmail us."

"I-I was, but then you remind me so much of the person that I love, he's so heroic and is always trying to succeed! He's branded as a villain too, even when he's so inspiring to other people!"

There were a few moments of silence, before the vigilante closed the laptop with a sigh. He handed it back to her and she hugged it to her chest like a precious treasure.

"What exactly did you want us to do?"

"I..." She looked straight into his eyes, "I want you to help me meet my hero!"

He blinked and raised a brow, "That's it? And you couldn't talk to me like a normal person would?"

“Look at me.” Her shoulders sank and she motioned to her clothes, “People have always made fun of me. They always say I have spooky eyes, o-or that I’m a stalker and a creep. My hair is drab and unwieldy. Who would even want to go near me? Plus, he’s branded as a criminal, so I couldn’t just go up to anybody...”

“Look,” The vigilante sighed and stuck his blood-red gloves into his pockets, “I get it. I do, but how exactly did you expect us to help you? For all you know, we could’ve led you on a wild goose chase and then disappeared without a trace.”

“Then there has to be something that you want! How about a favor? Hacking has been my life, surely there is something that I can get for you, in exchange for helping me meet Gentle Criminal?”

“You really should have started off with that.” He gave her an odd look, then nodded, “Alright, there are actually a few things that we’ve been having trouble with. If you’re up for them.”

She nodded eagerly.

“First, I need to create a new identity.”

“I can do that in my sleep! If there’s anything specific you want, then you can write it down and hand it to me later.”

“Noted. The second favor might be a bit more difficult, but I want to meet someone in the black market. We have some hot items that could sell for a good price.”

Manami tapped her chin, “I think I have someone in mind, but it’ll be up to him to set up a meeting. Anything else?”

“What do you know about the USJ?”

She jumped for the second time and looked over her shoulder to a cat. He peered at her with eyes as clear as a crystal blue lake, but

they had a fire in them that promised an unseemly demise if she screwed up. The vigilante sighed.

“Mona, you were supposed to wait in the alley.”

“And you were taking too long, Joker.” Mona stalked around her and sat next to his feet, “And I wanted to make sure she didn’t hurt you.”

“I didn’t want to *hurt* you.” She said as she tucked her laptop under one arm.

“No, only to blackmail us instead.” Mona rolled his eyes, “How can we be sure that you’ll hold up to your end of the deal? Can you prove to us that you can do these favors?”

“I will! What exactly do you want to know about the USJ? I thought you guys invaded the place?”

They blinked, then looked at each other. Their eyes communicated things she wasn’t aware of, then the vigilante nodded.

“We didn’t invade,” He said carefully, “We weren’t there by choice.”

Manami’s eyes widened, “You weren’t?”

“That’s why we want information.” Mona said, “If you’re such a good hacker, then you can give us that information.”

“It’s not that simple,” She looked at the laptop in her arms, “U.A.’s security is airtight. Their servers recently got upgraded because of the USJ attack, so it might take a bit to develop a decent program to get past it. Is that why you want to get into the Sports Festival?”

“Maybe. We just need its location.”

Manami frowned, “Then that information would probably be in the main building, I can try and dig up old blueprints to locate an office or something.”

“Well, we have our work cut out for us, then.” Mona said, “But you’ll have to wait for our help until after the Sports Festival. That, and we’ll be busy trying to take down Silver Falcon in the meantime.”

“Easier said than done,” Joker said, “We still have a bit to go, though.”

“You can send an even deeper message, you know.”

Mona and Joker exchanged glances, then looked at her.

“What do you mean?” Mona asked.

Manami sat down and opened her laptop, “I’ve been keeping track of that suitcase you dropped off, it’s still in the commissioner’s possession.”

“They didn’t burn it?” Joker’s eyes were wide, “Or at least hide it away somewhere?”

“Silver Falcon and his cohorts have the collective IQ of a rusted teaspoon,” She said as she typed away, “It’ll probably be in the commissioner’s possession for a bit longer before he does something with it.”

“So if we steal it back and leave a calling card,” Joker said with a smirk, “They’ll know they didn’t win *that* easily.”

“And we have a limited window to steal it back,” Mona said with a nod, “Nothing that we can’t handle.”

She looked over the screen at the grinning cat, “And what do you plan to do with all the evidence?”

“Could you look up a certain detective with that fancy laptop of yours?” Joker asked.

“Joker...” Mona looked up at him with soft eyes, “I know you want to give the detective a chance, but do you really think that would be

enough?”

“It won’t be.” Manami said for a fact, “Silver Falcon is a top-rated hero, so even if this detective came forth with the evidence, then they might not act right away.”

Joker suddenly stiffened, then he grinned. Shivers ran down her spine at the intensity of it.

“The next stage of the plan was to ruin his image anyways, and if you’re really as good of a hacker as you say you are...”

Mona looked at him in shock, “You don’t mean....”

“I have a contact within the media,” Joker said with a smirk, “We can get him to run the story.”

“I can make a video of everything and it send to him.” Manami said, her heart beat fast in her chest and she couldn’t help her own small smile, “Then I can hack into the station and broadcast it all over town!”

Mona and Joker exchanged another glance, then they looked at her with equal grins.

“Then I guess we’ll be working together for a bit,” Joker stepped in front of her, ripples of color splashing, and held out his hand, “Partners in crime, at least for a little while?”

Manami blinked at the hand, then looked at Mona. The cat still sharply scrutinized her, the tip of his tail twitched, one wrong move might send her to an early grave. She hesitantly reached up and shook his gloved hand, which was surprisingly warm and gentle. A genuine smile spread on her face for the first time in ages.

“Partners.”

He stood to his full height, “Then let’s get to work.”

“M-my men and I have been searching all night!” Commissioner Inu whispered into the phone, “B-but there’s no sign of them!”

“Bullshit!” Silver Falcon snapped, “Someone broke into my agency, someone tried to sell me out! Your head will roll if I find out you had anything to do with this.”

“I-I assure you, sir!” His hands shook as he dug for his keys, “We’re all still loyal, none of my boys would ever think to do such a thing. For now, just continue your hero work and pretend that nothing is amiss. We’ll get this sorted out, I promise!”

Silver Falcon scoffed, *“Don’t tell me how to do my job.”*

“I would never-!”

Inu looked at his phone as the line went dead, then sighed. He trudged up to his apartment and shut the door behind him. He craved a strong drink and then just wanted to sleep, but he had so much work to do. Inu threw the keys into the little bowl on the table before dragging his feet through the living room.

Maybe he could just take a small break?

He practically collapsed into the couch and closed his eyes, the soft, soothing breeze on his face-

His eyes shot open and he looked to the window. The curtains waved in the wind and the sound of birdsong echoed from outside. A pit of dread sank into his stomach as he pulled himself from the couch. Did he leave the window open?

No, he didn’t.

He always made sure that everything was locked up tight before he left. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he raced towards his bedroom. Surely the alarms would have notified him of a break-in?

His bedroom was spotless, not one thing was out of place, but something felt *wrong* . He opened his wardrobe and threw his clothes onto the floor, then ripped out the false backing.

His stomach dropped to his feet, he slowly backpedaled and collapsed on the edge of his bed.

The suitcase was gone, in its place was a black and red card.

~Meanwhile~

It was a slow day for Taneo.

U.A. had practically clammed shut over any news of the USJ or of the mysterious vigilante, and those topics were the only thing people had been talking about. He leaned back in his chair, bored out of his mind. The gods must have heard his plea for action because his phone went off. He raised a brow at the unknown number but answered it anyway.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Taneo.”

Taneo jumped as goosebumps broke out on his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up. He recognized the voice of that kid, but it wasn't the same shaky and nervous tone. His voice held confidence. Power. *Absolute authority.*

“Kid? Why are you calling me?”

“You asked me to call you in case anything interesting happens, and it just so happens that I found the cure for your boredom.” His laptop pinged with a new message, *“My associate just sent you an email, one that you may find intriguing.”*

Taneo held the phone between his ear and shoulder, then clicked on the message. A video popped up, the screen turning a vibrant red with a logo he's never seen before. An odd mask with a top hat, with one of the eyes bursting into flames. His jaw dropped at the contents, his instincts screaming that it would cause an uproar and devastate Silver Falcon's reputation.

"You... how did you get all of this?"

"Does that really matter? Can you get this to play on today's news?"

"And how do you know I won't just call the police?"

There was a chuckle, and Taneo could *feel* his smirk, *"There was a virus attached to that email. If you call the police, then it'll release all of your personal information to people that you've exposed over the years. I'm sure they would be delighted to know you live at-"*

"I get it!" His palms shook and his heart thrummed, but Taneo bore a shaky smile, "I mostly work for a news magazine, but I do have contacts in the JSN news station. I could call in some favors."

"Good, get them to play it at noon."

"Today?"

"Today."

"And the virus?"

"If everything goes as planned, and the truth of Silver Falcon is out of the bag, then the virus will delete itself. We can amicably part ways after if you wish. Or..."

"Or what?"

"I can call you again whenever I get.... interesting information. Do we have a deal?"

Taneo absolutely *beamed* . He knew his instincts were right about this kid, but he never imagined anything like *this* . If he could get this boy as his personal source...

"We have ourselves a deal."

"Good. I'll call you again if we find anything else."

"Wait, kid!" Taneo's heart rate was through the roof, "Who exactly are you?"

There was a chuckle before the line went dead. He tore the phone away from his ear and pressed redial. It rang only once.

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed has been disconnected-"

The cell phone fell from his grip and clattered on his desk, the robotic voice still trilled through the air. He took off his glasses and scrubbed at his face, but underneath he was grinning like a madman.

Tsukauchi jolted awake, he cursed underneath his breath when his knee slammed into the side of his kitchen table. He pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off his growing headache, then blearily looked at the time.

He stood from the table and hastily gathered up the scattered paperwork, he was going to be so late! It was almost noon already. When had he fallen asleep?

... When was the last time he actually got a full night's sleep?

He cast the thought out of his mind as he dumped the paperwork into a folder and raced towards the door. The keys fumbled from his hands as he almost tripped over something in front of his door, but caught the frame just in time. He blinked several times at the sleek suitcase sitting on his doorstep. Realization shot through him like a lightning bolt.

He looked up and down the walkway, but it was deserted.

A small envelope was attached to the handle. He opened it up and a black and red card spilled out, a logo of a flaming mask and top hat stared back at him. He flipped it over to see a message cut out from magazine letters.

The show starts at noon.

Tsukauchi looked at his watch as another curse flung from his lips. The suitcase and keys were snatched up and he fled back into his apartment. His shaky hands nearly dropped the remote as he turned on the TV. What sort of 'show' was Joker planning? Immediately the JSN News channel popped up, the anchor wore a solemn frown, a picture of the same strange logo appeared beside her.

With quick fingers, Tsukauchi dialed on his cellphone.

It was a calm day.

He was finally able to swat away the vultures at his front gate so that his students could resume classes in peace, so he rewarded himself by brewing his favorite beverage. Nezu gently swirled the teacup in his paws, his nose filled with the pleasant aroma of freshly steeped leaves. Then, his phone began to vibrate. He hummed a merry tune as he set the cup down and answered it.

"Tsukauchi! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Please tell me you're watching the news."

"No, has something interesting happened?"

"... You'd better see it for yourself."

Suddenly, his door burst open, Aizawa, Yagi, and a few other teachers had ghostly pale faces. Nezu frowned as he reached into

his desk for the TV remote, and flicked it on to a news channel. His frown, however, turned into a grin, which then turned into a maddening cackle.

The teachers shivered at the insane gleam in his eyes.

“Why do you think Aizawa-sensei ran from the room like that?” Sato asked.

“I dunno, kero.” Tsuyu poked her cheek and tilted her head to the side, “He took one look at his phone and practically bolted. That’s so unlike him.”

Ashido gasped and whirled around in her chair, “You don’t think it was a message from a secret lover, do you!?”

“Do not suggest such a thing, Ashido!” Iida chopped his arms and radiated stern energy, “Something like that should not concern us, and I would rather not poke into Sensei’s private affairs.”

“Besides, I don’t think it’s that,” Midoriya said.

“Then what else could it be?” Ashido asked as she bounced in her seat.

“Would you extras just shut up already!? Who cares why the hobo abandoned our class!?”

“There must be darkness on the horizon.” Tokoyami said with a nod, “Otherwise he would not have looked as if he had seen a phantom.”

“You guys are boring!” Ashido whined, then she grinned at her neighbor, “What do you think happened, Kaminari!?”

Attention swiveled to their classmate when he didn’t answer. His eyes were glued to his phone, wide in shock and horror.

“... Kaminari?”

He jolted out of his reverie with a grimace.

“I think you guys should check the news.”

“Huh? Why?”

Despite Ashido’s question, many of them dug out their phones. Dreaded silence filled the room as their screens shown a strange logo, crimes of a certain hero were spilled to the world without mercy.

“I...” Midoriya swallowed thickly as his hands shook, “I just watched one of his hero fights recently...”

Nobody answered, too stunned to gather any coherent thoughts. Several minutes passed until Uraraka finally broke it, her eyes wide and filled with tears.

“A hero wouldn’t do that, right? I-It has to be a lie?”

In the back, a pair of heterochromatic eyes narrowed. His fists shook with anger as his mouth was cut in a sharp frown. He understood all too well what type of ‘hero’ Silver Falcon was. All of his misgivings about Joker, and his involvement in the USJ, were wiped clean.

He seared that logo into his memory as he silently declared Joker his hero.

In a dark secluded room, where medical equipment hummed and beeped, a faceless man grinned at the screen.

This was how it was always supposed to be.

Silver Falcon walked down the sidewalk like a show rooster. He owned these streets, as well as the hearts of the women surrounding him. Innocent giggles and flirtatious suggestions were always

whispered in his ears ever since he became a hero, it was his right to rule these city blocks. He signed yet another autograph and waved towards a pair of girls, twins by the looks of it. He was about to take a picture with them when his work phone vibrated.

“Excuse me, ladies,” They swooned as he stepped away, “Duty calls.”

He narrowed his eyes. Why would Inu be calling? He knows better than to call during a patrol, but people were watching. He donned a confident, suave expression, his voice as smooth as silk.

“Silver Falcon here.”

There was harsh panting on the other line, *“Wh-where are you right now?”*

“I’m on a patrol.” He waved back to the group of ladies, who whispered to each other and giggled, “What’s up?”

“G-get off the streets! Now!”

“Why? I have everything covered-”

“Run! I-it won’t be long now! I-I’m sorry! I can’t deal with this!!”

The phone line went dead. Silver Falcon pulled it away from his ear with a frown, then shoved it in his pocket.

“Sorry, ladies. They must’ve had the wrong number,” He said as he approached them, “Now, where were we-”

“What’s going on?”

“Did something happen?”

One of the twins looked up as other voices of concern sprinkled through the street. Silver Falcon, like everyone else, glanced up as every screen turned blood red with a weird logo in the middle. The

image pulled back, revealing a news anchor in a red suit. Her hair was tied up in a neat bun and she had a stern expression.

"This just in," She said, her voice echoed, "We have received a video from a reputable source, and were urged to air it at this specific time. I warn you that there might be graphic images, so viewer discretion is advised for children."

The screen flickered back to the logo as distorted voices warbled through the air.

"Greetings everyone, my name is Joker." His voice was smooth and charismatic, "You might recognize my name as the vigilante that appeared during the USJ attack."

Murmurs broke out through the district like wildfire.

"We come to give you an important message. There's a hero in this city that shouldn't have the title of one who should protect," Joker said, "And I think you all deserve to know just what he's done."

"Before we do, there's one thing to note," The boyish voice gave way to images of the attack on the police station, "We already tried to give this evidence to the authorities, but it was hidden away and masqueraded as a violent attack on the police. We would like the share the faces of those who were in on it."

Silver Falcon's heart lurched as every one of his officers popped up on screen, with the commissioner's face being at the top. No, it wasn't possible! Inu said he had dealt with the evidence! He took a frightful step backward as the people around him whispered.

"If you don't believe that, then perhaps this will make you change your tune." Joker said, an invisible smirk oozing through the screens, "We'll show you the mastermind behind this scandal."

It was like the world was ripped from underneath him. Videos, photos, notes, and all other manner of things were shown on the

screen, ripping the curtain back on *his* crimes. His iconic armor was shown to the world, but his face was contorted by greed and malice as he demanded money from several establishments, *his* voice rained down on the streets as his threats were known to all. The final nail in the coffin was a certain conversation he had recently.

"I-I don't have a quirk."

Hostile laughter bounced in everyone's ears.

"Then nobody will give a damn if you die." His own voice haunted the air like an invisible plague, *"Isn't that right, quirkless scum?"*

The screen returned to its bloody red hue, the mask and hat icon slowly swiveling.

"Well, that's not a hero I would look up to." Joker said, *"What do you think, everyone? Does this man deserve the title of 'hero'? We'll leave you to decide."*

With that, the screen turned black and the static faded. The cameras went back to the news anchor, who's jaw was dropped in shock.

"We got hacked? How? I..." She looked past someone on camera, then cleared her throat and straightened her spine, *"I have a son that looked up to him, but I'm sure he's not the only one to be horrified by this. W-we'll keep you updated on the case as it progresses."*

The screens glitched, then returned to whatever advertisements they were playing before. Dead silence drowned the street as several eyes stabbed into him like a knife's blade.

"I-it's all lies!" He yelled, the twins flinched back as if he burned them, *"It's not true! It's... I..."*

"How could you!?" One man yelled, then the crowd roared with anger.

"You call yourself a hero!?"

“How many lives did you ruin to satisfy yourself!?”

“You’re a monster, not a hero!”

“How could they let someone like this pass in a hero school?”

“I...” Silver falcon fell to his knees as he was suddenly dizzy, his hands trembled with fear, “They’re all lies, I tell you! Please...”

He looked up, and his heart stopped. Within the yelling crowd was a boy, with steely silver eyes hidden behind thick glasses. A cat was hanging from his shoulder, looking as proud and smug as a lion.

“A cat...” His face twisted with rage as he forced himself to stand, “So it was you!”

Others stepped back as he summoned his beautiful sword and stomped towards the boy, who shrunk in on himself and shook like a leaf. The cat mewled pathetically and cowered in the boy’s hair.

“P-please! Please don’t hurt me, I-I’m quirkless!”

Silver Falcon froze in his steps. That single line drove the crowd insane. A sudden sharp pain bloomed across his face, he reached up to feel precious crimson raining down his forehead. The rock bounced off the pavement as he looked to the little boy, no older than five, who had thrown it.

“Leave him alone!” He said, fists clenched and tears streaked down his cheeks.

“Is that all you do!? Pick on the weak so that they can’t fight back!?” A woman, who he had just signed an autograph for, tore the paper into bits and threw it down in disgust, “I hate people like you!”

The crowd cheered her on as more things were thrown at him. He ducked and weaved with agile grace. Hatred emanated from him as he turned to the boy and his cat, he didn’t care what the crowd said, how could they not see the deceiving gleam in the boy’s eyes!? A

ragged battle cry ripped from his throat and screams rang out as he raised his sword to cut the boy down.

“Lacquered Chain Prison!”

His movements were bound by an explosion of wooden roots, his marvelous sword dropped from his grasp as he thrashed like a wild animal. The crowd cheered as Kamui Woods slowly approached, his eyes wide in revulsion.

“Kyogi Munashisa, you are under arrest and your hero license is suspended for attacking civilians.” The hero said, “Many of your cohorts are already in custody, so just come quietly before you lose the last shred of your dignity.”

Silver Falcon went limp in his prison, he stayed that way until the police cuffed him and dragged him to a waiting car. He stared at the boy and his cat as they were comforted by Kamui Woods, who had a strong hand on the shaking boy’s shoulder. The crowd watched on as the car door slammed shut like the finality of an executioner’s blade.

His life was *over*, and those victorious silver eyes were forever seared into his mind.

Welp, there was chapter 11.

What did you guys think of Silver Falcon's demise?

Layer Cake

Chapter 12: Layer Cake

“Joker,” Giran grabbed the cigarette from his lips, “Where did you get all of this stuff?”

“Around. A bank, a castle, an art museum...” Joker stepped around the table, his footsteps added a touch of brilliant colors to the drab place, “Maybe even an elite cruise ship? It’s amazing what people will leave.... unattended.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Aizawa downed his fifth cup and set it on the table with a clatter, but all the coffee in the world wouldn’t have prepared them for this.

“I think we’ll have to cut you off there, Sho.” Kayama playfully elbowed him, “Tsukauchi might get mad if you break his record.”

Aizawa rolled his eyes and leaned back into his chair. Kayama was here, alongside Nezu and Small Might, as they had been called to the police station by Tsukauchi. Nezu had been unnaturally quiet the whole time they were waiting in this dingy room, but there was just that certain gleam in his eyes that revealed how much fun he was having with this.

Finally, the door opened and Tsukauchi walked in, pale as a ghost.

Nezu perked up in his seat, “So, what news do you have?”

“Where to even start?” Tsukauchi pulled out the chair and sank into it with a long sigh.

Kayama took pity on the man and poured him some coffee. He nodded his thanks and took a long sip as he gathered his thoughts.

“Kyogi Munashisa is still in jail. His legal team is in a frenzy, but with this scandal, the Hero Commission is launching an investigation into them. They’ll be stalled for a good while.” Tsukauchi put his cup down and dug out his notepad, “We swept the card and suitcase for fingerprints, but we didn’t get any that already didn’t belong to Inu. The media has blown this out of proportion and compared Joker’s message to the Hero Killer’s ideology, which has already put the Hero Commission on edge.”

“Like destroying a police station wasn’t enough for him?” Toshinori said darkly as he folded his hands on the table, “Now he’s gained notoriety all across Japan because of this. I wonder if he’s basking in all of this attention.”

“We don’t know what his motivation was for attacking the station,” Tsukauchi said, “But it was the same one where he was held. That’s the only connection I could make.”

“I think he was looking for you,” Nezu leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs, “That suitcase was intended to reach your hands that night.”

“Me?” Tsukauchi widened his eyes, “Why?”

“Because you listened to him, gave him a chance while he was in custody. If he was mistreated by people who were supposed to protect him, then the evidence was a sort of olive branch? Or was it just one part of a much bigger plan? Perhaps it was a bit of both, since this video was released not a day later.”

“Back up, he was mistreated?” Kayama looked back and forth between Nezu and Tsukauchi, “Mistreated how?”

“He heavily suggested that he was a victim of police brutality, beaten, drugged, the works.” Tsukauchi shook his head, “But he

didn't give us names."

"How horrible!" Kayama cried, "And he's just a kid!"

"I think..." Aizawa scowled as a pit fell into his stomach, "It goes even further than that."

Their eyes glanced over to him, some in worry, some in dread. Toshinori was trying and failing to keep his expression neutral. Nezu's fur stood on end, but he kept his chipper tone.

"Care to elaborate, Aizawa?"

"It was after he escaped the police station and we gave chase," He swiveled his chair towards Tsukauchi, "It was just before you came into the alley, I asked him to surrender, said that we wouldn't hurt him."

"What did he do?" Tsukauchi asked slowly.

"He said," Aizawa braced himself, looking more grave than ever, "And I quote, 'I won't be going anywhere with you, especially when the result always ends up in either a cold cell or attempted murder.' A haunted look was in his eyes, so I know he wasn't lying."

Kayama cursed under her breath.

Toshinori swallowed thickly, "No wonder he doesn't trust us."

"Do you think somebody tried to murder him when he was in police custody before?" Tsukauchi asked.

"It's quite possible that he's only alive due to luck." Nezu was no longer smiling, "And that comment of a cold cell. I know it all too well."

Aizawa and Tsukauchi exchanged glances as the mouse stared into his clenched paws. Toshinori was lost to his own thoughts as Kayama stared at Nezu with a softness to her eyes.

“Nezu...”

“I feel like I understand this boy more than anyone else,” Nezu leaned forward and looked them all in the eye, “I know what it’s like to be nothing more than a plaything by beings that consider themselves to be gods. There is nothing more humiliating than having no control over your own fate.”

“But how does that connect to the police brutality?” Kayama asked.

“What if this wasn’t his first escape?” Nezu countered, “If he was caught a second time, perhaps he knew too much or it would be too troublesome to return him to his keepers. A skilled agent could’ve slipped in to do the deed.”

“Alright, so that failed, but how did that end up with him landing at the USJ?” Aizawa asked.

“These are questions that only Joker will be able to answer,” Tsukauchi put his hand up, “It’s no use asking them as of now. As for his recapture, that’s why I wanted Midnight here.”

“You want me to join the team?”

“I want you and Eraserhead to be the first ones on call in case there’s a sighting. We need to get him in custody quickly and quietly, so both of your skills and quirks would be perfect for that.” Tsukauchi nodded, “The Hero Commission is in an uproar over this little stunt, and the Chief and I can only hold them off so long before they demand drastic action.”

“Their best bet would be Endeavor,” Kayama said with a frown, “At this rate, I wouldn’t put it past them to set him on the kid.”

Nezu suddenly burst out with laughter, sending chills down the arms of everyone else in the room.

“What’s so funny?” Aizawa asked with a raised brow.

“Nothing!” The mouse had a feral grin, “I have a feeling that, even if they send in Endeavor, Joker will give him a good run around and then laugh in his face afterward.”

“You’re talking about the number two hero,” Toshinori had to stop his jaw from dropping, “And you think this child would treat it as a joke?”

“And you’re the number one hero, Toshinori. Joker took one of your super-powered punches and walked away without so much as a bruise. What do you think a little bit of fire would do?”

Toshinori held up a finger and opened his mouth, but after a few seconds of silence, he sighed with slumped over shoulders. Tsukauchi felt bad for him.

“In any case...” The detective cleared his throat and stood from his chair, “I just wanted to update you all and invite Midnight to the team. Now, if you excuse me, I still have plenty of work to do thanks to Joker, like trying to figure out who that second voice belonged to.”

Toshinori stood, “I should go as well, this case has given me many things to think about.”

“Wait, gentlemen.” They stopped and stared at Nezu as he crossed his legs and tilted his head, “Is it really not obvious who that second voice on the video belongs to?”

The four of them blinked, then exchanged confused glances.

“If you have any theories, I would love to hear them.” Tsukauchi said as he had his pen at the ready, “Who do you think it is?”

Nezu grinned, “Why, it is quite simple!”

“Just get on with it,” Aizawa groaned, “We don’t have time for your antics, Nezu.”

“My my, such impatience Aizawa.” His chair creaked as he turned towards Tsukauchi, still grinning, “The most obvious suspect to that

second voice is.... the cat!"

"The cat?" Tsukauchi gaped at him, "Why in the world would you suspect Joker's cat?"

"How could you not? This cat, Mona I believe, showed intelligence beyond what would be considered normal and he most likely has a quirk as well. Mona knew how to break out of the interrogation room, locate their confiscated goods, and then pulled off a plan to set his partner free."

"I mean, that proves the cat is smart, but to be able to talk?" Kayama said with a frown.

"What am I then? A mouse? A bear? A dog?" Nezu stared at her with an inscrutable glimmer in his eyes, "It is not impossible for there to be more like me."

"Great, and here I thought one talking animal was bad enough." Aizawa said as he scrubbed his eyes.

"But..." Tsukauchi furrowed his brows, "I could tell that Joker had a strong bond with this cat, he was actually concerned for his well being during the interrogation."

"Indeed. It is quite uncommon for animals like myself to manifest a quirk, so if they were experimented on together....." Nezu's smile fell and he shook his head, "Then it would make sense that they have such strong ties. I am also starting to suspect that this Sae Niijima person is a fake as well."

"Joker was telling the truth when he talked about her, though." Tsukauchi said.

"Perhaps, if he believed it to be the truth, then your quirk would deem it as such." Nezu stared between all of them, "However, I think that his keepers used this person, under a false name, to try and

gain his trust. It was not an uncommon tactic to get experimental subjects to cooperate. Torture was always a close second, though.”

Kayama sighed, “This poor kid.”

“No child deserves such hardships,” A shadow fell over Toshinori’s face, “Especially at the hands of people who are supposed to protect, not harm.”

“We’ll find them, both of them.” Tsukauchi smiled sadly, “And make sure they get the help they need. I want to be there when we recapture him though, we need to let him know that he can trust us.”

“We need to actually find him, first. There’s hasn’t been a single shred of evidence to where he’s hiding out.” Aizawa droned as a headache pounded on his temples, “He’s like a phantom.”

“A phantom...” They flinched back at Nezu’s manic grin, “Or a Phantom Thief? The boy dropped that hint on purpose. Perhaps that’s what the code name of the experiment was?”

“In any case,” Tsukauchi finished writing and flipped his notebook closed, “I’ll bring this up with the chief and see what he says. Hopefully, we can hold the Hero Commission off from sending in Endeavour.”

“And we’ll do everything in our power to locate them,” Nezu said, “Don’t you worry.”

The detective smiled, then walked out alongside a suspiciously silent Toshinori.

“I’ll up my patrols and keep in contact with everyone,” Kayama said, “I don’t want this poor kiddo to go through any more trauma.”

“I’ll do the same,” Aizawa leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, “But we should be together when we find him. It’s too dangerous to be alone.”

Kayama nodded, "Right."

Nezu simply folded his paws together and grinned. After all, he *couldn't wait* to see what Joker did next.

"He comes, Trickster."

Joker noted Yatagarasu's quick shadow pass over the windows. Dust and stale air permeated the abandoned warehouse, rusted crates and boxes were piled high, it was a perfect place for shady meetings like this. Mona didn't like the look of it, so he and Yatagarasu were patrolling outside. The door creaked open and a man sauntered in as if he owned the place.

Joker kept his guard up as the man's piercing eyes scanned him from head to toe. He wore amethyst colored dress pants and a matching blazer, some of his gray hair was swept to the side of his face. The smoke of the lit cigarette in his lips mixed with the stale air, Joker kept his face neutral even as the stench burned his nose.

"So, you must be Giran."

"I am." Giran blinked, then smirked, "Unfortunately, our mutual contact wouldn't give me the pleasure of knowing your name."

"It's Joker."

Giran's eyes widened, "Ah, you've caused quite the riot in the underground, kid. Invading the USJ, breaking out of a bustling police station, destroying said police station. A few are praising you since you're responsible for Silver Falcon's untimely demise. There have even been whispers that you'll be the next Stain."

Joker kept up his mask of confidence. He's seen what Stain's been doing, he had a message of 'true heroism' disguised in a bloodbath, and the mass following of a ruthless serial killer sent shivers down his spine. How could people cheer on somebody like that? The

media comparing him to Stain made him want to vomit. Maybe he could work something out with Taneo to fix it, but that was a problem for his future self.

“Well, as much as I would love to talk about myself,” Joker couldn’t help his knowing smirk, “We’re not here to chitchat.”

“Straight to business then?” Giran took a long drag of his cigarette, then breathed out the acrid smoke with a wide grin, “I like that in a client. So, what have you got for me?”

Joker waved him over to a table laden with goods. The final few treasures and gems they collected in the last trek through Mementos, a few of Takemi's lower end medicinal items, alongside a small pile of Life Stones. The trump card of the whole pile was the few Beads sitting innocently at the end of the table.

Giran took his time examining the items in silence. His face shifted several times as he went down the line, going so far as to pull out some tools to authenticate the quality of the treasures. Joker watched him with careful consideration, but the man stopped in front of the Beads.

“What are these?”

“I call them Beads, you just break one and it heals you. Those Life Stones do the same, but they only heal a small fraction in comparison.”

Giran gaped at him, “Really?”

“Really.” Joker smirked as he stuffed his hands in his pockets, “You can try one if you want, but I’ll have to charge you extra. They were.... risky to get ahold of if you know what I mean.”

Giran stroked his goatee thoughtfully, then turned to him, “How about I try one, and I’ll pay double for them if you’re telling the truth.”

Joker waived a hand, "It's a deal."

Giran took the immaculate little orb and snapped it in between his fingers. A flash of pale light consumed his body as every fiber of his being was charged with energy. Giran stood there, jaw agape. He forced a cough. His lungs were so *clear* and the overwhelming cravings for tobacco were all but gone. The headache that had pestered him all day miraculously vanished too.

"Joker," Giran grabbed the cigarette from his lips, "Where did you get all of this stuff?"

"Around. A bank, a castle, an art museum..." Joker stepped around the table, his footsteps added a touch of brilliant colors to the drab place, "Maybe even an elite cruise ship? It's amazing what people will leave.... *unattended* ."

The man across from him chuckled, which slowly turned into gut-busting laughter. Joker slowly tilted his head to the side as the man tried to calm down, taking deep breaths and wiping tears from his eyes.

"I like you, kid." He said, grinning, "You have some good stock here, I'll give you that. How about-"

Giran's eyes caught an item hanging from Joker's belt.

"What's that?"

"It's not for sale." Joker said with a frown.

"Can I have a look at it?" The other man hummed with curiosity, "I'm a collector of curiosities, and I've never seen anything like it."

Joker narrowed his eyes but relented.

Raw power filled him the moment he touched the smooth skull. He stopped himself from gasping at the icy cool sensation trailing up and down his body. He felt invincible as if he could punch straight

through concrete or run a marathon without breaking a sweat. The details of the crystal skull were so perfect that it couldn't have been crafted by a human, its mesmerizing colors kept shifting in the light and he didn't recognize the material. Joker cleared his throat and Giran hesitantly handed it back.

"That piece alone would net you a small fortune."

"Maybe," Joker shrugged as he reattached it to his belt, "But, as I said, it's not for sale."

"I can see why." Giran nodded to the table of goods in between them, "I'll give you a hundred and fifty thousand yen for the lot."

"A hundred and fifty? My last fence would've given me a lot more for the same."

Curiosity peaked on Giran's face, "Oh? Then why don't you go to him?"

"He's out of town right now, but I suppose I could wait for him to get back and take all of these wonderful items with me." Another smooth grin split Joker's face, "But I still have to charge you for using a Bead."

"Heh, I can see you're driving a hard bargain." Giran sighed with a shrug, "Right after my own damn heart. Fine then, one sixty."

"Two hundred."

"Two hundred?" Giran's eyes flashed with amusement, "How about one seventy?"

"One ninety."

"I'll meet you in the middle and go one eighty, but I can't do more than that."

"I suppose that's good enough." Joker sighed, then held dug out a piece of paper from his pocket, "Wire the money into these accounts. It doesn't matter how much goes into what account, just make sure that its the full amount overall."

Giran blinked curiously at it, then grinned. "Alright, then."

The man stepped away as he got out his phone and held it up to his ear.

"How goes it, Trickster? You've been in there for a while."

"Better than I ever thought it would." Joker studied Giran, *"Much better. How's Mona doing?"*

"See for yourself. We're above you."

He looked up to one of the grimy windows, where their shadows were silhouetted against it. Mona nudged the filthy window open and looked down at him with a tilt of his head. Joker bit his lip to stop himself from laughing.

"Tell him we have enough for some decent sushi tonight. We deserve a reward for the whole Silver Falcon fiasco."

Yatagarasu ruffled his feathers, then leaned in close enough to whisper in the cat's ear. Mona *beamed* and licked his chops. Suddenly, his phone gave off a few pings, and he dug it out to see that the accounts were filled. Joker smirked as he turned to Giran, who had just hung up his phone.

"Pleasure doing business with you."

"Pleasure was all mine, kid." Giran threw down his cigarette and stomped it out, "I hope you'll call me when you've 'obtained' more goods."

"I'll set up a meeting when I do." Joker walked towards the door and waved, "See ya."

Joker left Giran behind and stepped out into the night air. He was glad to be out of that filthy place, but the briny smell from the nearby shipyard didn't do it justice, either.

"You want us to come down?"

"No, I'll come up, just wait there."

It was child's play to hop up the nearby crates and onto the rooftop. Mona padded up to him and jumped on his shoulder.

"So? When are we going to get sushi!?"

"Really?" Joker put a hand over his heart in mock injury, "That's the first thing you ask me when I risk my life and meet strange people to get us money? Mona, I'm so disappointed."

"You'll get over it." Mona swished his tail over the back of Joker's head, "But let's not stick around here too much longer."

"Good idea."

Yatagarasu took off into the darkening sky, nobody was around to witness the figures dart across over the rooftops as easy as breathing, Mona only spoke when the stars dotted the sky and they were a clear district away from shady businessmen.

"Why did you only sell him a few items?" He asked, "Wouldn't we have gotten more if you sold him some additional Beads? Those did get the highest price."

Joker stopped on a flat rooftop of an apartment building. Yatagarasu flew in a wide circle overhead as he sat on the edge of the building with a long sigh, his legs dangled from the sheer drop. The stretch of shimmering city lights and nightly traffic was beautiful if anything.

"It's fine to sell more things like Life Stones and Takemi's items since we have loads of them, but we should be careful with Beads. Plus, its simple supply and demand." He said as Mona hopped off of his

shoulder, "Their value wouldn't be as high if there were a bunch of them out there, so if I limit the number and get more demand for them..."

"Ohh, I get it!" He swished his tail back and forth, "Then we can buy even more sushi!"

"Sushi, or a Sports Festival ticket."

"Oh, right." Mona sat beside him and looked out into the city, the lights highlighting their figures, "How much does one of those cost? Ten thousand? Fifteen?"

"Who knows," Joker said as he dug out his phone, "They tend to jack up the prices of tickets for these kinds of events the closer it is. The Sports Festival is about a week away now."

"More of that supply and demand thing, huh?" Mona frowned as Joker grimaced, "So, how much?"

"Sixty thousand, give or take."

"S-sixty!?" Mona's eyes blew wide in shock, "No wonder that school is so huge, getting sales like that for *one* ticket! These people really are crazy."

Joker sighed as they were reaped of sixty thousand yen. At least the ticket would be delivered tomorrow by mail, Aiba set up an anonymous P.O. box not too far from the Raven's Nest for them.

"Hey, we still have plenty for sushi. We'll have to get some for Kaito and Aiba though, so they won't feel left out."

"Can I get tuna!? I like tuna!" He gave Joker the most adorable expression he could muster, complete with big eyes and saggy ears, "I loooooove tuna. Did I mention that I want tuna, Joker?"

"Nope, not once." Joker laughed and pat Mona's head with a smile, "I'll look up a nearby restaurant so we can get your tuna."

“Yes!”

Joker looked over at Mona. He had his eyes closed as he hummed a random tune and bounced happily on his front paws. Joker exited the browser while he was distracted. The Phantom Thief chat room was still vacant, not a single word had been sent by the others. It was like a knife twisting through his heart. He missed them so much already.

“Trickster...”

“I’m fine, Yatagarasu.”

Of course, the bird’s doubts trickled down his spine, but he said no more.

He didn’t know what prompted him to type all of a sudden.

[Joker]

So much has happened in such a short time.

We met a girl that reminds me of you, Oracle. Mona said I was being too soft after she tried to blackmail us, but she was so much like you before you joined us that I just couldn’t help it. Perks of being an adoptive big brother, I guess?

I’ll be going by a new name soon, a false identity that is being created by that same girl.

If any of you make it to this world, then simply look for the Raven. The thief protecting that nest should point you in the right direction. Hopefully.

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

Joker scoffed, drawing Mona's attention.

"What is it? Are the restaurants closed!?"

"No," He closed out of the chat room before Mona could see, "The nearest one is a few blocks away."

"Well, what are we waiting for, then!?" Mona jumped back on his perch, "Let's gooo! Sushi waits for nobody!"

"Yeah yeah, we're going!" He said as he stood and dusted himself off.

Outside, Joker was smiling and laughing alongside his partner, excitement bubbled between them as they inched closer to their delicious reward.

On the inside, Ren dearly missed his family, and he wouldn't forgive himself if they never returned home.

Oof, poor Joker. Maybe some special sushi will make you feel better.

Also??? We passed 5k hits, already?? You guys are all amazing XD Last chapter was also the most comments I have /ever/ gotten on a single chapter! It was awesome and made me smile like no other, it means a lot to me to see that so many people are enjoying this story as much as I am enjoying writing it!

Encounter

Chapter 13: Encounter

Morgana narrowed his eyes, “You want to patrol around as Joker.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

Edits made 10/9/2020

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“This sushi better be worth the money.”

Morgana chuckled, “Oh please, *any* sushi is worth the money, especially when it’s tuna!”

Ren rolled his eyes as a plastic bag hung from his wrist. He wasn’t keen on spending another twenty thousand yen on sushi alone, but his heart couldn’t say no to Morgana’s pleading eyes. Four different trays had been prepared and he hoped Aiba and Kaito would like theirs, that or Morgana would devour everything and get sick the next day.

Either way, they were heading back to the Raven’s Nest for the night. There was a certain ambiance in the nightlife of this part of the city, full of colorful lights that painted the cityscape with vibrant colors, shops, and restaurants that exuded mouthwatering scents. They stopped at the crosswalk and waited for the light to turn green when someone standing next to him cursed under his breath.

Ren looked over to a scowling boy around his age, with wild purple hair and so many bags under his eyes that an entire week of sleep

wouldn't erase them. His shoulders were tense as he looked to the crowd behind them, but he must've felt Ren's staring. He whipped around with a daggered glare.

"What the hell are you staring at?" He snapped.

Morgana blinked at him as Ren raised a brow, then turned away. The other boy scoffed as the light finally turned green, Ren dug out his phone and pretended to scroll through it as the purple boy rushed to the other side of the street.

"Ren, what are you doing?" Morgana asked as they crossed at a snail's pace, "The tuna's gonna go bad at this rate!"

"I know that look," He said, "He was scared and kept glancing over his shoulder. Don't you think that's suspicious?"

Morgana hummed, then peered at the other boy, "Let's follow him, just in case."

He didn't need to be told twice. It didn't take long to see who the boy was afraid of. Another group shouldered past the crowd, the purple-haired kid looked over his shoulder again and fear flashed through his eyes. The group nudged each other with vicious snickers and stalked closer like a pack of wolves going for the kill.

Purple ducked into an alley, but his pursuers were on him.

"The boy pens himself in like a lamb to the slaughter." Yatagarasu's faithful shadow floated high over them, *"What is it you plan to do?"*

"Just watch."

Morgana hopped off of his shoulder as they slipped into the dark alley, quiet as ghosts. It was long and narrow, with a single turn that led right to a dead end. That's where they cornered Purple, who stared at the ground, eyes scarily blank. The ringleader had wolfish mutations, complete with a canine head and a long bushy tail poking

out of his pants, his lackeys looked to be like any discount thug that could be scraped off the cement of a Red Light District. They looked rather young though, *too* young to have that sort of life.

Ren took off his glasses and tucked them away as Morgana leaped on a nearby garbage bin to watch the show. Yatagarasu landed on the ledge of a building. He looked down on these worms, the power of ripping winds was at the tips of his feathers, should the Trickster call for it.

“How could they let a villain into a hero school?” Wolf asked as he shoved Purple’s shoulder, “You should’ve done all of us a favor and just given up. Nobody wants someone like Silver Falcon in their ranks, though I hope Stain gets to you before Joker.”

Purple opened his mouth but was silenced by a quick jab to the stomach. The sickening sound bounced off the walls as Purple double over, coughing.

“Were you about to *talk* ?” Wolf asked dangerously.

“Ooh,” The thug on the right said with a grin, “I think he was about to use his quirk on you!”

“Maybe we should teach him a lesson!” The other cackled, “He can’t use his quirk if he doesn’t have a tongue!”

Purple’s face drained of all color and he took in a sharp breath, but he still kept his head down. It was as if he hopelessly waited for the executioner’s blade to fall.

“Only cowards lord their power over the helpless.”

The trio whirled around to Ren, Purple stared at him with comically wide eyes, though several different emotions ran through his ivory pupils. The sleazy lackeys looked to Wolf as he grinned, revealing the rows of deadly fangs. Wolf stomped over to him. The beast was

several inches taller, but Ren had stared down a god and lived to tell the tale.

“And who the hell do you think you are?” Wolf growled, “I’ve never seen you around before.”

“I’m new to this city,” Ren grinned, and it was somehow sharper than Wolf’s fangs, “But I couldn’t just stand by and watch this happen.”

Wolf stiffened as the air became heavy. There was something *off* about this kid, the way his eyes were like twisting silver daggers thrown straight through the heart, pupils rimmed with glittering gold. Beautiful, but deadly.

“A-are you just going to let him talk to you like that?” One of the thugs asked, sweating.

Wolf shook his head and snarled, a clawed fist flew straight for Ren’s face. Suddenly, the kid’s eyes flooded with golden fire. A raven’s call screamed out into the night as gusts of sharp emerald winds batted them away, but Purple was left untouched as they crashed into the walls and slid down into pathetic heaps. Playful gusts swirled around them, ruffling Ren’s hair and clothes, his footsteps were like drums of war as he approached Wolf, who flinched.

“Leave.” Ren commanded, “I better not see you threatening anybody else again, otherwise I won’t be so merciful.”

Wolf flattened his ears on his head, his tail between his legs, but he scrambled up and ran from the alley on all fours.

“H-hey, wait for us!”

“You’re just leaving us here!?”

They froze when Ren turned to them, but he motioned to the exit.

“Go.”

They pulled themselves from the ground and fled, Morgana barely held back a snort as one of them face planted on the way out. The alleyway was left in silence for several moments as the wind died down. Ren took a deep breath, then slowly let it out as voices hummed in his mind.

"Did you see-hee how fast they ran-ho!?"

"Hmph, what weak men."

"Haha! The pup almost peed himself! You outdid yourself on this one, Trickster."

"Even me could devour them! Master, can I chase!?"

"You had your turn once already, Cerberus. Allow me to sharpen my claws this time!"

"My claws will always be sharper than yours, pussy cat!"

"Calm yourselves," Arsene said, "The Trickster exacted justice perfectly, we don't need to spoil the moment."

"With my help, of course!" Yatagarasu puffed up his feathers, *"My wind was flawlessly timed!"*

"Yes, you did very well." Ren said, the bird warbled proudly.

Ren dug out his glasses and perched them on his nose, adjusted his various bags, then approached Purple, who had yet to move. He clutched his stomach and flinched back as Ren approached.

"Yatagarasu."

"Understood."

Ren's eyes flickered with gold just as a pale green light encased Purple's body. The boy's eyes widened as he looked at his hands, then felt around his stomach. There was no more pain.

“Better?” Ren asked, he frowned when Purple didn’t answer and exchanged glances with Morgana, “Did you know those guys?”

“I...” Purple cleared his throat, “I went to middle school with them.”

“They looked a bit older than middle schoolers.”

Purple scoffed, still glaring at the ground, “Would you believe that they got held back a couple of years?”

Ren hummed, “Well, we can’t stick around. I’m sure those bullies won’t be bothering you ever again, so-”

“Why?”

Ren furrowed his brow, “Why what?”

“Why did you help me?” Purple finally stood and eyed him with suspicion, “Nobody’s ever helped before. Most people would even sit back and watch!”

“Because I wanted to, and because I can’t stand people like them.”

Purple stared into his steely eyes, trying and failing to pierce through a lie. The boy’s expressions softened, the tension in his shoulders slowly bled out as he swallowed thickly.

“You’re telling the truth...?”

Ren nodded, “Do I have any reason to lie?”

“I... I don’t think so?” Purple sighed and ran a hand through his hair, “I guess I should say thanks?”

“Don’t mention it.”

Ren turned to walk away, but Purple held out his hand.

“Wait!” Ren stopped and looked over his shoulder, “I’ve never seen powers like that. What exactly is your quirk?”

“I don’t have one,” He said with a soft smile, then looked up to Yatagarasu, “For all that this place is concerned, I’m completely quirkless.”

Purple followed his eyes and stiffened.

Yatagarasu shuffled his feathers as Ren turned towards the exit, but Purple had seen the odd number of legs and the magatama. A noble aura radiated from it. The raven nodded down at him, stunning the boy in place, before taking flight.

Morgana leaped onto his usual perch as Ren passed and they exited the alley. The streets were calmer now, as the night had stretched on and the crowds have thinned out. Morgana was deep in thought for a while before he finally spoke.

“You seriously don’t know how scary you are when you’re angry.”

Ren chuckled, “I’m sure it wasn’t that bad?”

“Are you kidding me?” He said as he stared at him in disbelief, “My fur was standing on end with *that* display, and you didn’t even have your costume on! I don’t think we’ll see those punks around here any time soon, and the kid is safe and sound.”

“Yeah.” Ren crossed one street and onto another, “I’ve been thinking.”

Morgana nudged Ren’s cheek, “About what?”

“A couple of things, actually.” Ren pushed up his glasses, “First, Aiba says that the ID will be finished tomorrow, so I was thinking of getting a job.”

“Oh? Where?”

“You know all of those stores and such we saw around U.A.?”

Morgana's eyes lit up, “Yeah?”

“If I can get in one close enough to the school, maybe Yatagarasu can-”

“Still scan over the grounds? You can make money *and* collect valuable information!” He chimed happily, “And since it's close to the school, then maybe some of the students will stop in too. That's perfect, Ren!”

“I know.” He said with a grin.

“And the other thing?”

Ren stopped as his smile faded. They were farther away from the brighter lights and fancy restaurants by now, the barren sidewalk was lined with flickering lamp posts, the atmosphere was dead and stale. Darkness easily clung to the side streets here.

“It's about what just happened. That kid can't be the only victim, who knows how many others suffer like that. We've seen how some 'heroes' act in this world already.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes, “You want to patrol around as Joker.”

It wasn't a question, it was a statement. Ren nodded.

“Well, I'm not going to tell you no, but I think we should lay low for a while until this Silver Falcon stuff dies down a bit first.” Morgana said as he looked to Yatagarasu overhead, “Plus it's better if we know this city a bit more before we do anything else. We already made a name for ourselves, so the others can find us if they ever make it here.”

Ren continued walking, “Exactly.”

“And as long as you get enough sleep.”

“With you around? I always get enough.”

Morgana smiled at that. They continued the rest of the way in silence, just enjoying the night air and each other's company. At long last, they made it back to the Raven's Nest, Yatagarasu vanished into cinders as they stepped inside.

Kaito released a sigh of relief and even *smiled* at them when they came in. Ren stepped up to the front desk as he dug through the plastic bag and produced a vibrant sushi tray, he blinked at it as Ren held it out.

“What's this?”

“Our celebration!” Morgana said with stars in his eyes, “Mine has mostly tuna, of course.”

“Ah,” Kaito took the offering with a wry smile, “A celebration for clipping a falcon's wings? Did you hear that they're reimbursing every yen that the falcon took from us? *All* of us?”

Ren's eyes widened, “Really?”

“Really. It seems the people who brought him to justice got a hold of handwritten receipts and lists of all of his victims. The dirty money matches the amount, and there is a wave of victims giving their testimonies, so the police have everything they need.” Kaito's smile softened into a genuine one as he looked down at the sushi offering, “But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?”

“Of course not.” Ren said with a grin.

“I didn't think so.” Kaito's voice dripped with sarcasm, “But I bet you're tired, so go ahead and get some rest.”

“Now that sounds familiar.” Morgana said with a chuckle.

“But... we haven't paid?” Ren said, frowning, “This would be the third time you've let us stay for free.”

Kaito simply blinked slowly, “Kid, Silver Falcon has been leeching off of me for *years*, but I’ll be getting every yen back plus a healthy bonus from the Hero Commission as an apology. As far as I’m concerned you just paid me for a lifetime of free rooms.”

“I...” Ren cleared his throat, “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Kaito waved his hand at them, “Now go on, you two look beat.”

Morgana hopped off of Ren’s shoulder and pranced towards the lounge door with Ren at his heels.

“One last thing.” Kaito said as Ren held the door open, “I usually only learn the names of my clients if they become long term. So, if you’re willing to share?”

“It’s just Morgana.” The cat said as he popped his head back in.

But Ren hesitated. Kaito noticed and opened his mouth to speak, but Ren beat him to it.

“Kurusu Akira.” He said with conviction.

“Well then,” Kaito snorted, then shook his head, “Have a good night, Morgana and Kurusu-kun.”

He waved them off a second time as he popped open his sushi offering, they left him in peace. They crossed through the lounge and knocked on Aiba’s door. She peeked out but brightened when she saw them.

“It’s good that you’re here!” She ducked inside for a moment before shoving a manila folder into his free hand, “I know I said it wouldn’t be finished until tomorrow, but I worked extra hard to get it done tonight!”

“|-”

“Oh, is that for me?” She swiped the second sushi tray, “I heard all the way from the front, so thanks! I have some other work to do, so if you won’t mind?”

The door clicked shut. Ren and Morgana stared at it for several seconds, the familiar keys tapping away like there was no tomorrow. With a shrug, they made their way to their own little cubicle. Ren dumped off everything at the door and slipped off his shoes with a sigh.

“You want your sushi?”

“Tuna!” Morgana’s eyes blew wide and he crouched down as if going for a pounce, “Yes! Sushi!!”

Ren chuckled as he dug out Morgana’s sushi and set it down, “Please don’t eat it so fast that you get sick?”

“Hmm?” Morgana was already stuffing his face, “I can’t hear you over how delicious this tuna is!”

Ren finally sat down on the cushion, sushi in one hand, his new identity in the other. He chewed thoughtfully as he scanned over the myriad of papers that made up this false life. People, friends, *family*, an entire education and birthplace that had never taken place in reality. He absorbed every detail of this false identity, this other self that was not named Amamiya Ren, but Kurusu Akira. Aiba gave him an odd look when he wanted to be classified as quirkless, though.

Tomorrow, their quest for information would continue. He would get a simple job close to U.A., have Yatagarasu circle the place until they knew the layout, perhaps even meet a few of the students. Then, they could be adequately prepared for their infiltration mission.

It would be easy.

Right?

“It’s just Morgana.” The cat said as he popped his head back in.

But Ren hesitated. Kaito noticed and opened his mouth to speak, but Ren beat him to it.

“Kurusu Akira.” He said with conviction.

“Well then,” Kaito snorted, then shook his head, “Have a good night, Morgana and Kurusu-kun.”

... Do you guys realize how tempting it was to have Kaito say some lame dad joke or something?

Will Power

Chapter 14: Will Power

“Alright, don’t go too far.”

“I won’t.” Morgana rolled his eyes, “I’ll keep the warehouse in sight at all times and I know not take any candy from strangers.”

Before we start I would like to share the very first [FAN ART](#)s that I've ever gotten!! I didn't cry, I swear.

A knock on the door startled him from his work.

Tsukauchi looked up from the mountain of paperwork as the door swung open, Sansa stepped in and plopped a folder on his desk.

“The results of the DNA taken from the USJ Nomu.”

“Already? They worked fast.” Tsukauchi said, his hand hovered over the folder, “Why are you giving me that look? Is it that bad?”

The cat shook his head with a grimace, “See for yourself.”

He opened it up and studied its contents. The DNA matched five different men who had all gone missing from various parts of Japan. Tsukauchi’s stomach turned as he closed the folder with a long sigh.

“So it really is a mindless experiment?”

“It seems so. It just stares on blankly and doesn’t react to outside stimulus.” Sansa said as he crossed his arms, “The DNA also matches those people, but the quirks that the Nomu had doesn’t. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Tsukauchi froze, it was like the wind was stolen from his lungs.

“Their quirks didn’t match, as if they were traded off or stolen.”

“But that wouldn’t be possible,” Sansa tilted his head to the side,
“Would it?”

Dread roiled in Tsukauchi’s heart.

That man was supposed to be dead! If he survived, and that Nomu was just an experiment of his, then there would be more. Was it just a fluke? A spare? Something that the League found in an old lab? No, that wasn’t it, All For One was always meticulous in his experiments, so he wouldn’t just leave it lying around for anybody to find. His thoughts suddenly wandered to Joker.

Odd creatures, strange powers, a rare skill set that would’ve taken years to master, mistrust of authority figures or adults in general. He didn’t seem to have much knowledge of the world either, which was odd for a boy his age. Would that make him...?

Escape.

Assassination attempts.

Experiments....

Sansa flinched as Tsukauchi stood, his chair flying back.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Tsukauchi stepped around his desk and dug out his phone, “I just need to make a few phone calls.”

“Naomasa,” Sansa grabbed his shoulder before he could leave,
“Why don’t you just sit down and take a break? Between the League of Villains, the mess with Silver Falcon, and that vigilante case, you’ve been running yourself down.”

"I'll take a nap after I'm done."

"You better," An evil gleam sparked in the feline's eyes, "Otherwise I'll confiscate your coffee machine for two weeks."

Tsukauchi stared as if he had been slapped, "You wouldn't."

"Try me." Sansa turned around and opened the door, "I'll give you your privacy, but I'll be back in an hour. If you're not napping on that couch by then your machine will be coming home to my kitchen."

Tsukauchi chuckled as the cat left the room, but his smile fell just as fast. His finger hovered over the call button to his best friend. If his theories were right, and All For One was still alive, then what did that make Joker? Was he an experiment of that wretched man, too? Another sigh escaped him as he pressed dial and held it up to his ear.

If any of his theories were correct, then they *had* to find Joker.

If All For One really was still alive, then they had to find the poor kid before that man did.

Ren... no, his name was *Akira* now, left the cafe behind, ignoring the pain in his heart when the tiny bell sounded just like Leblanc's. Another rejection. A sharp sigh did nothing to soothe the irritation rumbling in his chest, he blended into the crowd and slipped into the nearby alleyway when nobody was looking.

Morgana poked his head out from behind a garbage bin, eyes hopeful.

"So? How did this one go?"

"It was going good, at first," He said as he kicked a can down the way, "Then we got into the topic of quirks and it all fell apart from there."

“Not again.” Morgana huffed as he glared at the ground, “Don’t these people realize that their powers aren’t everything?”

“They must’ve missed the memo.” Akira frowned, “I guess that’s why Aiba was looking at me weird when I said I wanted to be quirkless.”

Morgana snorted, “And you even got new clothes just for these interviews too.”

Akira looked down on himself. Honestly, he almost forgot just how *refreshing* clean clothes felt, they dipped a bit more into their funds to get him a new blazer, a few t-shirts, another pair of jeans, etcetera, but nothing overly fancy. There was a laundromat not too far from the Raven’s Nest, too.

“Well, onto the next one, then. It isn’t too far away, right?”

Akira checked his phone and nodded, Morgana abandoned his usual perch to walk beside his partner in crime. These alleyway mazes were becoming more familiar to them, even without Yatagarasu’s guidance. Morgana spoke as if reading his mind.

“How’s our eye in the sky doing?”

Akira gently tugged on the verdant string between himself and the majestic bird. The distance made the thread as taut as a bowstring, but it still had a bit of give yet. He wondered what would ever happen if this string snapped, Morgana forbade him from even trying.

“Still circling over U.A. I don’t think anybody’s noticed yet.”

“Of course they wouldn’t, as long as he doesn’t get too close to anyone.”

“Yeah, he already knows that.”

They stopped before the edge of the alley, Morgana rubbed against his ankles and smiled up at Akira.

“Hey, chin up.” He said, “One of these places has to hire you, right?”

“Maybe. At least half of them never called back, though. I’m telling you this world has something against us.”

“Then it’s their loss! They’re truly blind if they can’t see past a single word stamped on a piece of paper.” Morgana hid behind a dumpster and sat down, “Well, good luck on this next one.”

“Thanks.”

Akira pushed up his glasses and stepped out into the sunlit street.

“Deku-kun!”

Midoriya looked up from his spot within the crowded train to Uraraka. She gently nudged past other people and stood next to him, beaming. The boy tried not to stiffen and turn into a cherry tomato when they brushed arms, he hoped his voice wasn’t too squeaky.

“G-good morning, Uraraka-san!”

“Good morning!” She adjusted the bag hanging off her shoulder, “Did you sleep okay?”

Midoriya shrugged, “A-about the usual…”

In truth, he stayed up well past 2 in the morning looking up articles and forums about Joker. That boy’s quirk was *amazing*, and he would never forget the massive snowy lion that saved him from the Nomu. How many monsters did Joker control? Was there an extent to their power, how were they limited? Was there even a limit to their powers? That lion actually spoke to him, so were they intelligent enough to think on their own? Were they-

Uraraka gently nudged him and he clamped a hand over his mouth. Was he muttering again? But no, she pointed up to a nearby screen

with a shaky smile. Any hint of chatter died down in the train car as the newscaster spoke.

“An update on the case of Kyogi Munashisa, otherwise known as the former hero Silver Falcon. This morning he pleaded Not Guilty to his charges, despite his absent legal team and the mounting evidence against him. Many of his former victims have come forward and offered to be witnesses on the case, with more pouring in as time goes on. There will be more on this case as it breaks.”

It went to commercial and the train broke out in whispers.

“What a shame,” An old woman said with a shake of her head, “I never expected a hero to fall so low.”

“It’s all lies!” Another man shouted, “Everything has to be fake! It was a vigilante who’s spreading all of this garbage, why aren’t they pressing charges on him!?”

“You can’t be serious,” A woman in a business suit said, glaring, “You’re denying all of the evidence even when it’s laid down in front of you?”

The man scoffed, “Anything could be forged, this vigilante could be paying people off and telling them to make up these lies!”

“Shut up! Don’t act like you know everything!”

The train quieted as a girl their age rose from her seat, her shaking white knuckles clutched her school bag.

“And what would you know, little girl?”

“I know plenty.” Rage made the girl’s cheeks bloom red, her eyes stabbed into the man like daggers, “My grandparents own a bakery, you know. Silver Falcon paid them plenty of visits.”

“So what?” The man rolled his eyes, “A hero can visit anybody’s shop.”

“Oh yeah? How about when Silver Falcon threatened to destroy their store if they didn’t pay this month? The stress was so great that my grandfather had a heart attack! I don’t care what the authorities think of vigilantism, but my grandparents can continue their work in peace after he gets out of the hospital. If anyone is a *true* hero, it would be Joker.”

She sat down with finality and crossed her arms. The train was dead silent.

“Whatever,” The man muttered beneath his breath, “It’s all a load of bullshit, anyway.”

Midoriya and Uraraka gaped at each other as the unnatural quiet stretched, until a single comment threw it back into chaos.

“A true hero, huh? It kind of reminds me of Stain...”

Uraraka grasped Midoriya’s arm and they fled the train car when it pulled into its stop. They exited the train station with quick feet and heavy hearts.

“Deku...” Midoriya looked at Uraraka, whose eyes were trained to the ground, “What was Joker like during the USJ?”

“H-he was really cool.” He said with a small smile, “He saved me from the Nomu, and he had such confidence and skill! I wish you could’ve seen the monsters he uses Uraraka-san! He.... he also healed Aizawa-sensei’s injuries. I don’t know what would’ve happened to our teacher if he didn’t.”

Uraraka grasped the front of her shirt and was quiet for the next several steps.

“I... I don’t want to become like Silver Falcon,” She said as a film of tears came into her eyes, “I’m becoming a hero because I want the money for my parents. Does that make me like him?”

“N-no!” Midoriya waved his hands frantically, “Not at all! Y-you’re going to be an amazing hero, Uraraka! Plus, working to earn money for your parents is nothing like what Silver Falcon did!”

“I guess you’re right,” Her shoulders relaxed and she gave him a watery smile, “Thanks for saying that.”

“Besides, the Sports Festival isn’t too far away. We get to show everyone that we’re nothing like him, that we’re the dependable heroes of the future! We’ll do our best, right?”

“Yeah!” Uraraka blinked, then grinned with scary determination, “We’ll do our best!!”

They were so busy chatting that they didn’t hear a cafe door swing open, too distracted to divert the collision until it was too late. There was a cry of shock as Midoriya knocked shoulders with somebody.

“Aah! I-I’m sorry!” Midoriya shouted, “Are you okay!?”

Midoriya looked down the boy he just plowed over. He looked to be their age, with fluffy black hair and soft eyes hidden behind thick glasses, he wore casual clothes instead of a school uniform. Recognition flashed in his eyes as he accepted Midoriya’s helping hand. There was something strange about this boy, a certain beguiling air that reeled them in like fish.

“I’m fine,” He said with a sheepish grin, “I wasn’t exactly paying attention either.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Uraraka asked softly as he dusted himself off, “You look kind of sad, I-if you don’t mind me saying so.”

The boy rubbed the back of his neck and smiled, but there was no happiness to it.

“Yeah, just went through another job interview. It’s nothing, really. Maybe the next one will be better.” The boy checked his phone,

“Speaking of which, my next one will begin soon, so I have to go.”

“Do you want us to walk you there?” Midoriya asked, smiling, “It’s the least I can do after bumping into you like that!”

The boy blinked slowly, the gears cranking in his mind. Midoriya was drawn to his peculiar eyes, studying the intense silver and wavering rim of gold around his pupils. Were they part of his quirk? Or just a genetic mutation? His hands twitched and he longed to write in his notebook, but the boy spoke before he could.

“Sure, why not?” He shifted his weight and nodded, “Though, it’s literally just down the street, so you guys don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Nonsense!” Uraraka beamed, “We still have time!”

The boy nodded, sticking his hands in his pockets as he led the way.

“So, do you guys go to U.A.? I recognize your uniforms.”

“Yup! We’re in Class 1-A!”

The boy’s jaw dropped, “You mean the class that fought at the USJ?”

“Uh...” Uraraka’s trailed down to the ground, “Yeah....”

“I’m sorry,” The boy said as he pushed up his glasses, “Fighting real villains must’ve been terrifying, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, its okay, really!” She said as she held her hands up, “It was scary, but we all got through it because we worked together. Honestly, I think living through that brought our class closer together.”

“Yeah,” Midoriya frowned as he looked to the U.A. building in the distance, “If anything, it taught us what it’s really like to risk our lives as heroes. We got real-world experience with villains, so it’ll make us better heroes down the line, right?”

Uraraka nodded, "Right!"

"Then, I'm glad." A genuine smile lit up the boy's eyes, but he stopped in his tracks, "Well, this is my stop. I'll see you guys around?"

Midoriya looked up at the tiny flower shop. Bursts of color made the inside pop, the floral scents that drifted on the air were somehow relaxing.

"Yeah!" Midoriya said brightly, "See you!"

"Good luck with your interview!" Uraraka said as she watched the boy go inside, then she turned to Midoriya, "Something wrong, Deku?"

"Nothing!" Midoriya startled, "He just.... seemed kind of familiar? But I can't exactly place where I met him before."

"Hmmm," Uraraka checked her phone and her face drained of color, "We're gonna be late to class, Deku! We better hurry or we'll get a lecture from Iida-kun! Or something worse from Aizawa-sensei!"

Midoriya had a sinking thought as they sprinted down the pavement.

They didn't even ask the boy for his name.

"Cheer up Ren, er... Akira." Morgana said, "We'll get through this."

"I know." Akira shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked down the abandoned alley, "I just wish we didn't have *eleven* interviews that all ended the exact same way. It would only take *one* phone call in our world to get a job, so why is it so difficult here?"

The air around them smelled of salt and rust when they exited the alley, abandoned warehouses could be seen in the distance as the sky was painted with fiery hues.

“It is ridiculous.” Morgana said as he glanced up to his partner, prancing along by his feet, “You have to remember that this isn’t our world though, things are done a lot differently here. It’s too bad we haven’t met anyone like Boss, but I know not everyone will be so open-minded. We just have to keep trying.”

Akira faltered in his steps, but saved himself before Morgana noticed. He pushed down the sharp stab in his heart, the rustle of Arsene’s wings and a rush of comfort came over his mind, and he was thankful for his unwavering support. They said nothing more as they snuck towards the abandoned warehouses. Akira stopped in front of the door and looked down at Morgana.

“You want to come inside, or..?”

Morgana shook his head, “I’ll patrol around and make sure nobody sneaks up on us, and I wanted to practice this wind sensing ability too.”

“Alright, don’t go too far.”

“I won’t.” Morgana rolled his eyes, “I’ll keep the warehouse in sight at all times and I know not to take any candy from strangers.”

Akira chuckled, “I feel sorry for any strangers that would try to take you.”

Morgana snickered, then wandered off to the other side of the warehouse. With a sigh, Akira opened the door and stepped inside. This warehouse was a bit more crowded than the one he met Giran in, with stacks of rusting crates piled high. He wrinkled his nose at the floating specs of dust as his footsteps echoed. He stopped in the middle, right in the center of a pool of fiery sunlight that poured in from the window.

“So, which one of you should I practice with first?”

A chorus of excited voices made him smirk. He practically felt Yatagarasu's pride ooze through his mindscape.

"Pick whoever, Trickster," Arsene said, "I'm sure you'll master these bonds in no time."

"Master not listen to him!" Cerberus howled, "Pick me?"

"The Trickster could be a master over all impurities and filth, if thine chooses me first."

"Please, big brother? My teddies want to come out and play."

"Silence, the Mask Bearer cannot even think straight with all of this noise!"

"The Trickster knows best," A voice of rumbling thunder said, "We will all get our turn, so be patient and trust in his first choice."

"Oh hush, grandpa! How would it ever be your turn if you can't even fit in this small warehouse?"

"Says the tiny one who can be crushed with the barest tip of my claw."

"Enough, I think I've made my choice." The voices went silent as an easy smirk broke through, "Come, Byakko!"

A pry of swirling blue flames lit up the warehouse, his costume appeared like a second skin as Byakko was pulled into the physical realm. Although the great feline was just a bit smaller than the guard dog of hell, he was no less ferocious. Soft tufts of extra fur decorated his legs and his bottom jaw, his long tail swished happily as Joker stepped up to pet his massive head.

Byakko's glacier blue eyes drank in every detail about the warehouse as Joker withdrew his hand. His nose twitched and he snorted at the salty air.

“The others were correct,” Byakko said as an icy cool mist left his lips, “This world does feel strange.”

“It does?” Joker asked with a raised brow, “How so?”

Byakko sat down, the simple motion was somehow regal and awe-inspiring, as expected for a king of beasts. His eyes still scanned the room, then flicked to Joker with a lazy blink.

“This place is quite unlike the Metaverse. There is enchanting energy to it. It feels like I was once a tiny drop in a vast sea, lost to the wills of something far bigger than I. Yet now it’s like I control the sea’s power, one tiny ripple doesn’t swallow me up anymore. I feel.... whole? A flickering veil has been torn away, so my mind is once again clear.”

Joker frowned. It didn’t really make much sense to him, but then again, nothing did ever since they were forced to this world.

“But we are not here to discuss such things,” Byakko said with a shake of his furry head, “Yatagarasu was right in saying that there are new instincts to a new world. Can you feel our bond?”

Joker pushed the previous topic out of his mind as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The manifestation of their bond appeared automatically, but it was a lot different compared to Yatagarasu’s, for it wasn’t actually a string at all. It was a ribbon, silky smooth, and as reflective and blue as the ice that the mythical tiger commanded. The ribbon floated serenely on invisible winds, but Joker heard a strange noise in the background, like the peaceful whisper of fresh snowfall.

He imagined himself grasping it.

Permafrost crackled up his body like glass shards, so cold that it felt like it was on fire. Joker gasped as his eyes flew open, releasing the ribbon in the process. He looked down at his arms, the ice wasn’t actually there and his costume hadn’t vanished.

He glanced back at Byakko, who studied him with slitted pupils. Joker held back a shiver as his breath left in a ghostly fog.

“Well, that was weird.”

“Interesting,” Byakko stood and slowly circled around Joker, a thin sheet of ice crept onto the floor with each step, “It seems there may be adverse effects, should we not control it correctly.”

Joker opened and closed his fist several times, the pain slowly fading, then he smirked at Byakko.

“When did a little pain ever stop us?”

“Quite.” Byakko huffed in laughter, “Shall we continue, Trickster?”

Joker nodded and closed his eyes.

It took a few hours of practice, but they were able to make Joker’s costume vanish.

“Cold-blooded murder versus hard truth.” A voice echoed through the dingy little bar, “That’s what people have been debating since Silver Falcon’s arrest, the philosophies of an S rank villain or a vigilante that has taken the internet by storm.”

Tomura huddled over the bar, glaring at the tiny character within his handheld system.

“Joker, who is also the vigilante who appeared during the USJ invasion, has revealed a dark truth about one of Japan’s top heroes. How does that conflict with Stain’s methods? Joker has shown that it’s possible to reveal fake heroes without killing them, and-”

“Kurogiri!” Tomura was *this* close to dusting his game, “Turn that crap off. It’s all everybody’s been talking about!”

“Yes, Shigaraki Tomura.”

Finally, blessed silence. Tomura returned to his game as Kurogiri continued cleaning the same glass over and over, but the fragile peace never lasted. The screen at the end of the bar turned on, showing 'Sound Only'.

"Something bothers you, Tomura?"

"Sensei!" The game was forgotten as he turned to the screen, "I'm pissed off! They're completely ignoring us, they only talk about Stain and that infuriating secret boss. Is there even one mention about the League of Villains? No!"

Tomura stood, the chair screeching against hardwood, and paced around the bar. The dryness on his neck began to burn, he couldn't resist scratching the angry red marks. Kurogiri put down his glass, preparing for another of his tantrums, as Sensei spoke.

"Yes, you have failed during the USJ, but there is another chance for you to try again. How can you twist this situation in your favor?"

Tomura's nails stopped, "What do you mean?"

"This new vigilante has thrown the hero world off course. Intentional or not, he shook it to it's very core, people's trust in them has plummeted as a result. Stain might have a much larger following, but many people are torn between the two."

He turned Sensei's words in his mind, "So... if we can get them to join with the League..."

"Pardon the interruption," Kurogiri ignored Tomura's scathing glare, "But I don't think it would be possible for Joker to join us. He obviously opposed our methods and he was powerful enough to take on the Nomu with the beasts he controls."

"I see. Summoning quirks are almost unheard of, and to be able to use more than one monster is beyond rare. Is there anything else we know about the boy?"

Tomura slowly tilted his head, “Didn’t he ask you a weird question, Kurogiri?”

“Indeed,” Kurogiri looked to the ceiling in thought, his mist wavering, “He asked me if I had a connection with someone named Yaldabaoth.”

“Yaldabaoth? I wonder who is arrogant enough to name themselves after a false god. How intriguing.” Sensei hummed, *“However, if Joker doesn’t join us, then I wouldn’t mind relieving him of his quirk. It’s such a rare gem that shouldn’t be overlooked.”*

“Or he could be made into a Nomu.” Tomura said with a sickening grin, “I still want him to pay for ruining my final boss.”

All For One chuckled.

To have such a powerful quirk....

The man behind the screen grinned from ear to ear. Now he only had to acquire this gem before the heroes snatched it out of his grasp.

Akira sat in a small office nestled in the back of a cafe.

The interview had been going swimmingly, but it changed at the drop of a hat, just like all of the others. The owner had been deathly silent ever since Akira muttered that single cursed word.

Quirkless.

It hung in the air like a poisonous miasma, the man’s indigo eyes pierced into him as if he were personally insulted. The drop of a pin would sound like a bomb going off.

Akira had felt a wierd sense of deja vu when he walked in, as this man had the same unruly indigo hair and ivory irises as the kid he

saved a few nights ago. The only difference was that this man was obviously older, with a rough line of facial hair tracing his jawline.

“Sorry kid, I don’t think you’d fit here.”

He’d heard those words one too many times in the last three days alone. Akira kept the rush of anger from his face, he was expecting it anyway. He stood and bowed just to be polite.

“Thank you for your time.”

He turned on his heel with a rotten sourness in his chest, just barely resisting the urge to slam the door shut. Maybe it would be worth it to have Aiba change his quirk status, nothing overly powerful, weak and easily forgettable. Or would changing it draw more attention than necessary?

“Trickster...”

“It’s fine, Arsene.” He said, *“I’m trying not to let it bother me so much.”*

“Well, if you want any of these scoundrels to face justice-”

“It’s you .”

Akira snapped out of his mental conversation to stare into Purple’s surprised face. He had the same school uniform as Midoriya and that other girl he ‘bumped’ into. Purple glanced up and down the hallway, then eyed him with suspicion.

“What are you doing here? Are you stalking me or something?”

“Not a chance.” Akira snorted, “I just came for a job interview.”

“Oh, I saw that my dad just put out a notice.” Purple perked up, his lips twitched in a half-smile, “So I guess I’ll be seeing you around more?”

“Unfortunately not,” He said with a frown, “No quirk, remember?”

The boy froze. Many emotions flashed through Purple’s eyes, until it finally settled on anger.

“You really don’t have a quirk? What about that wind or how you healed my injuries?”

“You can thank the raven for that.” Purple opened his mouth, but Akira beat him to it, “And no, before you ask, he’s his own entity. I really am quirkless.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m really not, but don’t worry about it. I’m sure somebody will hire me eventually.”

“Eventually?” Purple narrowed his eyes, “How many interviews have you had so far?”

“This would be my third one today,” Akira pretended to count on his fingers, “Six yesterday and eleven the day before that.”

The silence was so thick that Arsene could cut it with his bladed heels. Akira was about to walk past and head for Morgana’s hiding spot, but Purple was faster.

“Oh *hell* no.”

“What-”

Purple grabbed his arm and dragged him back to the office, practically kicking the door open and marching them inside.

“Hitoshi! What do you think you’re doing?”

Huh, so that was his actual name.

Hitoshi let go of Akira’s arm with a dangerous scowl.

“You’re hiring him.”

Akira mirrored the same shocked confusion as the older man.

“What?”

“You heard me,” Hitoshi glowered, “The only reason you didn’t is that he’s quirkless, right?”

“Hitoshi, that’s not-”

“Is everything alright? I heard a loud noise.”

The woman from the front counter poked her head inside. Warm sleepy eyes were masked behind square rimmed glasses, her long violet hair was pulled back into an elegant braid. She was a slender woman, but there was an agile grace to her steps that shouldn’t be underestimated. Akira could see her family resemblance to Hitoshi, her copper name tag said her name was Risumi.

Hitoshi crossed his arms with a scowl, “Dad won’t hire him because he’s quirkless.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that that’s not it.”

“Oh yeah? Then give me the real reason, then.”

“I...”

Akira tuned them out and glanced towards the open door. It wouldn’t take too much to sneak out and then run to the hills, but Risumi placed a steady hand on Akira’s shoulder.

“Boys please, you’re about to scare him off. There is a simple way to solve this, Ayumu.”

“Is there?” The man said with a long sigh.

“The lunch rush has already ended,” She nodded and gently grabbed Akira’s wrist, “So there are no other customers right now.”

They walked out into the hall with the other two at their heels.

The store front was warm and soothing in the same way a good book or a cup of hot chocolate was on a cold, rainy day. Plush booths and the aromas of caramel, sugar, and coffee added that extra touch of comfort. Bookshelves and other small trinkets lined the walls to add hints of color. There were a few small tables outside underneath the shade of an awning, too.

Risumi whisked him behind the counter, laden with different coffee machines and housing a glass display full of decadent treats, then wagged a finger at him.

“Stay.” She commanded, and Akira didn’t have the nerve to disobey *that* tone of voice.

Hitoshi snickered when she vanished into the kitchen, then came back out with a tray full of dishes. Three small cups and supplies for hand-poured coffee. She glanced at the other two, who stood on the opposite side of the counter curiously, then set everything down in front of him.

“You simply have to make us a cup of coffee,” She said as she motioned to the variety of machines around them, “Without using one of these. Anybody can use them to make a good cup, but it takes a certain skill to be able to create decent hand-poured coffee.”

Akira blinked, “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Arsene cackled, “*Checkmate!*”

Akira used every ounce of self-control not to grin, then he got to work. Ayumu scrutinized his every move, from the way he put the

grounds in the filter to how he poured the gooseneck kettle, but the man had nothing on Sojiro's stone-cold glares. It took less than ten minutes to fill the three cups with the rich coffee.

Risumi and Hitoshi had equally astonished looks as Akira set the steaming cups in front of them, he couldn't help the tiny amount of smugness in his smile. Hitoshi swirled his cup thoughtfully, then took a sip.

"Woah!" Hitoshi's jaw dropped, "This is the best coffee I've ever had!"

"It has such a depth of flavor and smoothness to it. I don't believe one bit that you haven't done this before." Her tiny smile sent chills up everyone's spines as she motioned to the third cup, "And you wanted to turn him away. Well, dear? You just have to taste it for yourself."

Ayumu grumbled, but he swiped it and downed the whole thing in one go. His eyes flew wide open and he stared at Akira with an inscrutable expression.

"How did you learn to make it like this?"

"I had a good teacher," Akira said with a shrug, "He also taught me to make curry from scratch, people have told me that it's pretty good too."

"You're hired." Hitoshi said with conviction.

"Now, now Hitoshi," Risumi said with a triumphant smile of her own, "I think the boy would like to hear it from your father."

"Fine." He slowly set down the cup and scrubbed his face, "He's hired, but I want to meet who trained him."

Pain lurched in Akira's heart, his confidence fading, "You wouldn't be able to."

"And why not?" He said with a raised brow.

Akira couldn't meet their eyes and stared at the counter with a frown.

"He's no longer around."

"Oh, sweetheart." Risumi put a soft hand to his shoulder, "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." He forced a smile, "I've had some time to process everything, so I'll be okay."

"Well, feel free to stay as long as you like. We can begin your training later today, or you could wait and come back tomorrow morning."

"Can I start today?"

"Of course, dear." Risumi nodded, then turned towards Ayumu with a frightening spark in her eye, "Hitoshi, be nice and keep our new member comfortable, I need to have a little chat with your father."

The man visibly gulped. Akira experienced several levels of satisfaction when the man walked away as if he were heading for the gallows.

"Hah, serves him right!" Arsene hummed.

"So..." Akira turned back to Hitoshi, "I never really asked for your name since I was an idiot and asked for your quirk the other night instead."

"Kurusu Akira." He held out his hand, "Don't worry about it, I kept calling you Purple in my head."

"Purple, really? Well, it's Shinsou Hitoshi." He shook with a cheshire grin, "Those were my parents, by the way. Sorry about my dad, he's a bit touchy when it comes to certain quirks. Or the quirkless, I guess."

“I’ve faced much worse than simple prejudice before.” Hitoshi frowned, but Akira kept talking, “Anyways, shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Shouldn’t you?”

“I was homeschooled,” The lie slipped through so easily.

“Lucky.” Hitoshi scoffed, then looked up to a decorative clock ticking behind the counter, “I only stopped by for lunch, but it looks like I should head back soon. It’s a shame that they don’t have your coffee there.”

“You want another cup before you go?”

His eyes lit up like stars, “Please.”

Beneath The Mask - Rainy Version

Chapter 15: Beneath The Mask - Rainy Version

Honestly, the table was so morose it was as if he had just told them his parents were murdered.

Last chapter before the Sports Festival! ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Another piece of awesome [FANART!!](#)

"That's the last of it." Risumi said as she set the box down in the freezer, "Kurusu-kun, can you go flip the sign at the front to open?"

"Got it."

Ayumu hardly glanced at Akira as he left the small kitchen and went to the front of the cafe. It was nostalgic to flip the happy little sign, though there was a pang of sadness that went along with it. A flash of lightning brightened the sky, with the telltale rumble of thunder crashing against the city moments later. Dark roiling clouds devoured the blue sky, the light pitter-patter of rain that started last night raged on into whipping torrents of water.

"Yatagarasu, are you sure you're up for this? It's raining cats and dogs out there."

"A little wind and water will not dampen my wings," The bird skillfully leveled out just before a gust could knock him from the sky, "My

mission shall go on, no matter the weather."

Akira frowned. His personas were loyal to a fault, but maybe he could find some way to reward them for their hard work.

Morgana stayed at the Raven's Nest today, he was upset that he couldn't go out and scout around, but he had probably changed his tune by now. Akira sighed and was about to turn around, when a figure sprinted underneath the awning, holding her bag over her head in a frail attempt to keep herself from getting wet. It was the same girl that was with Midoriya when they 'bumped' into each other.

Well, it seems the fates were finally turning things in his favor for once.

"You want to come inside?"

The girl yelped and whirled around to him with wide eyes. He smiled as he held the door a bit wider.

"It's better to wait in here than getting drenched, right?"

"I-I guess so?" She stepped inside and shivered, "I left earlier so I wouldn't get rained on as much, but so much for that idea. Thanks for letting me in."

Akira snorted as he went behind the counter, "Well, that is what the open sign usually means?"

"Oh." She blinked at the sign, cheeks dusted with red, "R-right."

She dove into the booth closest to the door, setting her waterlogged bag aside with a sigh.

"You should give her some hot chocolate."

Akira jumped and looked over his shoulder. When did Risumi get here?

“What?”

“Go on,” She nudged him with her elbow, “I saw the way you were looking at her. Plus, she’s your first real customer, so this one will be on the house.”

“It’s not like that!”

“Of course it isn’t, dear.” She winked at him before fleeing to the safety of the kitchen.

He pushed up his glasses and got to work with a sigh. The scent of cocoa and cinnamon permeated the small space, warmth seeped into his hands as he brought the steaming mug to her table. She stared into the drink set in front of her, then glanced at him with wide eyes.

“But I didn’t order this?”

“Don’t worry about paying,” Akira smiled softly, “You’re actually the first person I’ve served myself, so this one’s on the house. I added a little bit of spice to it, too. I hope you like it.”

She gingerly picked it up, holding out her pinkies, and took a sip. Her eyes blew wide open and she gaped at him like a fish out of water.

“It’s really good! I never thought to add cinnamon to it!”

“You’re welcome,” He turned towards the counter, “Let me know if you want anything else.”

“Wait!”

Akira stopped and glanced at her with a raised brow. Her honey colored eyes studied his face for several seconds.

“Have we met somewhere before?” She asked with a tilt of her head, “You look familiar for some reason.”

Akira clutched his chin as he pretended to think, then snapped his fingers.

“Were you with that green-haired kid that plowed me over the other day?”

“Oh! I thought it was you!” She beamed, “Sorry about that, but I’m glad you got a job!”

“Thanks,” He swept a hand through his hair and threw on his best debonair smile, “Though I must’ve only gotten one because you wished me luck.”

She blinked several times. Her face slowly turned red and she swiped up her drink, downing the scalding hot chocolate in one gulp. The mug clattered on the table and she stood, eyes darting everywhere except in his general direction.

“W-well, look at the time!” She fanned her face, “I-I better get to class before I’m late!”

“Wait a moment before you go,” Akira just barely kept the smirk from his face as he went into the back room.

Hitoshi looked up from the couch as Akira grabbed his umbrella and went back out, the girl was standing by the door, face still a shade of pink. He held it out to her, but she only stared at it.

“Is that yours? I can’t take that, especially on a day like this!”

Another blinding flash and crack of thunder rumbled across the city without remorse. They looked outside as the rain beat against the windows, tracing trickling rivers in the glass.

“I insist,” He said, still smiling, “My shift will go on into the afternoon, so the weather should clear up by then. I don’t think your bag can take much more, either.”

She pointedly stared at her damp school bag, then sighed.

“I...” She held it with both hands and bowed her head, “I’ll bring it back after school today.”

Akira nodded, “I look forward to it.”

Her face turned red again, she turned on her heel and fled into the storm. Akira pushed up his glasses with a triumphant smile. He picked up the empty mug and went to wash it, Risumi peeked out of the kitchen and nodded her approval.

The ring of a bell signaled another customer taking shelter from the typhoon. It was a man with short hair and darker clothes, but his eyes were a startling blood red.

Risumi took over the register, “Akane-san! How have you been?”

“I’ve been better, it’s too cold outside for this time of year.” He said as he shook the rain from his hair, “This storm came out of nowhere though! I almost didn’t make it here before work.”

“Well, your usual should warm you up in no time.” Risumi glanced over her shoulder, “Kurusu-kun, can you make this fine gentleman a cappuccino with a dash of cinnamon, to go?”

Akira set the clean mug on the strainer and nodded. The man leaned over the counter and watched Akira work, then turned to Risumi with a bewildered expression.

“You were finally able to hire some help, eh?”

“Yes,” Risumi adjusted her glasses, “Now that the problem has finally been taken care of. The boy’s a natural, and Ayumu almost didn’t hire him over something petty.”

Akira pretended he couldn’t hear them as he finished Akane’s coffee, then handed it over.

“Thanks, kid.” Akane paid for his drink, “See you guys around.”

Akane turned and went out to brave the storm, with only the warmth of coffee to comfort him.

Akira glanced over at Risumi when he felt her eyes on him, she was smiling softly, her sleepy eyes held a warmth that he hadn't experienced before. He blinked at her, then raised a curious brow.

"What?"

She chuckled and wiped some invisible dirt from her apron, "It's nothing, dear."

He was about to reply when the bell signaled more customers.

A peaceful ambiance came over the cafe as they prepared orders, accompanied by rain and the occasional roll of thunder. Dishes clattered and the cafe was filled with quiet chatter, it was so similar to Leblanc that it was easy to fall into the work. The only thing missing was Sojiro's curry.

Hitoshi eventually dragged himself out of the back, uniform wrinkled and tie only half done. He carried a school bag in one hand and a vibrant pink umbrella in the other.

"Hitoshi!" Risumi said, scone and coffee in hand, "How many times do I have to remind you to iron your uniform? Or do your tie properly? Your father taught you for a reason."

"Too many times, mom," Hitoshi half shrugged, "I don't get in trouble for it anyway, so why bother."

Risumi sighed and shook her head, then went to deliver the goods to the customer's table.

"You want some coffee before school?" Akira asked as Hitoshi leaned against the counter.

"Is that even a question?" Hitoshi looked him straight in the eye, "I'll never say no to your coffee."

“Coming right up, sir.”

Hitoshi snorted at the sarcasm as he sank into a nearby booth and dug out his phone, flicking through it as the aroma of fresh coffee grew stronger. With a confident nod, Akira took the cup and rounded the counter.

Hitoshi was too enamored on his phone to notice him, an all too familiar video played on the screen.

“What are you watching?”

Hitoshi cursed under his breath and glared at him, “Geez, would it kill you to make any noise when you walk? You remind me too much of my mom.”

“Actually,” Akira’s lips twitched as he set the cup down, “In some circumstances, yes.”

“I’ll pretend that was just a joke,” His eyes flicked to his mother, then back to Akira, “Do you know about that vigilante that’s been on the news? His name is Joker.”

“A little bit,” Akira kept a blank face, “What about him?”

Hitoshi stared down at the paused video. It showed Arsene’s fury just before he blew Eraserhead from the rooftop, Hitoshi took a slow sip on his coffee as an odd gleam entered his eyes, he seemed to mull over his thoughts.

“For the longest time, I’ve looked up to Eraserhead. He’s been my favorite hero ever since I was little,” Hitoshi pressed play, watching Arsene silently fling the hero off the building, “But no hero ever came when we needed it most.”

Akira’s heart sank. He had seen that hopelessness before, experienced those empty eyes and heavy shoulders as if he carried the weight of the world on them.

“What do you mean?” He asked softly.

“Well,” Hitoshi put his phone face down and took a sip, “Look at my mom.”

Akira furrowed his brows, but glanced over to her. She was smiling and laughing with a young woman as she handed over some hot chocolate and a cinnamon bun, she must’ve felt their eyes because she glanced over to them with a small wave.

“My mom is *smiling* . She wasn’t like that just a week ago.” Hitoshi curled his lip and glared into the table, “My dad actually laughed for the first time in months, and we’re not hurting for money anymore. We were about to close shop and move away because of that so-called ‘hero’, so when Joker released that video about Silver Falcon and the asshole finally got arrested...”

He looked into Akira’s widened eyes.

“Let’s just say that I have a new favorite.” Hitoshi shrugged and finished off his coffee, “Eraserhead’s still cool and I look up to him and everything, but he didn’t save us as Joker did.”

“Um...” Akira cleared his throat, “What would you say to Joker if he were standing right in front of you?”

“Are you kidding? I owe the guy a lot for saving us, a lot of other people too.” Hitoshi shoved his phone in his pocket and grabbed his stuff, “I’m sure mom and dad would give him a lifetime of free food. Anyway, I better head off before I’m late for school. Thanks for the coffee, see you later.”

Akira’s feet were frozen as Hitoshi went into the storm with his hot pink umbrella.

“Kurusu-kun!” Risumi called, “The customers won’t serve themselves!”

“Coming!”

Morgana took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Feel the air as if it were an extension of one’s self,” Mercurius whispered, “You should be able to sense it just like the magic that flows through our veins. Use your breath as a medium.”

He breathed in, then out.

With each new breath, he could sense them, feel a ghostly breeze against his fur as the winds raged outside. Every little eddy and gale, to the way the air moved when Kaito shifted in his usual spot in the other room. Or, no matter how quiet her steps were, how Aiba tried to creep up on him.

“I know you’re there.” Morgana opened his eyes as she reeled back in shock, “Did you need something?”

“How did...?” She blinked several times, then shook her head and huffed, “You know what, never mind. I’m not going to bother asking when I know you won’t tell me.”

Morgana sighed as she set a small stack of papers beside him.

“What are these?”

“Blueprints of U.A.’s main building,” She said as she crossed her arms and tapped her foot, “I just managed to dig them up from some old archives. I’m working on something else too, but I’ll keep it a surprise until the day of the Sports Festival.”

“Wait.” He said as she turned on her heel, “Why are you doing so much for us? You could just as easily wait this out until we can help you meet your hero. Why waste energy doing more?”

“Well,” Aiba put her hands to her hips and faced him fully,
“*Somebody* has to make sure you boys don’t get caught! If you two get thrown in prison then I’ll have to go on my own, and I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet.”

She didn’t even wait for a response as she fled the room, the soft rush of air signifying that she closed the door to her cubicle. Morgana glanced at the blueprints. It would be better to wait until his partner came back from work before reviewing them, whenever that would be.

He shifted on his paws and curled his tail around himself, then closed his eyes and focused on his breathing.

The girls trudged back to their locker room, doused with sweat and sore muscles after hero training.

Ochako opened her locker but froze when she saw what was inside. Her hand hovered over the umbrella, her cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

“I still can’t believe he let me borrow it.” She whispered to herself,
“And I didn’t even say thank you...”

SLAM!

“Do mine ears deceive me!?” Mina said as she practically lunged at Ochako, “Did I just hear you say that somebody let you borrow an umbrella!? Was it a cute boy!?”

“Mina-chan, let the poor girl breathe.” Yaomomo said with a patient smile.

“Oh! Sorry...”

“I-it’s not what it sounds like!” Ochako waived her hands, “Promise!”

“Then why is your face red, Ochako?” Tsuyu asked as she poked her cheek, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this embarrassed.”

“Yeah, spill the tea!” Mina said with a mad gleam in her eyes, “We need details, girl!”

“It’s really not what it looks like, not at all!”

Ochako ignored her pounding heart as she told the girls her story.

“If only all guys were nice like that.” Kyouka said as she twirled an ear jack in between her fingers, “Instead we get idiots like Kaminari and Mineta.”

“Yeah!” Toru waved her arms, “So? What’s his name?”

Ochako’s mind blanked.

Mina gasped, “You got his name, didn’t you? Didn’t you!?”

“Um....” Ochako scratched the back of her head, “No? I kind of forgot to ask?”

Mina clapped her hands together, took in a deep breath, and pointed her joined hands at Ochako.

“Girl, we’re getting his name.”

“Well, I wanted to return his umbrella after school today. He said he would still be on his shift.”

“Perfect!” Mina said with a mischievous grin, “I’m tagging along!”

“But-!”

“I want to come too, kero.”

“Not you too, Tsu-chan!”

“Oh! We should bring some of the boys too!” Mina said, “It would be too obvious if it was just us, so I’ll invite Kiri!”

“What would be too obvious...?” Ochako shook her head, “Never mind. Actually, I think Deku-kun would want to know his name too, since he knocked him over when we met the first time.”

“This was the second time you met him!?” Mina screeched as she pulled on her horns, “That’s it, I am now declaring this as an emergency!”

“I’m honestly starting to feel sorry for him.” Kyouka said with a small smirk.

“Please don’t cause this boy too much trouble,” Yaomomo said as she pinned Mina with furrowed brows, “Especially you, Mina.”

“What are you talking about!? I’m a perfect angel!”

Toru giggled, “Of course you are.”

Ochako turned back to her locker with a long sigh, “We’re *just* learning his name, nothing more. Okay?”

“Aw, come on!” Mina said, “Where’s the fun in that?”

“We’re going to be heroes one day, so dating anybody is off the table.”

Mina and Tsuyu exchanged glances as the other girls frowned.

Ochako ignored them as she packed away her things. Besides, that boy was charming and all, but he was forgotten whenever she thought of a certain green-haired classmate.

Time flew by as he and Risumi worked the front of the cafe. Ayumu mostly stayed in the kitchen, filling the whole place with scents of sugary warmth, any treats he made practically flew off of the shelves

in record time. This place was busier than Leblanc, but the Blue Lotus Cafe had just as much love and hard work put into it.

“Kurusu-kun,” Risumi handed him a small cup of tea on a plate, “I want you to give this to Haru-san, the older lady in that booth over there. She’s been a regular for quite some time, and I know she would want to meet you.”

Akira nodded as his heart sank through the floor. Of course, there would be other people with names like Haru or Makoto, but hearing his friend’s name for the first time was like swallowing ice, he stilled his shaky hands as he went to her table.

Haru had a kind, wrinkly face framed with long black hair, an occasional strand of silver broke through like starlight. Her eyes shone with sunny warmth as he set down the cup in front of her.

“Oh, thank you, dear. I heard that Risumi and Ayumu were able to hire some help since the whole Silver Falcon ordeal. What’s your name, son?”

He smiled as he adjusted his glasses, “Kurusu Akira.”

“Well, Kurusu-kun,” She slowly sipped on her drink and sighed in contentment, “I hope you’ll stay for a while. It’s been some time since this place was so bright.”

Akira furrowed his brow, “What do you mean?”

“My quirk lets me see the general emotions of the atmosphere around me.” She traced the rim of her cup thoughtfully, “Just last week, and for so many months before that, there was pain and sadness. The owners and their sweet boy were suffering and I didn’t know what I could do to fix it, but everything changed when somebody brought that horrible man’s crimes into the light. Do you know what I think, Kurusu-kun?”

Akira blinked and tilted his head.

“I think that the vigilante saved more than just their cafe,” She pointed towards his chest, “I think he rescued their hearts too, gave them hope. Anybody can run a cafe or a store, but it takes that little bit of something else to make it extra special.”

Akira glanced over to the front counter. Ayumu was stocking the glass display full of glistening treats, Risumi leaned against the counter, whispering to him. A genuine smile crossed the man’s lips as he unloaded the last of the goods, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then dove back into the kitchen. Risumi stared at the swinging doors, blushing and smiling sweetly.

“You see?” She said, drawing his attention back to her, “They haven’t been that happy in ages.”

“Well, then I’m glad Joker was able to save them.”

“Same here, kiddo. I hope somebody is able to save you from your pain, too.” He stiffened, but she gave him a warm smile, “But this old lady has gabbed your ear off long enough and I’m sure you have other things to do. It was nice to meet you, Kurusu-kun.”

“It... was nice meeting you too, Haru-san.”

Akira bowed his head and went behind the counter just as the door’s little bell rang, a small group of familiar teens walked in. Well, mostly familiar. He didn’t recognize the girl with wild pink hair and skin, her eyes were like pools of ink with blazing gold suns.

“Much like your eye color when you use us in our full power, Trickster.” Arsene whispered, *“Minus all the black, of course.”*

The girl from this morning met eyes and sheepishly waved at him, Midoriya simply beamed as he recognized Akira. Pink grinned like there was no tomorrow and was the first to march right up to the counter, with her friends going over to a booth. Akira threw on his best unassuming smile as she dug a list out of her pocket.

“Hi!” Pink said with a grin, “I’ll take a latte please! My friends already made a list for their orders, if that’s okay?”

“Of course,” Akira said as she handed him the paper, “Is this all on one ticket?”

“It sure is! We all pooled some cash together for it.”

Then, with a sly wink, she turned on her heel and went to sit with her friends.

“Do you know them?” Risumi asked as he handed her the list, “That one girl tagged along, too.”

Akira shrugged as they worked the machines, “I’ve bumped into a few of them once, but it was mostly by accident.”

Within minutes a small tray was loaded with drinks, Akira snatched up a brownie and blueberry muffin from the glass display, then carried it over to their table.

“Ooh, that brownie looks delicious, Kiri!” Pink said as she grabbed her latte.

Kirishima sipped his black coffee and took a massive bite from his brownie, his smile held all of the warmth of the summer sun.

“Because it *is* really delicious!” He said, beaming.

“This blueberry muffin looks good too,” Asui said, grabbing the treat and the iced coffee, “I’ll share if anybody else wants a bite, kero.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to take yours, Tsu-chan!” Midoriya said, grasping his decaf with both hands, “Uraraka, aren’t you going to take yours?”

“R-right!” Uraraka didn’t look him in the eye as she grabbed her cup of hot chocolate.

“If there’s anything else you need,” Akira said with a soft smile, “Then you only have to ask.”

“Hold up!” Pink said, throwing her arm around Uraraka, “My girl here has something of yours.”

“Mina!” Uraraka cried, but she dug around in her bag and held out his umbrella, “Thanks for letting me use it.”

“Don’t mention it.” Akira grabbed it, then looked outside, “It seems the rain did clear up, somewhat.”

It was still drizzling, but it was nowhere near the rampant typhoon from this morning.

“What’s your name, by the way?” Ashido said as she propped her chin on her hand, “Just so I don’t have to say ‘hey, you!’, you know?”

Uraraka stared into her hot chocolate as if it held the secrets of the universe.

“Kurusu Akira.” He said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise! I’m Ashido Mina, this here is Uraraka Ochako!”

Uraraka waved at him bashfully.

“Kirishima Eijiro!” The red head said, mouth dusted with brownie crumbs, “These brownies are amazing, by the way!”

“Asui Tsuyu,” She said as she glanced at him, “But my friends just call me Tsu-chan.”

“I-I’m Midoriya Izuku! I wanted to apologize again since I knocked you over.”

“It’s nice to put names to faces. Don’t worry about what happened the other day, Midoriya.” Akira said as he was about to step away, “Anyways, just holler if you need anything else.”

“Wait.”

Akira stopped as Asui peered into him, scanning him from head to toe. He blinked and curiously tilted his head, before she finally spoke.

“Have we met before?” She said, “I don’t know why, but I feel like I know you somehow.”

“Oh, you too Tsu-chan!?” Kirishima said, “I got that feeling too when you came to our table!”

“Really?” Uraraka said with a raised brow, “I didn’t feel anything like that.”

“Same!” Ashido said.

“A-actually,” Midoriya smiled at him, “I kind of got that feeling a-after I bumped into you. Do you have some sort of deja vu quirk?”

“A deja vu quirk?” Ashido said, gaping, “That sounds awesome, but how come Ochako and I don’t feel anything?”

“W-well,” Midoriya’s eyes gained a feverish spark, “There could be certain parameter for it to activate? Or if it’s a quirk that can’t be turned off, then it could just choose random people or maybe we look somewhat similar to other people he knows already? Oh, what’s it’s range? Can you affect a bigger group of people at once? Or only a few at a time?”

“Mido-chan,” Asui shifted in her seat and placed a hand on his shoulder, “I think you went a bit overboard with questions.”

“R-right! Sorry, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Actually,” Akira pushed up his glasses, his expression carefully neutral, “I’m quirkless.”

Silence overtook the table. They stared at him with a variety of shock or surprise. Midoriya sat ramrod straight, his eyes wider than the rest, but there was a deep sadness to his emerald eyes. And maybe a hint of understanding?

“Dude...” Kirishima said with a frown, “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” Akira blinked at him, “Sorry for what?”

“Er... well, it’s just....” He scrambled for an answer, but his voice died in his throat.

“Is that why you had more than one interview the other day?” Uraraka asked softly.

“Yeah.” Akira stared down at his shoes, “People don’t tend to hire if you’re quirkless, so I had a lot of trouble getting a job until I got to this place.”

Midoriya gaped at him while the others exchanged glances. Honestly, the table was so morose it was as if he had just told them his parents were murdered.

“But,” He stared right into their eyes as confidence radiated from him, “I’ve never let a lack of a quirk put me down in life. I’ll draw on my own strengths and show people what I’m made of, reveal to them that I can do anything I put my mind to no matter how powerless I felt, even if I have to claw my way there.”

Their faces dropped in awe.

It *technically* wasn’t a lie, since quirks didn’t exist for him until recently. Last night he and Morgana studied up on the quirkless and how they were treated. There was a staggering high number of unemployed quirkless people or kids that didn’t make it past the age of 18, but society didn’t seem to care. The quirkless were treated as second class citizens or worse. At the same time they were ignored

or just faded into the background, so all the better for himself and Morgana.

“Bro,” Kirishima had tears in his eyes, “That’s so manly!”

“That’s not just manly, that’s badass!” Ashido said as she threw her hands up in the air, “Don’t ever let them drag you down, Kurusu-kun!”

“Deku-kun, are you okay?” Uraraka said, brows furrowed, “Why are you crying?”

“I’m fine!” He grabbed a wad of napkins and wiped his eyes, but the tears flowed like waterfalls, “I-I don’t know what’s come over me?”

“Kurusu-kun’s speech was epic, that’s why!” Ashido said as she slapped him on the shoulder, “Even I’m feeling pumped up from it!”

Midoriya sniffled and nodded, finally ebbing his waterworks with a few more napkins.

“Can I ask why you are working, instead of going to school?” Asui said as she poked her cheek, “If you don’t mind me wondering, of course.”

“I was home schooled because of the bullying, so I already completed all of my classes not too long ago. I just moved here recently so I could try and find a job.”

“So there would be no way that we’ve met before?” She said.

“Afraid not.” He lied right through his easy smile, “Anyways, it really was nice meeting you all, but I better get back to work before Shinsou-san gets cross with me.”

“Wait! Can I have another brownie?” Kirishima asked, his eyes wide like a puppy, “Please?”

“Ooh, I want to try one too!” Ashido shouted.

“M-me too?” Uraraka said.

“We might as well all try one,” Asui said with a smile, “Right, Mido-chan?”

“R-right!”

“Of course,” Akira chuckled, “Coming right up.”

He swiftly went into the back to deposit the umbrella, got more brownies for the U.A. kids, and then checked on Haru-san and a few other customers. He went behind the counter as Risumi gave him an approving nod.

“You’re a natural at this, Kurusu-kun.”

“I’ve had plenty of practice,” He said as he approached the sink to wash dishes, “Boss made sure I knew how to run things in case he had to step out for a bit.”

Risumi hummed sadly, “Well, I’m really grateful for your hard work. We usually take any leftovers upstairs after we close, but feel free to take anything that catches your eye, alright? There’s no way I’m going to let you go hungry.”

“Thanks.”

He’d make sure to grab extra for the others too, they would probably appreciate it.

“By the way, where’s Hitoshi? I figure he’d be back by now.”

Risumi paused, blinking at him in surprise, “On a first name basis already?”

“Maybe,” He sheepishly grinned, “I think it’s better than just asking where Shinsou is.”

“Touche, there are three of us here after all,” She adjusted her glasses and looked to the ceiling, “He comes in through the back after school. Our apartment is above the cafe and Ayumu mentioned that he came in already, so he’s probably doing homework in his room.”

Akira nodded and got back to work.

He went to clean the U.A. kids’ table as they left, frowning. They left a few hundred more yen than what they owed. Did they leave him a tip? People didn’t tip back home. As he stood there, stupefied, the little bell rang and somebody tapped him on his shoulder. He looked over to Midoriya, who was tugging the edge of his sleeve.

“Um...” He bowed his head and held out a tiny piece of paper, “Here.”

Akira turned fully towards him, “What’s this?”

“My phone number.” He said, face crestfallen as Akira took it, “I.... my quirk only came in recently, so I grew up quirkless. I *understand* what you’ve been through, so I’m here to listen if you ever wanted to have someone to talk with! I-if you wanted to.”

Akira smiled as he dug out his new (hyper encrypted thanks to Aiba) phone from his pocket, and Midoriya blinked curiously as his pinged with a message, it was a gif of a cartoon cat drinking coffee.

“Thanks, Midoriya.” Akira said with a warm smile, “You can share my number with the others too, if they ask. It might be nice actually having friends here.”

Not that they would ever be able to replace *his* friends. The other U.A. kids waited outside. Ashido had her arm over Uraraka’s shoulders, whispering something that made her go beet red. Asui patted her shoulder as Kirishima bellowed with laughter.

“Yeah!” Midoriya said, his expression brightening, “We’ll see you later!”

“See you.”

Akira smiled when Midoriya left, Ashido and Kirishima turned back towards him and waved their arms wildly before they vanished down the street. He finished cleaning the table and brought the payment to Risumi.

“Do you not want your tip?” She narrowed her eyes at his blatant confusion, “You’ve never gotten a tip before, have you?”

“No, not many people did that where I’m from.”

“Well, there’s a first for everything, Kurusu-kun.” Risumi snorted, pushing the spare bills and a few extra coins from the till into his hand, “Don’t go wild and spend it all in one place now.”

He grinned, “I won’t, promise.”

The next few hours passed peacefully and his shift came to an end. Risumi playfully shooed him away well before the actual closing time, but he got first choice of the delectable snacks to take back to the Raven’s Nest.

“See you tomorrow, Kurusu-kun!”

“Yeah, tell Hitoshi I said hi?”

“Will do,” She nodded firmly, “Since he didn’t come down to do it himself.”

Akira walked out of the Blue Lotus Cafe with a paper bag full of goodies.

The clouds had finally broke, allowing a curtain of god rays to peek through. Any little puddle was alight with the sunset’s soft golden

glow, the air was crisp and clean. Akira stopped and looked over his shoulder.

The sun made the glass U.A. building look like it was on fire, a familiar smudge on the horizon banked towards him, wings still glistening with rainwater.

"I'm sure you're tired after today," He said, *"You want to go back?"*

Now he knows how Morgana felt.

"Me, tired? Ha, I laugh in the face of fatigue!" Yatagarasu flew in a circle high over him, *"Although, I wouldn't mind seeing everyone else..."*

Akira snorted as the bird vanished into cinders. A myriad of voices welcomed Yatagarasu back to his mind space, but he didn't pay any mind to them.

Two days. The Sports Festival was only *two days* away. They were as prepared as they could be, given the circumstances, but officially making contact with Midoriya and his friends was just the icing on the cake. Morgana would be happy about it.

He turned his back on U.A. as he headed home. Curiosity and hunger got the better of him, so he opened the small paper bag and dug out one of the brownies. He froze in his tracks after he took the first bite, eyes blown wide.

Damn, this really was a good brownie.

Poor Deku, I feel as if he should've heard those words instead of what All Might said to him on that rooftop.

Tension

Chapter 16: Tension

Let the Sports Festival begin!

More AWESOME pieces of [FAN ART!!](#)

And [another!!!](#)

It warms my heart like no other to see people create art inspired by this story, and there are no words to describe how amazing you guys are!

“What do you think a Stealthanol would do in this world?”

“I have no idea, it just hid our presence from shadows in the Metaverse.” Morgana said as Joker tucked items into his costume pockets, “We already know that Beads are stronger than they were in our world, so it’s possible that any one of these items could be more powerful too. We should find time to properly test everything out after the Sports Festival is done and over with.”

“Agreed.”

Joker pocketed the Beads, the Stealthanol and a few Vanish Balls, a couple of Soul Drops, and a Snuff Soul just to be safe. The Eternal Lockpick was safely deposited within his sleeve. Joker held a Soma in between his fingers. Like his Crystal Skull, the little marble was created from an unknown material. It looked like a pure glass ball, but the way the rainbow of colors swirled around inside told a different story. They only had a few of these, so selling them was off the table. He shrugged and put it with the rest of his Beads.

“I think that should do.”

Joker’s costume vanished, Akira looked down on himself as the blue embers faded. The items were nowhere to be found. Disappeared into the unknown abyss, just like his thieving outfit.

“That’s pretty convenient.” Morgana said as Akira tucked the bag underneath the desk, “We should eliminate the evidence bag altogether.”

“I’ll reorganize our inventory when we get back.” Akira nodded, then opened the new bag he bought yesterday, “Are you ready to travel the old fashioned way?”

Morgana snorted. This bag was identical to the one back home, there was plenty of room for Morgana to hunker down in comfort. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

“Are you two done yet?” Aiba said, “The Sports Festival will start soon!”

Akira partially zipped the bag, leaving enough of a gap so Morgana could get some air, then opened the door. Aiba stared up at him, tapping her foot.

“We were just about to leave.” Akira said as he walked into the lounge with Aiba at his heels, “You do remember what the code phrase is, right?”

“Of course I do! How could I ever forget?” She huffed as she dug around in her pockets, “Here.”

Akira raised a brow at the little flash drive, “What’s this?”

“The little surprise I’ve been working on. I thought that if you’re going to go through their paper files, that we should get their digital ones as well. You just plug it into any computer and it’ll bypass any password and download any additional information. Just...” She

grasped the end of his sleeve and bit her lip, "Just be careful, okay? I don't want anything to happen to you guys."

Akira chuckled and patted her head, "We will, you don't need to worry so much."

"Worried?" Her cheeks turned red as she turned away from them and crossed her arms, "Who said I was worried? I'm not scared in the slightest!"

"Of course not," Akira said, grinning, "We'll see you later."

Aiba said nothing as they went into the front. Kaito's eyes were locked on his phone, but he glanced up at the sound of Akira's footsteps.

"I'll be watching the Sports Festival from here," He said as he leaned back in his chair, "Go and have fun, but please don't do anything that would get you thrown in prison?"

Morgana chuckled, Akira hesitated by the door, his hand just over the handle when he turned towards Kaito with a smirk.

"Don't worry, they'll never know that we were there."

"I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse." Kaito huffed, blowing a few strands of silvery hair from his face, "Good luck."

Akira nodded and they stepped out. Unlike the past few days the air was clear and blue and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The streets were filled with shifting bodies all headed in one direction, charged with laughter and contagious joy.

They snuck into an alleyway and traipsed through the trash infested space. Akira looked over his shoulder to make sure they were alone, nobody else was around to witness the quick flash of cerulean fire.

"It is time, Trickster?" Yatagarasu said as he shuffled his wings.

“Yup. You know what to do?”

“Indeed! It is my duty to fly over and memorize the enemy patrols and find a weak point, so you can pass through when they least expect it.”

“Exactly.” Yatagarasu spread his wings and was about to leap from his arm, “Wait a moment.”

The mythical bird stopped, tilting his head as he stared at Akira. He tucked his wings back into his side and faced him.

“What is it, Trickster?”

Morgana popped his head out of the bag and watched on in silence. Akira sighed and pushed up his glasses, then met Yatagarasu’s inky black eyes head-on.

“You’ve done a lot already, Yatagarasu. You and everyone else.”

“It is my pleasure to serve you.” Yatagarasu warbled and stood just a little straighter, “And I know that the others would say the same.”

“We would, without a shred of doubt.” Arsene said, to which the bird nodded.

“Is there anything you want, Yatagarasu? We wouldn’t be able to pull this off without you, so I think you deserve something for your hard work.”

“You...” The bird stiffened, “The Trickster wants to give a reward? There is no greater prize than your appreciation.”

Akira snorted, his lips turned in a warm smile, “Just humor me?”

“I...” Yatagarasu looked to the ground, Akira swore he saw budding tears as the bird cleared his throat, “I would not object to visiting the ocean again. I enjoy soaring in the salty breeze, as it brings back so many treasured memories.”

“Alright, we’ll see about going to the beach sometime soon.”

Akira felt a rush of warmth in his heart that wasn’t his own.

“I have no words to express your kind gesture, Trickster.” Yatagarasu turned and flared his tail feathers, “Now, onward towards our mission!”

Without another word, he launched himself into the air and disappeared over the rooftops. Morgana pulled himself from the bag and rested his front paws on Akira’s shoulder, he looked at his partner with a proud spark in his eye.

“That was really nice of you to do.”

Akira chuckled as Morgana rubbed against his hair, “It’s only fair. They all deserve *something* for their loyalty. So if there’s anything you guys want, just ask.”

“Your compassion will not be forgotten, Joker.” Arsene tipped his hat, *“As long as everyone’s requests aren’t too outlandish or will do anything to harm others. Got it?”*

A ripple of excitement cascaded across his mindscape, peppered with whispers and cheers alike. Akira had an honest smile on his face as they finally left the alleyway, Morgana dove back into the bag before they blended into the crowd like water through a bamboo forest. It took less than twenty minutes to reach the imposing gate, it was easy to follow the pops and booms of daytime fireworks and rain of confetti floating on the breeze.

There was a line of students manning tables before they could officially enter the school grounds, Akira handed over his ticket to a short blonde girl. Her golden eyes scanned through his ticket with lightning-fast efficiency, then with a nod, she stamped it and handed it back.

Akira blinked several times.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” The girl shoved the ticket in his hand and waved him off, “Go in already! You’re holding up the line!”

“S-sorry!”

Akira ducked his head and went inside, heart pounding as he crossed the threshold into the school. He took one step, then another. Nobody moved in to attack or arrest him. At any moment he expected heroes to whirl around and charge at him, for alarms and shrill police sirens to wail through the air.

There was nothing.

A knot in his chest unfurled and he released the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Was it really that easy?” He whispered, brows furrowed as he looked at the ticket in his hand, “Is this what they call upgraded security?”

He took a few more wary steps, keeping an eye on the parade of heroes sprinkled throughout the crowd. It was one thing to imagine it from Yatararasu’s perspective, but it was a whole other ordeal to actually *be* here. The grounds stretched out before them for miles, three stadiums larger than the Roman Coliseum jutted up into the sky, as impressive as they were imposing. Posters and streaming banners hung from various stands, the hiss and sizzle of freshly cooked festival food made his mouth water.

His bag shuffled as Morgana peeked out.

“Maybe they have too much faith in their- ngh!”

“Morgana? What’s wrong?”

Akira slipped in between the food stands, pretending to read the colorful flyers posted there. Morgana poked his head out, eyes wide and nose twitching.

“I don’t know, I suddenly felt something.” Morgana blinked owlishly and scanned their surroundings, “It’s almost that same feeling when I sense a Treasure in a Palace, but this one is so fuzzy and distorted that I can’t sense the exact location. It just feels off, like it’s behind a barrier or something.”

“Could there really be a Treasure here?” Akira asked as he furrowed his brows, “This place can’t be a Palace though, since we don’t have access to the Metaverse. How is this possible?”

“I’m not sure.” Morgana shook his head, “But let’s keep our guard up, I’ll let you know if I sense anything else.”

Morgana ducked back into the bag, but that didn’t stop the butterflies fluttering in Akira’s stomach as he stepped out into the daylight. He tucked his ticket away and followed the stream of people to the food stands.

“Oh, come on! Can’t you add in a few more, for free?”

Akira glanced over to a few heroes. A woman with long blonde hair and a skin-tight bodysuit was batting her eyes to a takoyaki vendor, her fingers idly twirling through her locks.

“Mount Lady!” Kamui Woods chopped the back of her head, “We heroes are scrutinized enough since you-know-what, so do your part and pay him properly!”

“Oww! I would share with you, Kamui!” She wobbled her bottom lip and swayed her hips, “It won’t hurt anything to get some free takoyaki for my services as a hero! Besides, this nice gentleman likes me, right? ”

The vendor turned bright red and nodded frantically. Kamui Woods facepalmed, then shook his head with a weary sigh as the goods were handed over, free of charge. Kamui slipped the vendor some money when Mount Lady wasn’t looking.

Akira stopped as the heroes walked away with the food. The takoyaki *did* smell heavenly. Who knows how long they would have to wait until Phase Two, so a snack or two wouldn't hurt. He waited in line and shamelessly walked away with two orders of takoyaki.

"Hey, can I get some of those?" Morgana whispered, "I'm dying of hunger in here!"

Akira smirked, "We'll eat when we get seated, wherever that would be."

Thankfully, there were vibrant signs and pointers all over the place, so they arrived at the Class 1 stadium without too much trouble. He was shoulder to shoulder as the crowd flowed inside, he ignored the occasional bump and push, it was reminiscent of the packed Tokyo subways. People splintered off into different hallways and climbed sets of stairs, he chose a random exit and stepped out into the coliseum.

The roar of the crowd was *deafening* and the events haven't started yet.

"Look at how filled out this place is," Morgana gaped as he peeked out, "There are *thousands* of people here!"

"Let's just try and find a seat-"

There was a sudden sweltering heat behind them. He was thrown off-kilter as somebody knocked into him, he managed to catch his balance before their food could spill all over the ground.

"Hey!"

Akira glared up to a tower of a muscle in a blue suit, swirling crimson flames burst from his shoulders and clung to his face like a mask. The flamestache was utterly ridiculous, but the way the number two's turquoise eyes pierced through him like he was an insect made his

teeth itch. Akira scowled and stared him in the eye, to which the hero scoffed.

“Watch where you’re going, *boy* .”

Endeavor stomped away without so much as an apology.

“You’re the one who bumped into me, jerk.” Akira said under his breath.

“Forget about him, Akira!” Morgana said, “Let’s just find a seat so we can eat and enjoy the show.”

Akira grumbled but turned away to find somewhere to sit. It took a while for him to shoulder through the mass of people and find an open seat, right in the center of a crowd of heroes. He sank into the chair with a sigh, putting his bag and the takoyaki on his lap, conversations from the nearby heroes drifted into their ears.

“I wonder how these kids will carry themselves,” One woman said, donned in a hooded blue cloak that shadowed her face, “The weight of the future rests on their shoulders.”

“With how everything between Silver Falcon and Joker went down?” Another hero in a red suit said, waving his hand, “They better be at their best behavior, a lot of people will judge them no matter what they do. I don’t care as long as it’s a good show.”

Another hero sitting a row in front of them turned around. She had long green hair spilling from an orange bandanna, her face covered by a gas mask decorated with smiley faces.

“You have to remember that these are children, ” She said, loud enough for everyone in earshot, “They will make mistakes, but there is enough time to set them straight! What they accomplish today is just the start of their journey to be heroes.”

“Aren’t you biased because you’re a teacher, Mrs. Joke?” Red Suit said with a raised brow.

“It is precisely *because* I’m a teacher that I know they still have the ability to grow and learn as people.” She crossed her arms and firmly nodded, “The bar is set high because of what happened recently, but you better watch on as these kids beat the odds outta the park!”

Red Suit and Purple Cloak exchanged glances as the whispers of surrounding heroes spread through the stands.

“Hey, kid.” Akira stiffened as Mrs. Joke stared right at him, “You look to be their age, what do you think of this whole thing?”

“I...” He cleared his throat as many curious eyes pinned him to the spot, “I think you’re right. Silver Falcon was a bad hero, but that doesn’t mean we should compare these students to a man that should’ve known better. I’m betting they already feel the pressure from society, and will do everything in their power to prove that they’ll be the best heroes that they can be.”

Mrs. Joke’s eyes gleamed with pride. Others nodded in agreement, but there were a few heroes with furrowed brows or crossed arms.

“Well, whatever the case,” Purple Cloak said as she leaned back in her chair, “We’ll see what mettle makes them.”

“Shh! It’s about to start!”

The loudspeakers hummed to life and the screens snapped on with a familiar hero.

“Heeey listeners!” The crowd roared as Present Mic waved his arms, *“Make some noise and get those cameras prepped! This year’s Sports Festival will be one of the most intense, guaranteed! I’ve only got one question before we start this show, ARE YOU READY!?”*

The audience's response was louder than a thunder strike, it was no wonder that everybody within a five-mile radius heard them.

"And of course, you can't forget my co-host, my partner in crime and best friend! Eraserhead!!"

"Remind me why I decided to volunteer for this."

"Because you love me!!"

"I do not-"

"ANYWAYS! Let's get this show on the road! You all know them as the class that beat back those nasty villains all by themselves, the survivors and fighters of the USJ!! These kids carry the weight of the future on their shoulders! Claaaaaass 1-A!!"

Morgana peeked out as the 1-A kids walked into the arena. Akira looked up to the screens as they zoomed in for a closer look, he recognized Midoriya and the others, their faces pale and shaky from their own nerves. But there was resolve in their eyes. They were more than ready for this.

"Now, they don't get as much credit, but they work just as hard as their sister class! Everyone put their hands together for Class 1-B!!"

"There's more than one hero class?" Morgana whispered.

"I guess so."

Akira popped one of the takoyaki in his mouth, then rolled his eyes and gave one to Morgana when he stared him in the eye and licked his chops. If more food was mysteriously devoured by his bag, the surrounding heroes were too busy to notice.

"We can't forget the General Education classes of C, D, and E!!"

The camera panned over a familiar face.

“Huh, I didn’t know he was in 1-C.”

“Who?” Morgana asked.

“That kid we saved that one night. He’s also the kid of the couple who runs the Blue Lotus Cafe, his name is Shinsou Hitoshi.”

Morgana hummed as Akira tossed him another takoyaki.

“I wonder how he’ll do,” Akira said, “He seems jealous of the hero courses for some reason.”

“Do you know his quirk?”

“No, he never mentioned it to me.” Akira frowned as he looked down at Hitoshi, “I wonder if those bullies targeted him for it? It’s not just the quirkless that get beat down.”

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see.” Morgana hunkered down in the bag, “He’ll have to use it sometime if he wants to make it through.”

“Next up is our Support Classes of F, G, and H! They are followed by, last but in no means least, the Business Classes I, J, and K!!” The cheering turned into catcalls when another hero walked out into the arena, waving a cat-o-nine-tails, *“Now that all the classes are here, take it away, Midnight!!”*

Midnight cracked her whip, the sound was just as nostalgic as it was painful. Akira wondered how Ann would react to Midnight or Mount Lady.

“Before we begin, our top student must swear the athlete’s oath! Come on stage, Bakugo Katsuki!”

The wild blonde kid was jeered by his classmates as he stomped on stage with a scowl on his face. The mic screeched as he slowly leaned into it and took a breath.

"I pledge..." The crowd held their breath, *"That I'll be number one."*

A moment of silence, then his classmates broke out in outrage.

"Oh, shut up, you extras! The least you can do is lay down and be my stepping stones!"

"How hero like." Red Suit's voice was laced in sarcasm, "I can't really see him being popular with that attitude."

"Look at how he carries himself," Another said, "What an arrogant child."

Bakugo preened like a show rooster as he marched from the stage, the rest of his classmates bore scowls and their eyes cried out for blood. The 1-A students inched back from him, but one in particular wildly chopped his arms and berated him.

"Huh, I have a feeling he would get along with Ryuji."

Akira furrowed his brow and looked at Morgana, "You really think so?"

"Yup! This Bakugo kid seems just as stubborn and bull-headed, but he's smart enough to stand at the top of the class."

Akira said nothing as Midnight spun a wheel and the students prepared for their first event, some sort of obstacle course that trailed around the arena. An ominous countdown flickered on the screen, Midnight cracked her whip just as it reached zero, jolting the students into action. Ice exploded in a glittering cascade, locking a majority of the poor kids in a crypt of diamonds.

"Ooooh, as expected of Todoroki! The ice has entrapped a good number of competitors, but it looks like most of Class 1-A anticipated his move, followed closely by a team from Class 1-B! Can Todoroki keep his first place spot!?"

Akira and Morgana watched on, mouths agape, as robots larger than a building rose to fight the students.

“Those robots are going to fall,” A woman in dark plated armor leaned forward, hands clasped together, “I should have predicted that the son of Endeavor to do anything it takes to earn first place.”

“What did you expect?” One of her companions scoffed, “Endeavor has always wanted to be the number one hero, so I’m not surprised his kid would resort to taking out some of the competition early.”

Akira tuned them out. Many of class 1-A and 1-B overcame the tumbling frozen robots and surpass the bottomless chasm. He kept an eye on Hitoshi as he crossed, determination and sweat plastered on his face. Bursts of purple smoke blinded some cameras as they reached the third and final obstacle, a minefield.

“Master! Look at the green-haired child!!!” Cerberus suddenly roared.

One of the cameras showed Midoriya digging in the minefield with a slab of metal.

“What do you think he’s doing?” Morgana asked.

Akira leaned back in his seat with a grin, “Oh, you’ll see.”

Morgana popped his head out to watch as Midoriya literally exploded himself across the field.

“Ahhh! Midoriya of Class 1-A just blasted himself into first place!”
Present Mic cried, *“Can Bakugo and Todoroki overtake him before its too late!?”*

Midoriya flung himself past the finish line with a rain of confetti and fireworks.

“MIDORIYA EARNS FIRST PLACE!! I can’t believe he pulled a fast one like that without using his quirk!”

"He proved that you can use your brain over any quirk," Eraserhead muttered over the microphone, "People put way too much stock in quirks, so most of the time their critical thinking skills end up lacking."

"Are you just saying that because of your quirk, Eraserhead?"

"Maybe. My quirk just evens the playing field, so I have to use a lot of strategy and martial arts when it comes to my work."

"At least some people don't stake everything in their powers."
Morgana said with a nod, *"It's too bad he's not on our side."*

Akira snorted.

Midoriya bawled his eyes out as others poured into the arena. Akira felt a sense of pride take over his heart. Was it bad to feel that way towards somebody you barely knew? Akira couldn't resist digging out his phone to snap a picture of the memory, then sent Midoriya a quick congratulatory text before the next event started.

"Everyone in the top 42 goes on to the next event! For those that didn't make, don't worry! We'll have other games where you can shine!" Midnight licked her lips and grinned, *"The next event will be based on points, starting at five points from 42nd, ten at 41st, and so on. We all know how the first place spot is always sought after, so the first place winner gets...."*

The boards lit up with a staggering number.

"Ten million points!!!"

"He's so dead." Akira deadpanned.

"Oh, that's an understatement." Morgana said, snickering, "That poor kid."

Midoriya's jaw dropped and he turned bone white, almost as if someone sucked his soul straight out of his body. His classmates grinned wickedly, like sharks swimming around a fresh kill.

"The next event is a cavalry battle! You lot have five minutes to form a team, so choose wisely!"

Akira opened the second takoyaki box as the students teamed up. His eyes trailed to the sky when there was a light tug on Yatagarasu's string.

"What's the situation?"

"It bodes well for us, Trickster. I have located the least guarded side entrance, so we should be able to slip in through there. I believe the opportune time to strike would be noon when more people are exploring the grounds in search of their midday meal."

"Akira, it's about to start!"

The whistle blew, the teams converged on Midoriya in a magnificent combination of teamwork and bloodlust. His personas thrummed with activity.

"Oh, they already stole the ten million points." Arsene said, "What a shame."

"Come on green child!" Cerberus howled, "Reclaim your right as top predator!"

"Cerberus," Titania covered her smirk with a dainty hand, "If I didn't know better, I would say you actually liked this boy."

"Me? Like??" Cerberus shook his snowy mane, "I'm just proud of the green child!"

"Hmph, stop pretending as if he's your pup or something." Byakko growled, "Just because you saved him once doesn't grant you the right to feel as such."

"You want to fight, pussy cat!? I can feel how I want!"

"Hush, both of you!" A mighty warrior flared his cape and pointed his weapon towards another group, "While people are enamoured with raw and explosive power, watch as another uses stealth and cunning. This Shinsou Hitoshi has proven himself and taken advantage of the situation. He might just make it to the top underneath everyone's noses."

Akira watched Hitoshi's group with a new interest. His teammates seemed off, their eyes blank and milky as they skirted away from the main fight, but they had a decent number of headbands. They were already in fourth place and Present Mic didn't even notice.

"Perhaps we should keep a closer eye on him, Trickster." Arsene ran a finger under the rim of his hat, "He could prove himself to be either a valuable ally or a deadly foe. I would highly prefer the former."

"I don't think he would betray us, as he has powerful respect for the Trickster. Too powerful to just turn his back towards the truth." There was a rustle of scales as great crimson eyes gazed through Akira's mindscape, "The powers of one's mind can be greater than that of the body, if one is intelligent enough to harness their wit. I believe this boy can be of great aid if he masters both aspects. Perhaps-"

"Ugh. You talk too much, grandpa!"

"My verbiage is not that vast, tiny one."

"Could we not just enjoy the show in peace?" Titania sighed wistfully, "I fear that it has already passed while everyone was blathering."

Akira smirked as Arsene facepalmed.

"Are you okay?" Morgana looked up at him from the bag, frowning, "The event is already over, but you haven't really said anything the whole time."

He pulled attention away from his personas and looked up at the board. Teams Todoroki, Bakugo, and Shinsou made it to the final

rounds, with Midoriya's team just barely scraping into fourth place by a few points. Akira shook his head and looked down at his partner with a smile.

"I'm fine," He put the cold takoyaki aside and tapped his temple, "I had enough commentary to distract me for a bit."

"Oh. Mercurius isn't that chatty, but I guess having over a dozen additional voices does that to you." Morgana snorted, "In any case, they called for an hour lunch break before the tournament. Did Yatagarasu make any progress?"

Akira glanced around. Many people were already leaving the stands, the grounds would be flooded with people in no time.

"Yup. The time to move would be now."

Morgana beamed and bounced on his paws, "They won't even know we were there."

Akira put away the leftovers and slung the bag over his shoulder, nobody batted an eye to the teen blending into the crowd.

"Congratulations on getting into the tournament, Tokoyami." Shoji said as they sat down for lunch.

They chose a nice sunny spot to eat in peace. It was close to the arena, yet far enough away where they wouldn't be bothered by the tidal wave of people.

"Thank you," He poked at his food with a frown, "Midoriya had a good plan, but I'm glad that Dark Shadow was able to snatch that last headband. I'm sorry you didn't get in, though."

"Don't worry about it." Shoji's eyes crinkled in a smile, "I'm glad I even got into the second round. Asui was understanding too, but Mineta complained about it."

Tokoyami snorted, “Mineta harbors a strange sort of chaos within him, so don’t let his caustic words bother you too much.”

“I know.”

Koda, who sat across from them, waved to get their attention.

‘I think you really have a chance of winning the Sports Festival, Tokoyami!’

“You really think so? I’ll be honest with you two.” Tokoyami said as he pushed his food around with a long sigh, “Dark Shadow and I have been troubled ever since Joker overpowered us at the USJ. We want to prove that we won’t be that weak ever again, so I want to regain my confidence during the tournament. It won’t be easy, but we refuse to be pushovers any longer.”

Koda and Shoji exchanged glances.

Suddenly, Dark Shadow growled at something within the distant crowd. Tokoyami shivered as a sudden chill slithered up his back, and he whipped around to see a flicker of familiar black hair. His food was forgotten as he bolted from his chair.

“Tokoyami!?” Shoji called.

His friends’ footsteps followed him as he dove into the middle of the bustling horde.

Was it just a trick of the eye? Tokoyami scrutinized the rushing mob, so many faces flowed around him as if he were a rock jutting out from a river. A hand fell on his shoulder, he jumped and whirled around to Shoji. His friend eyed him with furrowed brows.

“Are you alright, Tokoyami?”

“I... I thought I saw....” He turned to scan the crowd again, but there was nothing out of the ordinary, “But no, it must’ve been a

hallucination. Perhaps my past demons took advantage of my exhaustion and played me for a fool.”

Koda gently tugged on his sleeve, smiling softly, *‘Maybe you should eat something. It’ll help you feel better.’*

Tokoyami pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

“Yes, you’re right.”

Shoji nodded, then led Koda back towards their table. Tokoyami hovered at the edge of the crowd, eyes narrowed. He was certain he saw the vigilante. Surely that would be impossible? He really was just tired from all of the excitement and his mind decided to play tricks on him.

Besides, Joker would *never* be able to approach this glorious school without getting swarmed by heroes.

“What did you want to talk about, Todoroki?” Midoriya asked with a watery smile.

Silence reigned in the small hall tucked away in the labyrinth of passageways, gentle sunlight draped over Midoriya, but Todoroki leaned back into the shadows. His arms were crossed, dual-colored eyes bored into his classmate.

Midoriya fidgeted through the suffocating silence, “If we don’t hurry, then most of the tables will be taken-”

“Midoriya.”

The boy stiffened, “Y-yeah?”

“I wanted your opinion on something,” Todoroki narrowed his eyes, “About the state of how heroes are viewed.”

“How heroes are viewed...?” Midoriya furrowed his brow, “Are you talking about what happened between Joker and Silver Falcon?”

“What else?”

“R-right. I think...” Midoriya looked down at his hands, which curled into fists, “I think I understand what Joker was trying to do, a-and I’m thankful for everything he did to help us during the USJ. I also know that Silver Falcon’s victims deserve justice. I only wish he could’ve done it a different way.”

“A different way?” Todoroki’s lips fell in a frown, “He revealed that not all heroes are knights in shining armor like they want you to believe. Any other method would’ve been buried, either by the Hero Commission or by Silver Falcon’s own hands. He proved that when his demon delivered evidence to the police station. There was *no* other way.”

Ear ringing silence pervaded the hallway.

“Todoroki...” Midoriya stood straight and stared him in the eye, mouth agape, “Do you support what Joker did?”

“I do.” Another long silence stretched before Todoroki traced over his scar, “I support him because I know what it’s like to live with someone who pretends to be a hero.”

Midoriya’s breath hitched, “What are you talking about?”

“For as long as I remember, my mother was always crying.” Todoroki’s eyes flashed back to some invisible memory, he shook his head and gazed at Midoriya, “What do you know about quirk marriages?”

That day, in a tiny niche hidden away within a maze of hallways, Midoriya learned a dark truth about the number two hero.

Bakugo, who stood in stunned silence around the corner, scowled. He curled his hands into fists and stomped away as Deku redoubled IcyHot's declaration of war with one of his own.

"Vigilantes and 'true heroes'," Bakugo spat under his breath, "What a load of crap."

Life Will Change

Chapter 17: Life Will Change

“This is it.”

“How can you know for sure?” Mona stared at the door with narrowed eyes, then glanced up at his partner with furrowed brows. “It’s not even labeled.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Akira shouldered past the brush as they inched towards the monumental glass building, adjusting the bag over his shoulder so it wouldn’t get caught in the branches. These heroes were none the wiser as the lone figures crept through the lush gardens, the gentle rustle of wind in the trees and bird song covered their softened steps.

“Are you sure this Treasure isn’t in the main building?” Akira whispered to Morgana, who scouted a few paces ahead, “Yatagarasu did compare it to Madarame’s Palace.”

Morgana paused, brushing away a stray twig as to not give them away.

“I’m sure.” He said with a flick of his tail, “It’s not even close.”

Akira’s heart sank. With the way things are going, they might not have enough time to get information and wander around the vast grounds in search of this Treasure, not without having the heroes get suspicious. Or worse, they could get caught.

“Okay, we should be here.” Akira crouched amidst sun-dappled bushes with Morgana at his side.

They were less than 100 feet from the enormous glass construct, it was nearly invisible from the way the pristine mirrors reflected the cloudless sky. It rose so high into the heavens that they had to crane their necks up to see the rooftops. Akira curled his hands into fists as his heart pounded. It was a worthy target for the Phantom Thieves, but they had such a small window to pull it off.

“I figured there would be guards,” Morgana whispered as he looked up at Akira, “What do you want to do?”

There were two figures by the doors, exact copies of one another. Akira recognized Ectoplasm from the pile of Aiba’s files, it was also the same hero that had dragged them from the USJ after he got shot. Yatagarasu floated high over the heroes, who hadn’t yet bothered to look up.

“Big brother, use me.”

Akira blinked, “Use you?”

“This event has so many people, who would question if I suddenly lost sight of my big brother in the crowd and wandered away to find him? Nobody suspects a lost little girl. ”

Akira grinned and backtracked further into the gardens. Morgana glanced in between Akira and the pair of heroes, tilting his head curiously as he followed along.

“You have a plan.”

“Yup,” Akira brushed some dirt from his shoulders, “But we’ll have to be extra careful.”

“Why?”

“I have to use a persona I haven’t practiced with yet.” He studied the treetops with narrowed eyes, “So we’ll have to call Aiba a few minutes ahead of schedule.”

“We can work past a tiny bump in the plan,” Morgana said, grinning, “Who are you going to use?”

Akira chuckled as a smirk split his face, his eyes flooded with liquid gold. Yatagarasu fell back into his mind space to make room for new power.

“Come forth, Alice!”

There was no great pyre to give them away. Sapphire embers swirled around him like a dusting of tiny stars, his costume appeared in a wave of heat as the ashes molded together into one body. The dim light faded away to reveal the persona.

A pale little girl stood in front of them, her flawless blue dress was tied with a sash at her waist and her golden hair was decorated with a pretty white bow. Her eyes, soft and golden like sunshine draping in through the canopy, were too wide and all-consuming, they pierced through the soul of anyone who peered into them long enough.

His bond with Alice was not a thread or a ribbon, rather a braid of blonde hair drifting on a bottomless sea of death and despair.

“Hello, big brother.” Alice smiled sweetly as she curtsied, “I’m ready to play!”

“I’m sure you are.” Joker fondly patted her head, “But remember that they have to believe that you’re a lost little girl.”

“Aww, they can’t play with my teddies after?” She blinked, her tiny lip wobbling, “Not even a little bit?”

“Not today, maybe later.” Joker chuckled and shook his head, “We just can’t risk it.”

“Okay! I promise not to play with my teddies, for now.”

She giggled, but it was the sort of hair raising laughter that should never come from a little girl. The air was chilled with an aura of death, the forest chittered with an array of fleeing animals, even the branches over their heads shifted in an unnatural wind as if afraid for their life. Mona wasn't the only one to suppress a shiver as she skipped away to the edge of the bushes.

"You might not want to tip off the heroes," Mona said, fur standing on end, "They'd sense your aura for sure when you go near them."

Her too wide eyes stared into Mona, then she kicked the ground with a bored sigh.

"Fine, I'll do it just this once, kitty cat."

Joker held in his sigh of relief as the soul-shattering aura disappeared. She knelt down to grab a handful of dirt to rub into her dress, and she scuffed her shiny black shoes. Her eyes trailed back over them as she awaited his signal.

Joker held his arm down so Mona could climb onto his shoulder.

"We should hide in the trees." Mona said, "They'd be the perfect cover."

Joker nodded and leaped for the closest branch. He swung from one to the next, until his fancy footwork found them balancing on a sturdy branch overlooking the grounds. A curtain of speckled shadows and fresh green leaves shielded them. Mona kept an eye on the heroes as Joker whipped out his phone and called the only number on speed dial.

It only rang once.

"How long until the curry is done?"

"The curry is now simmering," Aiba chuckled as keys tapped away in the background, *"It should be done in fifteen minutes!"*

With that, she hung up. They had fifteen minutes to get in, grab the information, and get out. Without being caught. Mona leveled him with a deadpanned expression as Joker tossed his phone in his pocket.

“That was the lamest passphrase I’ve ever heard.”

“Hush, you.” Joker said with a smirk, then he looked down at Alice, “Go.”

The Ectoplasm clones stiffened when twigs snapped and the bushes rustled. They widened their stances and approached, tension lining their bodies.

“Come out,” Clone One commanded, “We know you’re there.”

Alice emerged from the bushes, tears streaming down her face as she sniffled. The heroes dropped their guard as they stared at each other in shocked silence, Clone Two crossed over the grass and knelt in front of her.

“What are you doing all the way out here?”

“I... I... got separated from my big brother. We... we were in the crowd,” Alice hiccuped and wiped crystalline tears from her eyes, “I only let go of his hand for one second! Th-there were so many people and I couldn’t see him anymore, I tried finding him and got so lost...”

The Ectoplasms stared at each other before Two put a firm hand on her shoulder.

“It’s alright. Can you tell me your name?”

She gripped the hem of her dress, “Alice.”

“Okay, Alice. We’ll help you find your brother.”

“R-really? You will?” She blinked her big doe eyes at them, “You promise?”

Two chuckled as he stood up, “I promise.”

“Yay!” She clapped and grabbed either of their hands, “We better hurry, though! My big brother can’t take care of himself, he’s completely lost without my help!”

“Then we better find him fast.” Two said with a hint of amusement.

One looked towards the stadiums, “Where was the last place you saw him?”

“We were at one of the takoyaki stands. I hope he didn’t eat any without me!”

“Well Alice, I’m sure he’s just as scared as you are.” One said with a nod, “Shall we go?”

“Yes, please!”

She walked off, dragging the two hero clones behind her. They faltered at her raw strength but easily fell in step as they traveled towards the crowded areas. Joker hopped down when the coast was clear, a smirk planted on his face.

“I have to admit, I’m impressed with her acting skills.” Mona said.

“I’m so proud of her.”

Joker burst from the foliage and sprinted towards the door. Of course, it was locked, but it didn’t stand a chance against the power of the Eternal Lockpick. That satisfying *click* would never get old.

“Woah, this place is weird...” Mona said as they walked into the first hallway, “But I guess they might need something this large in a world of superpowers.”

The halls were big enough for entire vehicles to drive through, split down the middle by broken lines as if it were an actual road.

“Too bad you can’t turn into a car here, Mona.” Joker said as he studied their surroundings, “Do you sense anybody?”

The cat closed his eyes as Joker pressed himself into the wall, ears keen for the slightest footstep or rustle of clothing. Mona took in a sharp breath as his eyes flew open.

“There’s nobody nearby at least, but we have a problem.”

“Already?” Joker rolled his eyes and sighed, “Why am I not surprised.”

“We memorized the maps that Aiba found from an old archive,” Mona huffed as he jumped from Joker’s shoulder and hovered at the corner, “But these halls are completely different from those.”

“How old did she say those archives were?”

“She didn’t.” Mona shook his head, “But they must’ve been so ancient that they didn’t bother updating it with the renovations. We’ll have to figure this out on our own.”

“And we don’t have time to scour the whole place.” Joker pinched the bridge of his nose, but a sudden idea crossed his mind, “Let me try something.”

Mona nodded and kept a lookout.

Joker took a deep breath and concentrated, awakening his Third Eye for this first time since they were hurled into this mess. The world around him fluctuated, colors and sounds faded into a smooth monochrome as his senses were honed to a razor-sharp point. Whispers and secrets, every vibration or clue in this vast structure, were at his fingertips. He only had to watch and listen.

Suddenly, ghostly blue markings trailed across the floor in front of him. They were footprints, but they were in no way human, more like strange animal tracks. Did they belong to a bear? A dog? Perhaps even an oversized rodent?

Mona was at his heels as he crept from one hall and into another, they passed by several classroom doors and then up the stairs to the fourth floor. His vibrant footfalls were in sync with the strange animal tracks, until they ended in front of a glowing blue door.

“This is it.”

“How can you know for sure?” Mona stared at the door with narrowed eyes, then glanced up at his partner with furrowed brows. “It’s not even labeled.”

Joker smirked, “I just do.”

Mona sighed as he broke through the locked door with the Eternal Lockpick. It creaked open and they rushed inside, Joker closed the door and flicked on the lights. It was a larger room, with two rows of desks that were stacked with papers and folders, a few had laptops or computers. All of the little trinkets scattered across the room were tempting to steal, with their fancy yellow glow, but he used every ounce of self-control not to snatch them up. His eyes wandered over to a cabinet that radiated a vibrant blue, the animal tracks stopped in front of it.

He closed his Third Eye, and the realm returned to normal, colors bled into his vision and he no longer heard the myriad of unintelligible whispers. Joker stepped up to the closest desk and looked over the piles of paperwork.

“Hmm, graded homework.” He looked down at Mona, “We must be in the teacher’s lounge.”

“Well, if you think the information we need is here, then we better get looking. How much time do we have left?”

Joker glanced at the clock on the wall, "Eight minutes."

He opened the nearest laptop and plugged in Aiba's flash drive, a smirk inched its way on his face as it logged itself in and opened to the home screen. Joker chuckled at the background photo of a cat, so white and fluffy that it looked more like a marshmallow, but it was forgotten as another window opened.

"Seems like it's working."

"Good," Mona said with a nod, "It was a good idea for her to come up with this."

Joker turned towards the right cabinet, Mona jumped from desk to desk and scanned over the teachers' personal items.

"You know..." Mona said as he pushed a cup of pens to the edge of the desk, so tantalizingly close to falling, "These people seem pretty normal when they're not playing hero."

Joker snorted as he dug through the files and pulled out every folder labeled with the USJ. He flipped them open and fanned out their contents on a nearby desk. Mona kept himself busy by pushing a mug or something particularly breakable near the edge of each teacher's desk, before trotting his way over to Joker.

"Hey, Mona."

"Yeah?"

"You don't think the Treasure could be at the USJ, do you? Since that's where we landed after Yaldabaoth's attack."

Joker got out his phone and snapped pictures of maps and class schedules, or information on how the hero Thirteen used various resources to build the USJ, amongst other things.

"I mean..." Mona frowned as he looked out the windows, "It's possible, and it would make sense. Maybe I couldn't sense it before

because Mercurius wasn't with me, or because I don't have all of my powers."

"And we had no idea what had happened to us at the time." Joker sighed as his phone snapped more pictures, "Whatever Yaldabaoth did, it messed with our abilities for a while. Don't blame yourself for not sensing it earlier, okay?"

Mona's ears flattened against his head and he stared at the ground, "I guess..."

Joker flipped one folder closed and put it back in the cabinet, a tiny smile perked his lips as he reached over to pet Mona.

"You said so yourself, we'll get everything figured out. We just need to be patient." Joker finished taking pictures of the second file, when Mona gasped, "Is everything okay-"

"Joker!" Mona stiffened, the fur on his nape stood up straight, "There are people in the hallway, coming in this direction. I think it's a pair of heroes."

Joker dug through his pouches. His gloved hands brushed over a small container and he grinned, Mona squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath as a cloud of Stealthanol clung to them like hair spray. Joker flipped the can around his finger and tossed it back into his pocket.

He hastily put any files away and closed the cabinet, then rounded on the laptop. Joker scowled when the download was barely at 50%, but he ripped it out and shut down the computer, Mona jumped to his perch as they scanned over the room.

Leaving from the door was out of the question, so he flung open the true Phantom Thief exit. A window. The sheer drop from the fourth story was dizzying, but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle. Joker froze just as shadows hovered at the edge of the door.

“Are you certain the weird smell leads here?”

“Grrr, I’m sure of it!”

“But the door should be locked, the only ones to have a key are us teachers....”

Mona clung on for dear life when Joker jumped, their stomachs shot into their throats as the wind whistled in their ears. They were in free fall for a mere moment before the ground reached up for them. Mona’s magic charged the air as a tiny cyclone cushioned their fall, a bark of laughter escaped Joker as he rolled into his landing and sprinted to the treeline. Leaves stuck in his hair as he shot up the nearest tree.

“Do you think they’ll follow us?” Mona whispered.

“I don’t know, but we can’t stay here.” Joker leaped to another branch, the movement shedding a few leaves to the ground, “Let’s just try to get back and blend into the crowd.”

Joker hopped through the treetops, inching closer to the chaotic din of the festival. He was about to reach out to Alice when Mona inhaled sharply.

“Stop!” Mona whispered.

Joker froze as the bushes below rustled. The heroes Hound Dog and Snipe emerged through the brush, crossing their verdant surroundings with practiced ease. Joker pressed himself against the tree trunk and held his breath as Mona hunkered down around his shoulders, the shade of the surrounding leaves shrouded them in darkness.

“Are you sure you weren’t just hallucinating?” Snipe asked with a sigh, “Present Mic and Midnight forget to lock the door all the time, and the weird smell could just be anything. Anybody could’ve left the window open, too.”

“No!” Hound Dog was on all fours, nose to the ground, “I *know* I smelled something off!”

“Okay, but what about now?”

“Now it’s gone!!” Hound Dog sunk his claws into the dirt with a snarl, “GRAAH! This nose of mine is never wrong, so why did the scent just vanish like that!? There’s no way that’s possible!!”

“So, let me get this straight,” Snipe put a hand on his hip and motioned towards the school with the other, “You made us jump out of the fourth story window over *nothing* ?”

Hound Dog growled and ran his claws through his thick mane. Joker and Mona stared at each other with wide eyes, a single glance towards the sky and they would be found.

“I don’t know?”

“Okay, I blame Nezu. He always brings bizarre stuff into the lounge, most of the time it has a weird smell, too. Remember when he brought that cheese one time? It stunk in there for a week!”

“Grrrr, maybe you’re right.”

Hound Dog finally stood on two legs and sighed sharply through his nose. He scanned through the brush, eyes glancing dangerously towards the treetops. Joker slowly reached down for the hilt of his dagger and dug in his pocket for a Vanish Ball, ready to recall Alice at a moment’s notice.

A sudden chime rang across the silent garden.

“Wait.” Snipe said as he looked at his phone, “I got a message from Ectoplasm.”

Hound Dog tore his eyes away from the tree, “Did something happen?”

"It seems like there's a missing kid? Ectoplasm was helping some little girl, but they lost track of her in the crowd." Snipe tucked his phone into his back pouch, "He wants us to help look around."

"Grrr, fine!" Hound Dog stomped off into the garden, "I can at least help with that."

"When you're not chasing a fake trail, that is." Snipe teased.

"GRAAAH! YOU BETTER WATCH YOUR MOUTH!!"

Joker finally let out a breath as their crunching footsteps faded into the distance. Mona sagged over his shoulder with a long sigh.

"That was close, *too* close." He said, "Good thinking with that Stealthanol though, otherwise they would've found us for sure!"

"No kidding," Joker crouched on the branch, "I want to check in with Alice and Aiba, can you keep an eye out?"

Mona rubbed against his fluffy hair, "Do you really even need to ask?"

Joker smiled as he closed his eyes.

"Alice? What are you doing?"

"Heehee! I wanted to play hide and seek with Ectoplasm."

"You promised you wouldn't play with them, but I'm glad you did. The distraction saved us in the nick of time." He said, "Are you ready to come back?"

"I only promised not to play with my teddies, so you're welcome, big brother. I only need another second, promise!"

"Alice-"

Goosebumps broke out on his arms as her power suddenly flared, the bone chilling aura of death trickled down his spine and made his heart shudder in fear. It was gone just as fast, and Alice skipped back into his mindscape without a care in the world.

"What did you do?" Arsene growled.

"I scared a big meanie! He never apologized to big brother and he was being a jerk to somebody!" Alice twirled around with a giggle, *"He deserved it!"*

"That doesn't matter," Arsene flared his wings, his anger seeping into Akira's psyche, *"You could've exposed yourself, and by extension the Trickster, by doing something so foolish. Who knows what could've happened if we were found out."*

"I'm sorry...."

"Just don't do it again," Arsene's anger simmered down with a fiery sigh, *"Otherwise I won't be so lenient next time."*

"Okay, I'll be good!"

Joker let their voices fade, then opened his eyes to see Mona watching him.

"Are you okay?" He asked, scrutinizing Joker's pale face, "You didn't look too good for a few seconds there."

"I'm fine." Joker dug out his phone and pressed speed dial.

"Are you guys alright!? I got the gist of what happened through the cameras!"

"We made it out, for the most part. Are we still in the clear?"

"You are, there are still a few minutes left before everything goes back to normal. Any longer and it might tip off the security nodes."

Her keys clacked away in the background, *“Did you get everything you needed?”*

“I found some files of the USJ and got pictures of them, but the flash drive had to be removed before the download was complete.”

“Hmm, it should be alright. It sucks that we didn’t get everything, but it’s more than what we walked away with, right?”

“Right...” Akira frowned, “We’ll go over everything once we get back to the Nest. Can you keep a watch out in case anybody gets wise to us?”

“I’ll listen in on their radios, leave it to me!”

“Thanks, we’re counting on you.”

Mona chuckled when Joker hung up, “We’re lucky to have someone like her on our side.”

“I have a feeling she and Futaba would get along like a house on fire.”

“They could burn the entire world down from their computers, and there would be nothing anybody could do about it. It’s pretty frightening to think about.”

Joker laughed as they dropped from the treetops, his landing sent ripples of color through the grass. His costume was burned away into casual clothing, they emerged from the forest to rejoin the crowd after Morgana dove back into the bag.

Nobody so much as glanced their way.

“I think the Stealthanol is still in effect,” Morgana whispered, “We should get to the stadium before it wears off.”

“You think it’s worth staying? We got what we needed.”

“It is. We’ll see up close what the strongest students will be able to do. It’ll be valuable information when we run into them in the future. Besides, we got away from the heroes, didn’t we?”

Well, there was no arguing with Morgana.

Akira shuffled on his feet and made his way back. The lunch hour was almost up, civilians and heroes poured back into the stands as the Tournament rounds loomed over everyone’s heads. Excitement charged the air like static.

All they had to do was sit back, relax, and enjoy the rest of the show.

We've hit some milestones! 12k hits and a little over 600 kudos. Honestly, I never thought I would ever see those numbers, I'm so flabbergasted and thankful to you guys :D We've also passed 60k words even though it doesn't feel that long already?

On The Precipice Of Defeat

Chapter 18: On The Precipice Of Defeat

For real!?

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[FANART!!](#)

The holographic map purred to life within the head's up display.

Buildings and streets were painted into existence by beautiful green light, the details of this stretch of small-town were spotless, from every street lamp and signpost to houses and storefronts. Various energy signatures dotted the map like glittering gems. It was almost too easy to make a map of this tiny town nestled away in the countryside. This world's technology was ten or fifteen years behind, it was as easy as breathing to hack into various networks and security cameras dotted here and there, her persona filled in the rest.

Oracle fiddled with the hidden dials on the side of her mask, watching as the golden dot left a convenience store. Her stomach churned and grumbled, and she lifted her mask with a long sigh. She scrubbed at her eyes and blinked several times to the dingy warehouse where they have been staying since the incident.

Her 'room' was nothing more than a few boxes piled together and covered with a tarp, the torn blanket she laid on smelled of mold, but it was better than just ice cold concrete. The warehouse was shabby, the holes pierced through the thin metal allowed rays of sunshine to pass through unscathed. Her nose wrinkled as she sniffled, the scent

of rust and copper so strong that it was as if she had just sucked on an old coin.

She gasped as an alarm pierced her ears. Her mask was thrown back on to see a blinking red dot in the center of town, a blood-curdling roar echoed across the city as the air became heavy with unnatural pressure.

"It's another one of those monsters!" Ryuji growled, his yellow dot wavering, *"I want to go get a look at it."*

"Skull, no!" She snapped, "There are already other energy signatures converging on it and I don't want them to spot you. We're trying to stay hidden, remember?"

"A quick peek won't hurt anything."

"Please, just leave it alone?" She grasped her stomach as it grumbled, "We haven't eaten since yesterday. I feel like my stomach is going to turn inside out at this rate!"

"I..." There was a long sigh, *"Fine. They had some of those cute animal faced meat buns that you like. I got a few extra just for you."*

"Thanks," A tiny smile quirked her lips.

"Don't mention it. I gotta take care of my Ren-Ren's adopted little sis, right?"

She felt her cheeks burn the same time as her heart lurched. Oracle missed her dad and Ren, and their banter bouncing back and forth on a quiet day in Leblanc, or the way they made coffee. Ren's curry had slowly gotten better than her dad's, not that she would ever tell him that. She missed them. It was a feeling that was just as foreign as it was familiar, to have that great, yearning chasm of coiling emotions rising and falling like the tide. One single misstep and her emotions would gouge her like shards of glass.

Don't get her wrong, she was glad to have Skull at her side. He kept the mood light and prevented her from spiraling, but sometimes he was just a little too loud or swore too much. He missed them too, it was impossible to miss how bags had slowly accumulated under his eyes. Sometimes his temper was a little too short or he would spend nights pacing the warehouse.

She finally opened her mouth to reply just as another alarm rang in her ears. She inhaled sharply as ice trailed down her spine, the hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up. Oracle swallowed thickly as her fingers began to shake.

"Skull..." She whispered as her heart pounded in her ears, "Somebody's here in the warehouse..."

"What!? Damnit!" His golden dot shot off towards the outskirts of town, *"Hang on, I'll be there soon!"*

"Oooh, not many people can actually sense my presence when I don't want them to. Color me impressed, little lady."

There was a *swish* of air and she saw a pair of sandalled feet appear a few meters away from her makeshift room. She froze as she slowly looked up, glancing over his billowing black haori and green shihakusho to stare at his face. Messy blonde hair spilled out from underneath a striped bucket hat, his slate grey eyes seemed to stare straight into her soul.

"You can come out you know!" He produced a fan from his sleeve and waved it at her, "I won't bite as long as you don't, either."

Oracle slowly crawled out. A pit fell into her stomach as her mask read his staggering power levels, it was one of the highest readings yet! Where had he been hiding? Why didn't she sense him earlier? Her hands fidgeted together, but she forced a brave front.

"Who are you?"

“Urahara Kisuke, I’m just a humble shop owner.” He smiled as he studied her, “But the real question is, who are *you* ?”

A strange fuzziness permeated the warehouse. Urahara flipped his fan closed and plucked something from mid-air as if he were picking a delicate flower. Her chest tightened as the air was sucked out of her, there was a tugging sensation over her heart as he held a ribbon between his fingers. It was pitch black, with intricate jagged lines flowing with a rainbow of color.

Prometheus growled within her mind, a rumbling snarl that shook the air and clashed with this man’s power. The ribbon glitched straight out of his grasp and vanished. He blinked in surprise, his eyes sharpening like a blade.

“Your spirit ribbon is different from anything I’ve ever seen,” Urahara took a step closer, and she scrambled back, “Not an arrancar or a hollow, not a shinigami or a quincy either. You still feel human, yet there is something else tied to your soul that says otherwise.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Her voice shook despite her best efforts, “What is it you want?”

“Just to have a friendly little chat.” Urahara said, flaring his fan once more to cover his face, “Something strange happened about ten days ago. A foreign energy signature leaked into Karakura Town, one that ripped apart the very fabric of reality. I was curious, and more than a bit surprised to see two children responsible for it.”

“You...” Oracle flinched back, “You knew we were here this whole time?”

“That’s correct!” He smiled as a calculated gleam entered his shadowed eyes, “I wanted to see what you would do, but you two seemed so lost and out of place. It was rather sad to watch much longer. Besides, your strange reiatsu already alerted the Soul Society, so it’s only a matter of time before they send in a team to capture and interrogate you.”

Capture, *interrogation* !?

Soul Society? What?

Is that where those other strange people were from, donning changing swords and black kimono? Then, what were those other monsters? Coming in all shapes and sizes, their heads always covered with a bone-white mask, their bloodlust always stained the air like a thick smog.

Urahara studied her as the silence stretched.

“Well, the information you have wouldn’t be for free!” He tapped the fan against the palm of his other hand, “I can provide you protection and a place to stay, so you won’t have to sleep in this dingy little warehouse anymore. Maybe, I could even help you return to wherever you came from.”

“You... could really do that?” She whispered.

He took off his bucket hat and placed it over his heart, “If it’s within my power, little lady. Plus, I haven’t had anything this interesting and new to study in *years* . It can get rather boring after a century of idleness.”

Oracle folded her hands together. Her mask scanned over Urahara, readings with body temperature, his heart rate, and breathing popped up across her vision. Everything was normal, calm. Nothing about him signaled that he was lying.

This man was being genuine.

“|-”

“Hey! Get away from her!!” Skull burst through the door in full costume, electricity snapping at the air in roiling serpents, “PERSONA, Seiten Taisei!!”

“Skull, wait!” Oracle cried, but it was too late.

The mythical being appeared out of a curtain of flames. Seiten Taisei charged forth on a blackened cloud, swinging his bludgeoning staff with the full force of thunderstorm. Urahara stepped aside and deflected the blow with his fan, sparks flew as if it were made of steel, Seiten Taisei curled his lips in a snarl and his weapon was a blur as he struck again.

Urahara was smirking. He snapped the fan closed and met the attack head-on. The persona's weapon was stopped with a *paper fan* .

Oracle's mouth dropped as lightning crackled around the warehouse, winds whipped between the two figures as their powers clashed, but the winner was clear. Urahara stared up at the persona with amusement, the persona was repelled with a simple flick of his wrist.

Seiten Taisei reeled back, slamming into the wall with a loud crash and a plume of smoke.

"For real!?" Skull cried, "What the hell is this guy!?"

He jumped in front of Oracle protectively, weapon at the ready.

"That was impressive!" Urahara huffed with laughter as he dusted himself off, "You *almost* caught me off guard. Almost. Not quite, though. It was a good try."

"I'll show you impressive, old man!" Skull grinned as Seiten Taisei pulled himself from the dent in the wall.

"Skull, stop-"

The light was snuffed out as dark clouds converged over the warehouse, there was a bright flash before lightning clashed through the rooftop and struck Urahara. Or it would have if the man didn't suddenly vanish.

"Knock it off!" Oracle grabbed Skull's wrist, "He's not a threat!"

“That’s bullshit!” Skull whipped around, “You know we can’t trust anyone here, not to mention shady adults!”

“M-maybe, but he was being genuine! My readings proved he wasn’t lying.” Oracle curled her hands into fists, “I’m so *tired* . Do you want to keep staying in this stupid warehouse? Do you want to stay cold and hungry? Do you want to find a way home or do you want to be stuck here forever? What other choices do we really have, Skull!?”

He blinked several times, leaning back from her fury.

“But... I...”

“I see you like to play with lightning.” They whirled around to Urahara, who appeared behind them, “I can play with lightning too, you know.”

There was a spike on Oracle’s HUD. She yanked Prometheus into reality as Urahara pointed a single finger at Seiten Taisei.

“Hado number four, Byakurai.”

“STOP IT!”

A serpent of blue lightning shot from his finger as Prometheus lurched into the air, her quick fingers flew across the holographic keyboards at mach speed. The crack of lightning boomed in their ears and shook the warehouse. It took mere moments for the smoke to clear, but the ground was alight with alien glyphs that circled Skull and Seiten Taisei. Prometheus hovered ominously over them all.

“Ha!” Skull said with a manic grin, “You can’t beat that!”

He was about to step past the barrier but received a nasty shock at its threshold.

“Ouch, Oracle!” He whipped his head towards her, “What the hell!?”

Urahara hummed curiously as he approached the glowing circle, the light cast him in sharp contrast. He poked the edge of the barrier with his shoe and hissed at the tiny sparks that nipped at his toes.

“Skull, banish Seiten Taisei!”

“Uh... why?”

“Just shut up and do it!” Oracle glared into the screen showing Urahara clutching his chin in thought, “And you! I thought you wanted to help, but you sit there and shoot lightning at us?”

The man blinked up at the giant floating orb encased in black fire, eyes still calculating.

“I wanted to see how you would react to the situation.” He whipped out his fan and playfully waved towards a scowling Skull, who was mere inches away, “That kido spell was rather weak and harmless, so it was all in good fun. I promise!”

Skull growled, but his persona vanished in a rush of licking flames.

“Now, are you boys going to be good or-”

“What the hell is going on in here?”

A woman had suddenly appeared behind Urahara. She was slender, with golden eyes and tan skin, her hair flowing down her back in a ponytail.

“Kisuke!” She stepped up to the man and gently smacked him on the back of his head, “What are you doing? Their reiatsu is leaking through the barriers like a sieve! Do you *want* the Seireitei to locate them? Honestly, they’re just as bad at controlling their reiatsu as Kurosaki!”

“I had it handled, Yoruichi!” He said, though he avoided her eyes like a scolded toddler.

“Right. *Handled* .” She crossed her arms and pinned him with a stern glare, “‘Handled’ would’ve been all of us safe and sound back at the shop, not whatever this is. Look kids, I’ll apologize to you for this idiot, he gets beyond reckless when he finds something new and gets too excited.”

“Not true.” Urahara waved his fan, but she snatched it out of his grasp and smacked him in the forehead with it.

“Now, we can keep playing and get caught, or we could all get somewhere safe. Your choice.”

The woman kept a straight face as Urahara tried and failed to take his fan back, like a kid reaching for a toy. Prometheus slowly floated back to the ground, where both the circle of glyphs and the persona dissipated into thin air. Oracle exchanged glances with Skull.

“I’ll apologize for my idiot too-”

“Hey!”

“He can be pretty reckless and stupid, he never thinks these things through.”

Skull sighed, “I’m standin’ right here, you know.”

“I like you, kiddo.” Yoruichi smiled at Oracle as her eyes glimmered with humor, “You have a name?”

Oracle closed her eyes, her costume burning away into casual clothes. The adults blinked several times in surprise as she pushed up her thick glasses and placed both of her hands behind her back.

“Sakura Futaba, my code name is Oracle.”

“Yoruichi Shihoin. It’s a pleasure meeting you, Sakura-san.”

Futaba nudged Skull with her elbow. He rolled his eyes as his costume disappeared into oblivion.

“Whatever. Name’s Sakamoto Ryuji, code name Skull.”

“Why do you have code names?” Urahara asked.

“Kisuke, save the questions for later.” Yoruichi waved for them to follow, “Let’s go.”

“Can I have my fan back?”

“Nope, it’s mine now.” Yoruichi fanned her face with a smirk, “Officially confiscated.”

“You’re so mean!”

“Get over it, you have a whole horde of them back at home!”

Futaba smiled at their antics. For some reason, it reminded her of how Ren and Morgana bantered back and forth, whether it be at Leblanc, Mementos, or within a Palace. The thought soothed her heart, just a little.

Ryuji grumbled, his distrust of them was as plain as the scowl on his face. He hovered in front of her protectively, his eyes never leaving the adults.

Futaba reached down and held his hand in both of hers, a reassuring smile spread on her face. His eyes softened a little, but tension still lined his shoulders. She made to follow the two strange adults with Ryuji at her side. They would both feel a little better with a few hours of sleep and some decent food in their bellies, then they could get to work.

Then maybe, *just* maybe, they could find a way to rescue the others.

So the world of Bleach is now confirmed!

Restlessness

Chapter 19: Restlessness

“Villain!”

Bakugo froze, eyes blown wide as he whipped his head towards the stands.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[AWESOME FANART!](#)

“What do *you* want?”

“For you to stop acting like a disgraceful child!” Endeavor loomed over his son, the heat of his flames soaking the hallway, “You would’ve blown past the competition if you used your fire! I don’t know why you insist on your foolish outbursts, have you forgotten your duty to surpass All Might?”

“I will win without using fire.” Todoroki scowled, his shoulders set in a stiff line, “I don’t need your power.”

Endeavor scoffed, “You will reach the limits of your mother’s quirk. What will you do then? Did you forget that you’re different from your siblings? You are my grand masterpiece, you need to cease this childish tantrum and use your flames!”

“I am not your ‘masterpiece’,” Todoroki rounded his father, his face filled with murder, “I will show you that I don’t need you to win.”

He stomped down the hallway, mind so muddled with rage that he didn’t notice the little girl waiting around the corner. Endeavor

growled, his swirling flames mirrored the frustrated whirlpool around his heart. He was *this* close to punching a hole in the wall.

Alice felt a tug on her soul, her big brother's presence was a comforting weight.

"Alice? What are you doing?" Joker asked.

"Heehee!" Her grin would unsettle the meanest of men, *"I wanted to play hide and seek with Ectoplasm."*

"You promised you wouldn't play, but I'm glad you did. The distraction saved us in the nick of time." He said, *"Are you ready to come back?"*

"I only promised not to play with my teddies, so you're welcome, big brother. I only need another second, promise!"

"Alice-"

Alice stepped around the corner and revealed herself.

Endeavor raised a brow, turning fully towards her as he felt eyes on him. His skin itched underneath her gaze, the hairs were raised on the back of his neck, something about this child was off, but he swallowed it down and took a step closer.

"What are you doing here, little one?" He asked, "There shouldn't be anybody else back here."

Alice's eyes stabbed into him as she flared her power. A sickly purple glow highlighted her body as death and despair seeped into the fabric of reality, her face split in half with a demonic grin and her eyes began to glow like red hot coals. Her golden locks wriggled like serpents.

"If you know what's good for you," Her sickly sweet giggle turned his blood into ice, "Then you'll be nicer to my big brother. This will be your one and *only* warning."

Endeavor swore as all consuming dread crawled into him like a thousand chittering insects. The girl twirled around and a sudden blinding light drowned out all color. He shielded his eyes as he flung himself back, but she had vanished by the time the stars left his vision, with only a smudge of soot and the fading chill of death as evidence that she was ever there. He shivered as he willed his flames to cover him like a wool blanket.

That little girl's terrifying laughter would torment him for weeks.

Hitoshi paced the edge of the hallway, the roar of the crowd trickled in from the sun draped opening, the sound showered him with a film of slimy anxiety. He swallowed the sandy dryness in his throat.

"I can do this," He muttered to himself, "I'll show them that I can be a hero, too."

Hitoshi took another deep breath to calm his rabbiting heart, his mind wandered to his hero. What would Joker do? A single video with Joker's voice told of his *confidence* and suave *authority*, he held the hero world in his palm and shattered the grimy veil of blind worship. That didn't even touch on his demons' awesome powers.

What he would give to meet Joker, but that was probably just a pipe dream at this point.

If... if the Sports Festival and hero course didn't work out, maybe he could be a vigilante, too? Taking justice into his own hands and punishing those that deserved it, saving others just like his hero did for his family. Every fibre of his being *screamed* for that kind of life.

But could he really do that to his parents, to break the law? Would they be disappointed to learn what his dream was? He loved the Blue Lotus Cafe and respected what his parents did to make it all work, but he didn't feel like that was the right path for him.

“And now, introducing the blazing green star that took first place in the obstacle course and got his team to fourth place in the cavalry battle, put your hands together for Class 1-A’s Midoriya Izuku!!”

Hitoshi took a breath through gritted teeth.

“Figures the hero course would get preferential treatment,” He muttered.

“And his opponent, who hasn’t really done anything outstanding, Shinsou Hitoshi from Class 1-C!!”

He breathed in, then out. His false confidence was but a shaky mask as he tried to imitate his hero, he stepped out into the light and made it to the arena without face planting, at least. Midoriya’s baby faced smile irked him like no other.

“I want a clean match, you two!” Midnight cracked her whip, “Start!”

Midoriya charged, but Hitoshi relaxed back with his hands in his pockets.

“I heard a lot about your class, Midoriya.” He said with a lazy grin, “How does it feel to be able to bask in all of the attention? To get everything you ever wanted in life because of your powerful quirk?”

Pain flashed across Midoriya’s face, but he didn’t answer.

“Ah, so that monkey must’ve told you. How stupid do you have to be to give up a spot in the tournament?”

“Don’t-!”

His quirk snapped around Midoriya’s mind like a steel trap, his lazy grin widened as he held the boy in the palm of his hand. The crowd gasped as Midoriya froze in his tracks, eyes blank and hazy.

“You still fell for it, huh? I guess I can’t fault you for caring for your friends. Now, be a good boy and walk out of bounds for me.”

“WHAAAAT!? What happened to Midoriya!? He just turned around and is heading right towards the boundary!!”

“This is what happens when hero course examinees are only tested for physically powerful quirks. Those with mental or emotional quirks get left in the dust and fall through the cracks,” Eraserhead sighed, “This is why I’ve been against those kind of tests for years.”

“Sorry Midoriya, but I have to do whatever it takes to be a hero. I have to step up and prove that ‘villainous’ quirks can be used in heroics too.” Akira’s face suddenly flashed in his mind, with a soft smile and kind eyes, “And make sure that nobody else gets beaten down for something they have no control of.”

Only a few more steps until his win, when Midoriya suddenly stopped. Hitoshi’s scalp pricked with static that trailed down his spine and sent a shiver through him. A blast of wind whipped his hair back, the control over his quirk snapped like a dry twig. Midoriya looked over his shoulder, and Hitoshi’s heart lurched with rending fear.

“H-How?” Hitoshi demanded, “How did you break free!?”

Midoriya gritted his teeth and went on the offensive. Hitoshi’s confidence fell apart as sweat beaded on his brow.

“So that’s how it is, huh!? Well, say something!!”

The wind was knocked out of him as Midoriya tackled him, he struggled and lashed out, but only gave Midoriya a bloody nose. His feet were swept out from under him, the sky and the blazing sun filled his vision before his back was slammed into the concrete.

“Shinsou is out of bounds!” Midnight called, “Midoriya moves on to the next round!”

Dread sank in his stomach like a ball of ice, his eyes burned with furious tears. He pulled himself to his feet and dusted himself off, not even looking in Midoriya’s direction as he stomped away.

“Shinsou!”

He stopped and glowered over his shoulder, Midoriya’s face was so full of beaming sunshine it was almost blinding.

“Y-your quirk is really cool! You’d be an amazing hero with it!”

“You really think so?”

“Of course! Do you know how many incidents you can prevent just by talking? You can save so many lives with a quirk like yours!”

A chunk of that hateful ice melted away into dim hope.

“Thanks, I guess.”

He turned and walked out of the arena, the encouraging calls of his general course classmates put a smile on his face. That smile fell as he ducked into the hallway and away from the arena, the next round was announced over the speakers, but he didn’t really care. He went to his locker, where he had put his phone and bag, before heading towards the stands.

His phone vibrated a few times. He expected his parents to send their encouragements or condolences, but he didn’t recognize this number.

[???

Hey, awesome job during the tournament! I thought you did really good, despite everything.

This is Kurusu by the way, your mother gave me all of your numbers yesterday.

Of course she did. Hitoshi snorted and tapped away on his phone.

Mind Bender Changed Kurusu's name to Coffee God

[Coffee God]

Really? That's not a name I ever thought I would be called.

[Mind Bender]

There's no way in hell that you can convince me to change it.

Thanks for the support I guess, doesn't really make me feel better since I lost.

That was my one ticket to the hero course.

[Coffee God]

Hey, for what it's worth I thought you were really cool. If the heroes can't see your potential then it's their loss, if anybody deserves to be a hero it would be you.

I'll make you some extra strong coffee during my shift tomorrow? I also wanted to make some curry too, if your parents agree to it. I promise to let you have first dibs.

[Mind Bender]

Deal.

He smiled as he put his phone away.

At least he had something to look forward to.

"Start!!"

Uraraka rushed Bakugo with a battle cry, her feet pounded over the arena.

Bakugo raised his arm for a right hook, but she flung herself under it and reached out. He swore under his breath as the first explosion sent a burst of heat and smoke into the air. Uraraka was swallowed by the cloud, but a wicked grin split his face as her shape moved through it.

“You thought you could sneak up on me!?”

He lunged, but it was just an empty jacket, burnt bits of cloth fluttered through the air. The crowd cheered as she jumped from the smokescreen, hand outstretched. Bakugo whipped around and put his hands together, the conjoined explosives launched her to the other side of the arena. She gasped as she scraped herself from the pavement, sweating and panting for breath, her eyes were sharp and determined as she charged in futile effort, pulling herself up again and again and *again* .

Smoke plumes and dust permeated the air, the constant pops and booms pounded into the audience’s chests. One hero rose from his seat with a scowl.

“Hey, shouldn’t you stop this?”

One voice rallied the crowd, it spread throughout the arena like wildfire.

“He’s being too harsh!”

“Is that what you call the top student in the hero course? He’s acting more like a villain!”

“I certainly wouldn’t have him as an intern.”

“They should disqualify him!”

“He’s never going to be a hero with that attitude!”

“Is this really okay? The poor girl will get turned to dust at this rate.”

“You shouldn’t even be in the hero course!!”

“Well, it’s easy to see who’s going to be the next Silver Falcon.”

“Villain!”

Bakugo froze, eyes blown wide as he whipped his head towards the stands. Uraraka was rooted to the spot as the boos and jeers got louder, her hands formed into fists and a rush of anger bloomed on her cheeks.

“Be quiet, all of you.” Aizawa’s voice had a razor sharp edge to it, “I know recent events have shifted the hero world considerably, but Bakugo is giving his all to treat his opponent with the respect she deserves. Can you honestly look into her eyes and tell her that she doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously? That she’s weak just because she’s a girl?”

The crowd was silenced, Aizawa let out a long sigh.

“That’s what I thought. To the hero who started this whole mess, I hope you seriously consider giving up your licence or have a change of heart. These kids have more heroic potential in their pinky fingers than you do in your whole body.”

“Thank you, Aizawa-sensei,” Uraraka said under her breath, “I’ll show them that I’m not frail!”

The brush of fingers on his arm threw him back into the battle, his gravity was ripped away as Uraraka pushed him towards the dreaded white line.

“WOOAH, what’s this!?” Present Mic screamed, “Uraraka managed to use her quirk on Bakugo! How will he deal with having no gravity!?”

Bakugo grinned like a mad dog as he soared towards his inevitable doom, he threw his hands back, blazing explosions slowed him to a stop. He hovered there for a few moments, stabilizing himself with a few more small pops, his fierce red eyes gleamed with vicious pride. The sun's searing rays cast him in a golden glow, almost as if he were an avenging angel sent down to do battle.

Uraraka's jaw dropped as Present Mic went wild.

"WHAAAAAAT!? Bakugo is now floating there like a herald of doom!!!"

"Bakugo adapted to the situation within seconds," Aizawa said, "He's excelled in combat simulations so far, but Uraraka shouldn't be discounted either."

Bakugo wasted no time. He twisted in the air as hands lit up like a fireworks display, thick smoke trailed behind him as he aimed his body at his opponent. Uraraka cried out and dove to the side as he crashed into the arena like a comet, the concrete shattered like ice on a warm spring day. Dust clouds choked the air, Uraraka coughed at the suffocating grime in her throat.

She rushed Bakugo, ready to push him out of bounds, but he jumped, his nonexistent gravity made him soar through the air. Her ears pounded with each explosion, her muscles screamed at her every time the arena gained a new crater, she pressed on through her exhaustion, willing her legs to move even though they felt like jelly.

Despite everything, she had a grin that matched Bakugo's.

She waited until he launched himself again, floating high in the air like a bird of prey ready to strike.

"Release!!"

Bakugo faltered as weight returned to him, a snarl left his lips as the ground reached up to meet him, but he aimed his explosions at the ground to cushion his fall. He bit back his pained grunt as he rolled into his landing, he glowered at the taste of iron and sharp pain in his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue.

“Is that all you have, Round Face!?”

“You should really pay more attention, Bakugo.” She wheezed, fingertips placed together.

“Debris is falling from the sky like a meteor shower!!” Mic shouted, *“How will Bakugo make it out of this!?”*

Bakugo huffed in amusement. His grin turned feral, teeth stained crimson like a predator with a fresh kill, he flexed his sore wrists as chunks of concrete plummeted from the sky.

“Well, you’ll have to do better than that!!”

A concussive blast blew everyone back in their seats, the air fluctuated with heat waves as a mushroom cloud obliterated the chunks to dust. Silence reigned as everyone was peppered with smoking pebbles.

“Finally!” Bakugo barked, “Now let’s get serious, Round Face!!”

He looked over to her, his bloody grin wiped clean off of his face as she collapsed like a ragdoll. Her eyes were glossed over, her fingers clawed towards him and she dragged herself over the crumbled earth, but her fire was extinguished. Midnight sighed as the girl finally passed out.

“Uraraka is down for the count! Bakugo proceeds to the next round!!”

Bakugo rolled his eyes as the crowd only gave half hearted cheers, he wiped the blood from his lips as adrenaline still thrummed through his veins. If he learned anything today, it was that this girl *wasn’t*

fragile. She was no useless lily waiting to be stomped on, she was a rose with jagged thorns that would draw blood if one was careless.

Bakugo would never admit to the tiny smidgen of respect that had bloomed for her.

He ran a hand down his face and trudged over to Uraraka as some robots brought over a stretcher. The least he could do is help her out.

Besides, he would prove to these damn extras that he wasn't a villain.

"Ooooh! Next on the roster is green child!!" Cerberus wagged his tail, "I hope he wins this one, too."

"His opponent is a master of ice," Byakko stuck his nose up in the air, "I doubt your 'green child' will stand a chance against him."

"Don't be so quick to dismiss Midoriya," Arsene said, clutching his chin, "He has significant power inside of him, if his battle with Shinsou is anything to go by. If he can create such a powerful gust from moving his fingers, then what else does he have up his sleeve?"

"See?" Cerberus beamed, "Green child will win!!"

Byakko snorted and languidly stretched out on the floor.

"It's adorable how you two are bickering over this," Titania giggled, "Did you already forget what happened at the end of the cavalry battle?"

Byakko and Cerberus cast glances at one another, and Titania sighed.

“If you were paying attention, you would’ve seen a bit of fire leave that boy’s left side.”

“He had fire?” The guard dog’s eyes lit up.

“Obviously ice is the better element. No wonder he shuns his vile flames.”

“An imbalance like that might prove to be a fatal mistake,” Yatararasu was perched on Arsene’s shoulder, “I wonder if the boy is limiting himself on purpose?”

“But that would be foolish of him,” Titania scoffed, “Not only does that curb his own growth, it would also be an insult to everyone else who got this far using their full power. It’ll only cause him more grief.”

“Hmm, we shall see what fate has in store for them.” A serene voice trickled through like water, “Let us observe their battle with utmost attention.”

The combatants were called to the stage as everyone went quiet. The battle blasted off with a glacier that consumed the arena, Byakko purred and batted his tail against the ground. Byakko’s smugness made Cerberus’s lips curl, but their staring contest was broken off by a sudden burst of power. The Trickster shielded the Magician as the chilly winds whipped through the stands.

“Did I not tell you?” Arsene said as more ice overwhelmed the arena, only to be blown apart, “He’ll be a force to reckoned with if he learns to properly harness his power.”

“But all of his fingers are getting broken,” Alice tilted her head head, “They seem angry too, the green one in particular.”

“How foolish. The other boy is shivering from his own ice.” Titania wiped some invisible dust from her shimmering dress, “Are all of these children this irrational, or does stupidity and recklessness just run in their veins?”

Midoriya clutched his purple fingers, a mix of rage and pain pooling in his eyes. He shouted something at the other boy, time tilted on it's axis as Todoroki's eyes shot open in shock and awe.

Byakko suddenly bristled, "What is this? I sense-"

"Hellflame!"

They were blinded by a sky high outpouring of golden-red fire, the pure heat bathed them all. Cerberus gained a subtle blue glow as he became the Trickster's current mask, the unbearable warmth fizzled out into a pleasant spring breeze, Byakko wasn't the only one to breathe a sigh of relief.

The momentary relief turned to horror as ice and fire and raw cataclysmic power clashed in the middle of the arena, Cerberus huffed as Seth became the next mask, his invisible wings shielding the Trickster from the destruction that shook the arena to it's very core.

The battle ended with Midoriya crumpling over, thrown against the wall on the opposite side of the stage. Cerberus whimpered, his ears went flat on his head and his tail lifelessly flopped to the ground.

"Green child..."

"I told you he would lose." Byakko muttered, but there was no smug joy in his voice.

"I said it before and I'll say it again," The Magician whispered to the Trickster, *"These people are crazy."*

Nobody argued with that.

Aiba glanced over to one of the screens as an eruption of fire overtook the feed.

“These kids sure know how to be dramatic.” She tapped a few buttons and pressed record, “Too bad it’s silenced. I wonder what Midoriya said to make Endeavor’s kid so worked up. Oh well, it’s not as entertaining as the Iida kid getting used as a show pony.”

She turned back to her work, brilliant code trailed up and down her main monitor, beautiful and dangerous all in one. It would be a weapon to be admired and adored. A tiny smile perked her lips as her fingers flew across the keyboard. She added a few more things to her newborn virus, then leaned back with a content sigh.

This project was barely in its infant stages, but if she was able to hack into U.A. without getting caught, if only for fifteen minutes, then who knows what else is possible? It was dangerous to go into uncharted waters, or fly too close to the sun without getting burnt, so she had to make sure that this virus would be perfect. She rubbed her burning eyes and stretched her sore wrists, her stomach rumbled. Aiba groaned as she fell back into the cushions, her hair was a curtain of magnificent maroon that contrasted her collection of darker pillows.

“Maybe I’ll ask him to make some more curry when he gets back,” She said as she stared at the ceiling, “Not the half baked instant stuff, either.”

Aiba’s eyes fluttered closed for only a few moments, but she was jarred awake by her blaring phone. She sat up with a startled cry, hands blindly feeling around her desk. An empty water bottle was knocked over as she finally found the cursed thing and held it up to her ear.

“H-hello?”

“Is everything still in the green?” Akira’s voice filtered through a din of chaos, *“We’re about to head back to the Raven’s Nest.”*

Aiba blinked several times and glanced at the Sports Festival stream. Her heart went into her throat as she lunged at the

keyboard. All Might was already giving the bronze medal to Tokoyami! She must've fallen asleep!

"Y-yes! Everything should be fine!" She pinched the phone between her ear and shoulder as she scrolled through her feed, "There hasn't even been a peep about any intruders. By the way, can you make some curry when you get back? *Real* curry, not the instant stuff."

"I... guess we can pick some stuff up for it," He was silent for a moment, *"Any real reason for the sudden request?"*

"Oh, come on! We have to celebrate somehow!" She said with a roll of her eyes, "You broke into the *top* hero school in the country and didn't get thrown in jail! That counts as a victory all by itself. Pretty please?"

"You're right. I should practice my curry making skills before they get rusty." She could feel his smug grin, *"Anyway, we'll see you in a bit."*

Aiba hung up and tossed her phone on the cushions, idly watching it bounce before turning back to her computer. She hummed a tune as she worked on her project, but her growling stomach was too much of a distraction. Her new baby was saved on an extra flash drive to be worked on later.

She couldn't wait for them to get back so they could eat.

If Akira's homemade curry was anything like his coffee, then she would be in for a real treat.

Akira left the stadium behind, despite the fireworks and the cheers rumbling through the grounds like thunder. His eyes were on his phone as he flicked through his gallery. He made sure to take plenty of pictures and gain video footage of the battles, both for research and to have undeniable proof of this world's insanity.

“I’m sure Yusuke would’ve loved to see Todoroki’s Giant Iceberg of Doom,” Akira said softly, “It was so close we could reach out and touch it.”

“You *did* reach out and touch the Giant Iceberg of Doom.” Morgana stuck his nose out with a snicker, “I’m surprised nobody got seriously injured from that, especially you.”

“Byakko made sure it wouldn’t hurt me,” Akira pocketed his phone, “I just feel sorry for that tape kid, he stood no chance.”

“That’s an understatement,” Morgana whispered, “In any case, I would call this mission a huge success.”

“Not quite, we haven’t left the school grounds yet.”

Every step closer to the U.A. gate was agonizing. They were so close to getting away scott free, yet anything could happen between here and there that could flip everything on it’s head. They passed the food stands, the vendors scurried to get the final dishes done before the events ended and people would flood the grounds, snapping up the last of the festival food before they were booted out of the school.

“Wait, you there!”

Akira froze as footsteps approached from behind. He looked over his shoulder to Ectoplasm, whose eyes scanned him warily, Morgana went rigid and held his breath. He adopted the mask of a nervous teenager, the switch was as easy as shifting to a different persona.

“Y-yes?” Akira made himself as small as possible, “Can I help you, sir?”

“I hope so,” Ectoplasm said with a sigh, “Have you seen a little girl with blonde hair and a blue dress? We were helping her locate her brother when she got lost in the crowd.”

Alice's giggles sent tremors down his back.

"N-no, I haven't."

"Damnit," Ectoplasm muttered under his breath, "If you do see her, then please alert the nearest hero or police officer. We don't want her getting injured or scared off."

"Will do." Akira pushed up his glasses and blinked innocently, "I hope you find her."

"Me too, kid."

Ectoplasm turned away to question other passing civilians. Akira sighed in relief, then whirled around to get the hell out before something else happened. They danced with Lady Luck enough for one day, and they knew better than to stick around and wait for her patience to run thin. Relief swelled through their chests when they passed under the cursed school gate. An odd heaviness left their bodies too.

"That was fun, I guess." Alice said the moment they stepped onto public streets, "I really like Ectoplasm, I think he might be the only one to survive playing with my teddies. I wonder how many clones would go down before he actually dies?"

"Killing humans is not our way, Alice." Arsene chastised, "Nor will it ever be the first option we choose. Understand?"

Alice nodded with a pout, but said no more.

Akira let their words fade into the background as he glanced back at the golden insignia stamped on the gate, Morgana's eyes gleamed from within the bag as he stared too. Akira adjusted the bag before turning to walk away. They both knew that they would have to come back to U.A. one way or another, if what Morgana sensed had any significant role in their place in this world.

Besides, no possible Treasure would ever be safe from the Phantom Thieves.

Aizawa let out a bone deep sigh as he stepped into the teacher's lounge.

"What's up with the dramatic sigh, Shouta?" Midnight teased as she plopped down at her desk and crossed her legs.

"I'm just glad the Sports Festival is over," Aizawa sank into his chair and laid his head down, "It was stressful and my students are idiots. Midoriya permanently damaged his hand because the problem child can't control his own quirk."

"It would have been worse if we didn't put a stop to it," Cementoss said with a nod, "Sometimes children just get reckless."

"That was more than just being reckless." He growled.

"Maybe, it was pretty exciting though!" Midnight said, "Oh! I heard that one of the third years lost his clothes when using his quirk. I bet that'll skyrocket the ratings!"

"Don't even go there." Aizawa said, "He-"

"GOOD JOB TODAY EVERYBODY!!!" Present Mic kicked open the door.

The sudden ruckus knocked over the items on their desks, mugs and picture frames toppled over and shattered while pens spilled out onto the floor. Snipe cried out as his favorite knick knack broke in half. Aizawa glared at his friend before scooping up his pen collection from the tiles, others cleaned up spilled papers or ceramic shards.

"Really, Mic?"

“Er, sorry?” He shrugged with a watery grin, “That’s never happened before.”

“You owe me!” Snipe said, he held together the broken pieces in futility, then put them on his desk with a sigh, “This was a collectors item!”

“Alright, alright!” Mic waved his hands, “I’ll get you another one! Scout’s honor?”

“You better,” Snipe tipped his hat, the other hand patted his gun, “Otherwise I’ll load your leather jacket full of iron.”

Midnight cackled as Aizawa rolled his eyes. He ignored their banter as he put his pen collection away, then opened up his laptop. His cat, Marshmallow, stared back at him from the home screen, but a sudden pop up made his eyes narrow.

“Download interrupted..?”

He scowled and glared at Midnight, but she wasn’t paying any attention as she teased Mic. He would have to remind both her and Present Mic to stop downloading unsavory garbage to his computer as a prank. With another roll of his eyes, he closed the window without a second thought.

“Shouldn’t Nezu be here already?” Power Loader said as he deposited broken shards in the waste bin, “It’s not like him to be late.”

“And Ectoplasm and Hound Dog too.” Midnight said with a frown.

“Oh,” Snipe glanced between the other teachers, “They are scanning over camera footage to look for a little girl that got separated from her family, they sent me back to inform you all. The other heroes we hired for security are also searching the grounds.”

“A lost little girl?” Yagi blinked up from his desk, “Do you know if they found her yet?”

“No luck as far as I could tell,” Snipe said with a shrug, “I hope they can find the little darlin’ before anything bad happens to her.”

“Maybe she found her family already?” Midnight said, “That would make sense since nobody received an emergency call or got an amber alert.”

“I guess we’ll find out when they get here.” Snipe tipped his hat, “Whenever that will be.”

Aizawa sighed as he scrubbed his eyes.

All he wanted to do after a day like today was go home, snuggle with Marshmallow, and go to sleep.

Hey everyone! Well, that concludes the Sports Festival, I felt that there wasn't really a need to hash out every canon fight and make it longer than it should be necessary, so I only included the two that I think would be most impactful.

Sunset Bridge

Chapter 20: Sunset Bridge

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Akira added the final touch of cream and sugar to the coffee.

The rich liquid was given a quick stir, curls of steam wafted from the cup as Akira picked it up and rounded the counter. Hitoshi sat at the booth with a small laptop, he glanced up as the coffee was set in front of him.

“Your coffee, as promised.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Akira frowned when Hitoshi glared at his device, “Is something wrong? If you’re still upset over yesterday-”

“It’s not that. Well, I would be a liar if I said I still wasn’t mad over that.” Hitoshi shrugged, “But it’s something else. I’ve been doing some digging on the Hero Killer, since the news compares him so much to Joker, and there are some things that don’t really add up.”

Akira blinked, “Like what?”

“Stain was relatively unknown before Joker took down Silver Falcon.” He sipped on his coffee and scrolled through the web page, “He still had a small following, with only a few mentions here and there between shady forums. Not even the news really seemed to care about him.”

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“I just find it odd how Stain gained so much attention all of a sudden.” Hitoshi sighed and set his cup down, “It’s like somebody

used Joker's sudden fame to fuel Stain's ideals, to send his message to a much broader audience. The sad thing is that it's working, and now Joker and Stain are nearly synonymous to each other. Their mutual fame keeps bouncing off one another, for better or for worse. There's always some new article about them whenever I check the news."

Akira sank into the opposite booth with a frown, "It does sound suspicious."

"It is. As I said, it just seems that way. I haven't found any concrete evidence yet, so I don't know if it's a coincidence or not." Hitoshi shrugged, "That, or the conspiracy theorist in me just doesn't know when to quit."

Akira pushed up his glasses, "What exactly do you know about Stain?"

"Where to even begin," Hitoshi blinked slowly, and took another sip of coffee before he spoke, "Rumor has it that Stain was a vigilante called Stendhal before he snapped and started murdering heroes, he's walked a pretty bloody path since then."

"How many victims does Stain have?"

"Let me look," Hitoshi hummed, typing on his laptop, "He's murdered 17 known pros and permanently crippled another 22. Well, 23 now. Ingenium got hit in Hosu during the Sports Festival yesterday, there was an article this morning stating that he might be permanently handicapped. They haven't released anything new yet, so the hero's still alive at least."

"Yeah..."

Akira frowned as he looked out the front windows.

Something heavy had taken to the air since Stain's attack on Ingenium, he couldn't exactly place a finger on it. Was it fear?

Uncertainty? It was in the eyes of everyone he passed this morning, in hushed whispers that spoke of the sheer brutality. It was similar to the dread that plagued Shibuya during Kaneshiro's reign, but Stain's reach extended all over Japan and was drenched by merciless bloodshed.

His gut instinct screamed at him to *fix* this before Stain could maim anyone else.

"Why are you so interested in Stain?" Hitoshi pulled him from his thoughts, "You've been asking a lot of questions."

"I just want to stay informed in case there's anything new," Akira blinked a few times and smiled, "Better than being completely ignorant, right?"

"Hmm," Hitoshi narrowed his eyes and took a slow, exaggerated sip, "I guess."

"Kurusu-kun!" Risumi poked her head out of the kitchen, "I believe it's almost done!"

"Coming!"

Hitoshi's eyes never left him as he stood and disappeared into the other room with Risumi, a divine scent had drifted from the kitchen, intermingling with buttery and sugary counterparts. Ayumu stood in front of a large bubbling pot, he glanced over to them when they entered. The man hadn't bothered Akira since he started working here, but his lips fell into a slight frown, his eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"It smells amazing, Kurusu-kun!" Risumi said, "Are you certain you want to give us this recipe? Wasn't it from your old boss?"

"I'm sure," Akira grabbed the ladle and stirred, the smell was familiar and heart wrenching, "Boss would want me to share it with everyone that I could."

“And if this test run of your curry and coffee combo takes off,” Risumi smile widened, “Then I think you should get to name it.”

Ayumu’s scowl deepened, but Akira paid the man no mind.

“Can we call it the Leblanc Special? It was the name of his cafe.”

“Of course, dear.” Risumi clasped her hands together at her waist, “Although, I’ve never heard of curry having grated apples and yogurt in it before.”

“It’s not uncommon,” Akira nodded as Sojiro’s voice played over in his mind, “The apples and yogurt add a layer of sweetness to the curry, and it balances out all of the other spices. This recipe is one of the first ones he taught me how to make. I figured we would start with something simple before moving on to the more complex recipes.”

“Oh?” Risumi perked up in interest, “What are some of the others?”

“There’s another recipe with honey, a different one that uses chocolate,” A soft smile came over him as he stared into the curry pot, “But my favorite has to be the one with red wine in it. The wine adds a certain depth and richness to the sauce, and it also tenderizes the meat. You don’t have to worry about the alcohol because it cooks off before the curry is done.”

“You know your stuff.” Ayumu admitted hesitantly.

“He taught me just as much about coffee beans,” Akira gave the curry one last stir, “If you’re up for buying anything new, then I would suggest trying Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. It was his best seller.”

Risumi exchanged glances with Ayumu, “I’m surprised you’re sharing so much with us, much less allowing us to use his actual recipes. I know you cared deeply for this man, just by the way you talk about him.”

“Well...” Akira avoided their eyes, “I might’ve also shared everything as a peace offering?”

Ayumu crossed his arms and scowled at him. “What did you do.”

“Ayumu!” She elbowed her husband, then looked at Akira with a raised brow, “Why would you want to give us a peace offering when you’ve done nothing wrong?”

“I know I just started working here, but I would like to request some time off.”

“How long?”

“A couple of days, a week at the most.”

Risumi hummed, “Is there a particular reason why?”

“I’m helping a friend move to another city. I’m the only person she has and I want to make sure she gets settled in safely.”

A whole week, one day to get Aiba to Gentle Criminal, and then the rest to scour Hosu for Stain. Morgana didn’t like going after a serial killer any more than he did, but they had to stop him before more people got hurt or worse.

Risumi’s sleepy eyes stared into him for several seconds, and for a moment he thought she would say no.

“Okay.”

Akira blinked, “Okay?”

“I gave you all of our numbers, so do keep us updated? Let me know if you need any more time to get your friend moved in.”

Akira nodded. Ayumu rolled his eyes and sighed, to which she turned to him with a tiny, frightening smile.

“Dear, I believe the cinnamon rolls are burning.” The man swore under his breath and scurried to another stove, “Don’t mind him, Kurusu-kun. Did you want to deliver the first plate of curry to Hitoshi? I’m sure that would make him feel better, he’s been a bit down since the Sports Festival.”

Akira scooped some fluffy rice from a nearby cooker and ladled a healthy helping of curry sauce. Risumi winked at him as he went to the front of the cafe, Hitoshi was still in the booth, captivated by his computer. His eyes shot wide open as Akira set the delectable dish down with a smirk.

“The first batch of my homemade curry,” He pushed up his glasses, “And you’re the first one to taste it.”

“Sweeeet.”

Akira could see Risumi and Ayumu poking their heads out from the kitchen doors as Hitoshi took the first bite. Hitoshi’s eyes shot wide open as he chewed thoughtfully, put down the spoon, and took in a deep breath. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the booth.

“You alright, there?” Akira asked with a tilt of his head.

“Perfect. Tasting anything you make is a religious experience,” He said with a content sigh, “I need a moment to savor it.”

Akira chuckled as Risumi came out of the kitchen with a tiny smirk of her own. In her hand was a sign with ‘Leblanc Special’ written in colorful chalk, which she put at the top of the glass display.

“Kurusu-kun, can you flip the sign? We’re just about ready for the day.”

“On it.”

Some tiny, gnarled part of his heart unfurled as he flipped the sign, the scent of curry and coffee drifting through the Blue Lotus Cafe felt

like home.

Morgana glanced over reports and class schedules, files with students' faces and quirks, of maps and blueprints of certain buildings.

This was but a taste of what Aiba's flash drive recovered from the school files, she had been working on sorting through and categorizing it on her computer, printing a few things here and there for him to read over. The largest map was splayed out on the lounge coffee table, anything of importance was circled in red.

Morgana's eyes were getting strained, but he shook his head and pressed on.

"So, let me get this straight," Morgana stared into the map, "This *whole* thing is the U.A. campus?"

"Pretty much." Aiba looked up from her laptop, "U.A. is the top hero school in the country, they can easily spend hundreds of thousands to expand their property, especially with the amount of money they get just from the Sports Festival alone. That doesn't cover the grants they get from the Hero Commission either."

"This is... a lot bigger than I thought possible," Morgana put his paw over the dot marked USJ, his ears drooped, "So this place is a few miles from the main building, but it's still within the school's boundaries."

"Yup." Aiba closed her laptop and set it aside, "They usually carry students to and from the various gyms with buses. The USJ is around a twenty-minute ride from the main school grounds. Not many classes aside from the Hero Courses actually go there, though the gyms are open to all students."

A pit of dread swirled around Morgana's heart.

“What’s wrong?” Aiba asked with furrowed brows, “You two have been quiet ever since you got back. I thought you would be happy to get all of this?”

“I know, and we are. It’s just...”

At that moment the door opened and Akira walked through, looking fairly exhausted.

“Welcome back!” Aiba said with a smile, “How did everything go today?”

“The Leblanc Special was a smash hit,” He said as he sank into the couch with a sigh, Morgana wasted no time jumping into his lap, “We were sold out of curry within a few hours. I wouldn’t doubt it if the Blue Lotus Cafe will be the talk of the town because of it.”

“I’m sure.” Aiba chuckled, “Kaito and I ate the last batch you made.”

“Already?” He stared at her with a raised brow, “I just made a whole pot last night!”

“I have no regrets.” She deadpanned, “Neither does Kaito.”

“Well, I’m glad it was a success,” Morgana said, “But we have a big problem, Akira.”

“What else is new?” Akira lifted his glasses to scrub at his eyes, “What’s the problem?”

“Just look at the map,” Morgana hopped onto the table, “How are we going to get to the USJ without tripping security? We barely made it out of the main building without getting caught, so we’re stuck unless we come up with something.”

Akira leaned forward with a frown, “Well, just storming the place is off the table.”

“Yeah, that would be total suicide,” Aiba said, “You’d not only alert the whole U.A. faculty, but it would send out an emergency signal to every hero in Musutafu! They upgraded their systems in case there’s another invasion.”

“But can’t you hack it?” Morgana asked, “You already did once.”

“I... could.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes, “You don’t sound so sure.”

“Look,” Aiba bit her lip and glanced in between them, “It took me *two weeks* with shortcuts to buy you two fifteen minutes! Plus, you were already at the building before I launched my program!”

“How does the security system at U.A. work, anyway?” Akira asked, eyes glued to the map.

“To put it simply,” She said, “The upgraded security nodes send out a signal in random intervals, the shortest interval being fifteen minutes. If there’s an inactive node or one line of code that’s not supposed to be there, then it’ll send an alert to all the heroes on site. It’s why fifteen minutes was the maximum amount of time I could get you.”

“Okay, so we would need to shut it down completely to have a chance,” Morgana looked into Akira’s eyes, “And who knows how long it’ll take to get to the USJ or to properly investigate it.”

“And to find what we need...” Akira clutched his chin in thought, then turned to look at Aiba, “How long would it take you to make a virus that would shut it down completely?”

“I...” She gripped the hem of her shirt with white knuckles, “It could take months to make a virus powerful enough to blackout their systems, and U.A. could upgrade their security system even more by then-”

“*Months!?* ” Akira and Morgana exclaimed simultaneously.

Aiba jumped, her shoulders flew up to her ears as she blinked several times.

“I’m sorry,” She said, shaking her head, “I’ll work hard on it, but I have to make sure that it’ll be perfect so you two won’t get arrested! What’s so important at the USJ anyway?”

Akira and Morgana’s eyes met. Entire conversations flashed in between them in mere seconds, before Akira looked over to Aiba. His shoulders sank, his eyes so full of sorrow that it made her heart twist.

“The USJ could be our only ticket to returning things to normal.”

Aiba furrowed her brows, then glanced at Morgana as the cat sighed.

“Let’s just say that we were attacked and that our appearance during the USJ was never supposed to happen,” Morgana said, he shivered and curled his tail around his legs, “There might be clues at the USJ that could fix our current predicament, but that’s all you need to know.”

“I get it,” She held her hands up, “We all have secrets. I’ll put my heart and soul into the virus and make sure you two can get what you need. Just, please be patient with me?”

Akira stood from the couch, his sorrow replaced with a mask of gentle kindness.

“Do what you need to do,” He said softly, “Now I know we have plenty of time to kill. In any case, how far did you get in sorting the information we got?”

“Do you know how many people would kill for this information?” Aiba pulled a flash drive from her computer and handed it to him, “ I already divided it up into different categories. There was a lot to sort through, everything from student and teacher files, to the *correct*

blueprints of all of the buildings, schedules, and classes, among other things. I put all of the useless information in a separate folder. I don't think you'd be interested in renovations for the girl's locker rooms, at least I hope not."

Akira snorted, "Thanks. We'll put it to good use."

"You better!" Aiba crossed her arms, "I also put a fail-safe on the drive just in case, so it'll only work with my laptop and the computer in your cubicle. It'll crash any other computer it's plugged in to, then wipe all of the information from the drive. We can't be too careful with something like this."

"Nice." Akira nodded, then pocketed the drive, "So, are you ready for tomorrow?"

"W-we're going tomorrow?" She jumped from the couch, her cheeks turning a shade of pink, "I... I'm going to be able to meet Gentle Criminal?"

"That's the plan."

Aiba suddenly rushed forward and crashed into him. Akira stiffened at the sudden embrace, but a genuine smile broke out as he patted her head.

"Oh my gosh! I have so many things to get ready for!" She broke off the hug and raced towards her cubicle, "Everything has to be perfect before we leave tomorrow!! Feel free to use my laptop for the information you got! The password is the flavor for last night's curry!"

Silence hung in the air as her door shut. Akira stood there for a long moment, the feeling of Morgana's eyes on him prickled up his back, then he walked over to the kitchen and dug out various ingredients.

"What are we going to do, Ren?"

The use of his real name made him hesitate, but he shook his head and snatched up a bag of potatoes.

“I’m going to make an extra big pot of curry,” He said, “I’m sure Kaito would appreciate some decent food while we’re gone.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“I know.” Akira dug out the massive pot from the bottom cabinet and filled it with water, “We’ll do what we need to do while Aiba works on the virus. It’s all we can do.”

“So we’ll continue our work as Phantom Thieves until then?”

“Better than sitting around and doing nothing, don’t you think? We’ll put our talents to use and help people, it won’t be that different compared to what we did at home.”

“I guess....” Morgana sighed and looked at the map, “I’m just really worried about the others. I hope they’re okay.”

“They are.” Akira frowned as he turned off the water, then set it on the stove to boil, “They’re strong enough to withstand anything, they’re not alone either. Who knows, maybe they’ll be able to reach us before we reach them, then the whole plan with Aiba’s virus won’t be needed.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Akira’s frown turned into a smirk, “I’m always right.”

“Sure you are,” Morgana said with a roll of his eyes, “But we should memorize all of the information we got from U.A. and research everything we can about Stain, after you’re done with the curry, of course.”

“And here I was just getting used to not doing homework,” His voice oozed with sarcasm, “But then again, I don’t think anybody’s homework is to plan the downfall of a serial killer.”

Morgana chuckled, "Understatement of the century."

Extra pair of clothes? Check. Items and a certain flash drive tucked safely away in his costume? Check. His phone, charger, and wallet? Double check. He stuffed the rest of his things underneath the desk, then picked up his bag and walked out of his cubicle. Morgana was sitting patiently in the lounge.

"She's not out yet?"

"Aiba's been in the bathroom for almost two hours," Morgana said, "Remind me why girls take so long?"

Akira shrugged with a half-smile.

"We still have time before the train leaves. We'll be-"

Morgana looked at something behind him, his jaw dropped as Akira heard soft footsteps. He turned around, his eyes widened as he blinked several times.

Aiba's baggy clothes were replaced by a long-sleeved blouse and a maroon skirt, her raspberry hair was wrapped up into pigtails, with some sweeping bangs over her forehead. Thick black makeup covered the circles under her eyes and made them pop. She carried a backpack that was nearly as large as she was.

"W-well?" Aiba tugged on one of her pigtails, eyes flicked between them, "How do I look?"

"You look... a lot different." Morgana said.

"A good different," Akira said with a smile, "You've really come into your own."

Her anxiety melted away with a bashful smile, she adjusted the massive bag and marched straight for the door.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” She chimed happily, “Let’s go!”

Akira and Morgana exchanged glances before he held out his shoulder bag for Morgana to make himself comfortable. The cat snuggled down as he followed, Kaito’s jaw slacked when they traipsed out to the front.

“So, you guys really are leaving.”

“Morgana and I aren’t,” Akira said, “Not permanently, anyway.”

Aiba nodded, “Thanks for letting me stay here, Kaito. I don’t like long goodbyes, so I wish you the best of luck!”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck too,” Kaito chuckled, then glanced at Akira, “You two be careful, you hear?”

“We will,” Morgana poked his head out of the bag, “I hope you don’t mind, but we had to leave some of our stuff in our cubicle. Can you look after it for us?”

“And there’s more than enough curry in the fridge to last until we come back.” Akira said, “Just don’t eat it all in one go.”

“I’ll make sure nobody messes with your stuff. I shall make no such promises with the curry though.” The man leaned back in his seat and waved at them, “Now, go on. I’ll be seeing you later.”

With a nod, they made their leave. They barely took two steps before Aiba dug around in her bag, producing a fuzzy shawl and a large pair of sunglasses.

“What are those for?” Akira asked.

“A disguise!” She threw the items on and posed, “I don’t want to be recognized when I start working with Gentle!”

“Right, because you don’t look ridiculous at all.” Morgana shook his head and ducked into the bag, “Let’s go, before we’re late.”

Akira took the lead, with a 'disguised' Aiba trailing behind him. The morning rush was just beginning, but they made it to the station without too much trouble. It wasn't until after they got their tickets that they ran into something interesting.

A certain group of kids stood around holding similar suitcases, he spotted Uraraka and Midoriya right off the bat. Eraserhead was at the head of the group, the general chaos of the station washed the man's voice away. Akira ducked his head to avoid their eyes and blended into the crowd, Aiba reached out to grasp his sleeve so that they wouldn't get separated.

"Did you know them?" She asked when they boarded the train.

"Those were the 1-A kids," They walked down the aisle to find a decent seat, "I've run into a few of them before."

"I don't think they saw us," Morgana whispered, "I was watching them while we boarded."

"Then there's nothing to worry about!" She found a pair of open seats and hopped into the window seat, "I've already hacked into the areas we'll be in today, so any camera footage will be useless."

"Did I ever mention that I love your hacking?" Akira said as he took his seat and placed his bag on his lap.

Aiba chuckled, then they fell into a comfortable silence as the doors shut and the train lurched with motion, the world outside was reduced to nothing more than a colorful blur. It wouldn't be too long of a ride, so Akira leaned his head back into the chair and closed his eyes.

He took a deep breath as he focused inward. His personas had been unusually quiet today. He could feel the tension lined within Arsene, hear the bristle of his wing feathers as he shuffled them restlessly, that alone set the rest of them on high alert.

"It'll be okay, everyone." Akira thought, "We have a plan."

"And we know plans don't usually go, well.... as planned." Arsene said, "We have experience with the dangers of the metaverse, but taking on a man as ruthless as Stain is an entirely different matter."

"Hmph!" Seth reared his head up, "Bloodstain uses mortal weapons made of metal, they cannot harm as long as the Trickster has me as his mask"

"His name is Stain." Titania corrected, "Just Stain. What a droll name for a bloody man."

Seth snorted, "Bloodstain, Shitstain, whatever sort of stain he is, he can be devoured by yours truly."

"Shit."

All eyes turned to Alice, who swayed her hips back and forth. She blinked her big doe eyes like the innocent child she wasn't.

"Alice, no bad words! And you, Seth, watch your language!" Titania covered Alice's ears, "We have a precious child in our midst."

"Big sis!" Alice pushed away from Titania and stomped her foot, "I'm more than old enough to listen to curse words!"

"Even if Stain were to somehow get through Seth's defense," Byakko huffed an icy breath as he ignored them, "We have powerful healers in our ranks. The Magician, Titania, among others."

Byakko's eyes trailed to a figure floating serenely half-way across the mindscape.

"Tch," Titania tucked a lock of hair behind her ears, "My healing skills should be more than enough. The Trickster has faith in my healing abilities, right?"

"Oh?" The floating woman's velvety voice slinked across Akira's psyche, "You only have a single healing skill, but you cannot revive or cure ailments. You cannot match a power like mine. Such a shame, Lady Titania."

"You want to say that to my face?" Titania snapped, her voice was like a sickly sweet venom, "Come over here and I'll-"

"Enough!" Arsene flared his great wings and growled, "We will not argue over petty little things. Besides, the Aiba girl is staring at you, Trickster."

Akira opened his eyes. Aiba was studying him, her eyes visible over the dark lenses.

"What?"

"You fell asleep for a bit," Aiba said with a tilt of her head, "I was about to wake you up."

"I didn't fall asleep, I was just talking with everyone." Aiba scrunched her face in confusion, so he tapped his temple, "Was talking with Arsene, but he's not the only one there who likes to talk."

"Really?" Aiba's eyes widened, but there was a sparkle to them, "How many of them are there?"

"Over a dozen."

"Wow, and they can all talk to you?"

"Yeah, it gets pretty loud sometimes. How long was I out?" Akira glanced around the train, "Are we almost there?"

"It's been over an hour already, so it should pull in any minute."

"It has?" Akira glanced down as Morgana poked his nose out, "It only felt like a few minutes to me."

The train hissed to a stop, Akira shook his head to clear his thoughts as Aiba hopped from her seat. Akira followed her, Morgana adjusted himself as Akira swung the bag over his shoulder. This station was sprawling with cafes and small stores, music playing over the loudspeakers added to the general murmur of the crowd.

“You know where we’re going, right?” Akira whispered.

“Yup,” Aiba already had her phone out, “Gentle’s apartment is this way.”

He wasn’t going to bother asking, so he kept his mouth shut as they cut through the station. The surrounding city was like any you would find in Japan. Skyscrapers jutted out over the horizon, cars thrummed along busy roads, and the streets were awash with a variety of different people.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore, Joker.”

Akira barely held back a snort, *“You did not just make that reference, Arsene.”*

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.” His voice dripped with sarcasm, *“But we better keep up with Aiba. She’s fast for her size.”*

Aiba followed the map on her phone like a bloodhound would a fresh trail. They barely had time to take in any new sights as they trekked farther from the city center, busy shipping districts turned into quieter neighborhoods, they only stopped to stare up at a row of apartment buildings on the other side of the city.

“Is this it?”

“Yeah...” Aiba swallowed, “This is where he lives. Okay, we can do this. I *can* do this.”

She took off the shawl and sunglasses before they stepped into the third building. The lobby was vacant as they called an elevator,

Aiba's shaking finger pressed the button for the fourth floor.

"It's alright." He put a reassuring hand to her shoulder, "You have this in the bag."

Her eyes sparkled, "Thanks."

The elevator dinged, and the door opened to a long carpeted hallway. Akira walked out first, Aiba made to follow, but she stopped after a few steps.

"Akira." He looked over his shoulder as she stared at the ground, "I want to know something before we go any further."

"What is it?"

"I..." She looked him straight in the eye, her bag straps creaked as she tightened her grip, "I want to ask you why you were so nice to me."

"Why?" Akira's brows shot up.

"Y-yeah. I was in a dark place before I met you, just hopelessly clinging to my computer..." Her pigtails bounced as she shook her head, "I thought my life wasn't worth it before I found Gentle Criminal, and then you showed me a kindness that I've never experienced before. Everyone else always kicked me to the curb, so I was curious."

He took a moment to think. With a sigh, he answered honestly.

"Because you were exactly like someone I care about, we aren't actual siblings, but I would consider her my little sister." He said slowly, "It's almost ironic how alike you two are, down to the hacking and long hair. Hers was orange, though."

"Oh," Aiba stepped up beside him with a smile, "Can I meet her sometime?"

“I’m... afraid that’s not possible.” Pain flashed in his eyes and he looked away, “She’s not around.”

“I’m so sorry.” Aiba inhaled sharply, “I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it. Which apartment is he in?”

“Uh...” Aiba blinked rapidly to hide her tears, “Apartment 6, right over there.”

She stopped in front of the door, her hand lifted, she bit her lip and glanced back at Akira.

“Go ahead. He’s your hero, so you should be the one to knock.”

“R-right...”

Aiba took a moment to psych herself up, she stood up straight and rapped her knuckles on the door. They heard footsteps and it opened to reveal a man with white hair and mustache, he seemed to be taken aback, gaping at the two of them.

“G-Gentle Criminal sir!” Aiba said, “I’m a huge fan! I....I want to help you carve your name in history!!”

The hall was doused in silence.

“Why...” Gentle blinked and cleared his throat, “Why don’t you two come in for tea?”

He held the door open as Aiba and Akira stepped inside. The interior of his apartment was simple but refined, with purple wallpaper and polished wooden panels. They slipped off their shoes and Gentle swept them into a small room with a table and a few red cushioned chairs.

“Feel free to take a seat. I wasn’t expecting any guests today,” Gentle said, “But making tea for someone other than myself is quite exciting! It’ll only be a moment!”

Aiba set her bag down and hopped up on the closest chair. Akira watched Gentle as he went into the kitchen, before sitting down next to her.

“Oh my gosh....” Aiba whispered, her eyes wide, “I can’t believe we’re here.”

“He seems nice enough.”

Gentle came back in with a tray loaded with teacups, the man moved with an agile grace as he set out the refreshments, Akira picked up on the subtle scent of honey. Aiba was infatuated with everything he did.

“I think we should start by exchanging names.” Gentle said as he took the last seat across from them.

“A-Aiba Manami!”

“Kurusu Akira.”

Akira’s bag moved and the not-cat popped his head out, “Morgana!”

Aiba covered her mouth to stop her laughter, but Akira snorted. Gentle looked in between the three of them, stroking his facial hair.

“Oh my, how rude of me not to foresee a third guest!” He said, “Would you like some tea, my feline friend?”

“Huh, people usually freak out when he talks.” Akira said.

“No, it’s fine.” Morgana crawled out of the bag and settled on Akira’s shoulders, “You were about to tell us your name?”

“Of course,” Gentle took a lavish sip of tea, “The world might know me as Gentle Criminal, but my name is Tobita Danjuro!”

Morgana and Akira exchanged glances. It didn’t seem to be an alias. Akira didn’t say anything as he tried the tea, he masked his surprise

as he gently set the cup back down. The pure golden liquid was in league with the quality of his coffee and left a pleasant aftertaste on his palette.

“Now, may I ask what brings you children here?”

“I’m not a kid!” Aiba said, “I-I’m actually 22 years old!”

“Really?” Akira gawked at her as she blushed.

“Yeah. How old did you think I was?”

“Thirteen, maybe fourteen?” A smirk slid onto his face as he pinched his fingers together and held the minuscule gap by his eye, “You’re just so tiny.”

“Hey!” She reached over and punched him on the arm, “I might be tiny, but I’m mighty too!!”

He laughed as he rubbed his arm, “I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“Apologies, Miss Aiba.” Tobita said with a bow of his head, “I’ve now insulted two of my esteemed guests.”

“It’s fine, really!” She cried, “As for why I’m here, I really do want to help you! You’ve inspired me so much that I could keep on living.”

“I...” Tobita ran a hand through his hair, “My work is very dangerous.”

“I know!” She grasped both of her hands together, eyes watery, “Pleeease? I’m already a criminal, what with all of the hacking that I’ve done. As long as I’m with you Gentle, then nothing can go wrong!”

Tobita contemplated her for several moments, his blue eyes were piercing.

“Very well.”

Aiba placed her hands on the table, "Really!?"

"Indeed, Miss Aiba! I see that you have a certain fire in your eyes, you are already prepared for this path," Tobita smiled as happy tears came into her eyes, then he glanced at Akira, "And what about you, young man? I don't think a normal law-abiding citizen would be okay with associating themselves with criminals."

"Trickster," Arsene came to the forefront of his mind, *"I believe we can trust this man with our secret."*

"What? How can you be so sure, Arsene?" Akira asked, *"We just met him!"*

"He is a fellow gentlemen thief, as well as a master of tea. He is quite like us, wouldn't you think? We need allies, and I believe the Aiba girl would be able to vouch for us."

Akira rolled the thought around as he looked at Tobita. The man exhaled the same air as Tsukauchi, Eraserhead, Kaito, Aiba, and so many others they had met, but there was more to it than that. He sensed a certain level of kinship that he hadn't with anybody else in this world. Was it because they were fellow Gentlemen Thieves like Arsene suggested?

Perhaps Arsene was right.

Akira glanced at Aiba, she stiffened at the sudden intensity in his eyes but gave him a reassuring nod. Morgana gave him a weird look as he stood from his chair.

"I don't exactly follow the laws, either." He said, "You might've heard about the new vigilante that appeared during the USJ?"

"Ah, I believe his name is Joker." Tobita stroked his mustache as he studied Akira, "He's made quite an impact for his short time."

Akira snorted, then the apartment was alight by a flash of blue flames. Tobita and Aiba covered their eyes at the sudden brightness, but the man gasped as he beheld Joker in full costume. Morgana's hackles raised, and he looked at Akira as if he had lost his mind.

"My word!"

"Don't mind him too much." Morgana sighed as he jumped onto the table, "He just likes to show off."

Joker put a hand to his chest in mock injury, "How dare you say something like that, Morgana."

The cat simply licked his paw and cleaned his face, utterly ignoring his partner.

"I helped too!" Aiba said, "We worked together to bring down Silver Falcon! I used my hacking skills to broadcast it all over town. I guess you could say we were partners in crime for a while. I trust him."

"Is that so?" Tobita's icy blue eyes met Joker's flickering gold, "Well, I do recognize a fellow gentleman thief when I see one, so your secret is safe with me! Did you want to join us as well?"

"No, at least not right now." Joker let his costume burn away, "I just wanted to make sure that Aiba got here safely. Morgana and I should go, though."

"Y-you're leaving already?" Panic flashed in her eyes, her brows furrowed in worry.

"We still need to pick up some gear, then get to Hosu before it gets dark."

"Oh..."

"Well Joker, you are welcome here any time." Tobita said with a nod, "I'll be sure to take care of Miss Aiba."

“I have a feeling that she’ll take good care of you too,” Akira chuckled as Morgana perched on his shoulder, then he looked at Aiba, “I’ll send you a text when we get to Hosu, alright?”

“Okay. Promise me you’ll be careful?”

“We will,” Morgana said, “I’ll make sure he doesn’t get into anything he can’t handle.”

Aiba clasped her hands together as Tobita kindly showed them to the door. They barely took two steps down the hallway before the door flew open and she rushed out.

“Wait!”

Akira stopped mid-stride, “What’s wrong?”

“I just....” Aiba pulled on her pigtails, “I just wanted to tell you two something. Can you lean in closer?”

Akira raised a brow, but knelt in front of her. She searched their faces, her eyes drinking in every detail before she stepped forward and planted a kiss on his cheek, another on Morgana’s forehead. He blinked several times as he put a hand to the spot.

“Thank you, Akira and Morgana.” A genuine smile curved her lips, her eyes sparkled with pure joy, “For everything.”

With that, she turned on her heel and fled into the apartment. He stared at the door with impossibly wide eyes, completely rooted to the spot.

“Hey, earth to Akira!” Morgana said, “We have places to be.”

Akira cleared his throat, “R-right.”

Their hearts felt warm as they left the building.

We hit 20k hits and just over 900 kudos.

I can't even comprehend that?? When? What? How???

Collapse Of Arrogance

Chapter 21: Collapse Of Arrogance

“H-Hold up!” Mona said, his eyes going comically wide, “Can’t we talk about this!? Don’t you think this is a bit too cra-ZY!!!”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The moon hung high over Hosu, a witness to the muted bustle of a city soaked in fear.

Shoto stared into his father’s back, his writhing flames parted the crowds as they marched through the streets. This was Shoto’s second excursion into this city in as many nights, he thought his father would teach him about harnessing the unwieldy power of flame, not go chasing after the Hero Killer in some single-minded obsession to bring him down.

He kept his expression neutral, the whispers of surrounding Endeavor fans haunted the streets, the snap of phone cameras was a constant drone against his eardrums. How any hero dealt with this kind of attention all the time bewildered him, but he wasn’t about to sympathize with his personal tormentor. Maybe the swirling flames were a saving grace, that or his surly reputation towards his fans kept them at a distance.

Another hour of mindless trudging through the city passed, like mice skittering through a maze with no sight nor scent of their reward. His father’s scowl deepened as the night dragged on, his fists were clenched dangerously, wisps of smoke trailed from them. Any villains had gone to ground, there was no trouble to spice up the monotony. No sign of Stain, either. They had just crossed an intersection when

he caught a sliver of movement on the rooftops. He glanced over and froze in his tracks.

There, perched on the corner of a building like a gargoyle, was Joker.

The moon outlined him in silver, a breeze gently ruffled his long coattails and his unkempt hair. Joker's cat was curled around his shoulders, glaring. Their startling blue and steely silver eyes met his own. Neither of them moved, each held their breath, but Joker's red-gloved hand reached down for the hilt of his dagger.

Was it a silent challenge, or a threat?

Joker's eyes stabbed into him like knives, as if waiting for Shoto to make a sudden move or alert Endeavor, but he didn't, he stayed rooted to the spot. Shoto's pounding heart counted the seconds that ticked by, time slowed and the outside world faded away until it was just the three of them locked in an eternal staring contest. Shoto slowly blinked and tilted his head minutely, relaxing his rigid stature.

Something softened in Joker's eyes and a cocky smirk broke through, his stiff shoulders drained of tension.

"Shoto!"

The rest of the world snapped back into place as Shoto whipped his head towards Endeavor, whose face was twisted in a sneer.

"Don't fall behind! You have no time for idle distractions, otherwise we could miss something important."

He kept a straight face and nodded, only risking a glance when Endeavor turned his back. Joker was gone, vanished from the rooftops like a phantom. Excitement bubbled underneath his stoic expression as he caught up to his father, but that begged the question.

What was Joker doing in Hosu?

"I can't believe he didn't rat us out." Mona said, "His distrust of you was so obvious during the USJ attack."

"He seems different than before. Something must've changed between then and now." Joker hopped over the chasm between one building and the next, "It's almost like..."

"Like he had a change of heart?"

"Something like that." Joker shook his head as he stopped at the ledge, the tips of his boots hung off the sheer drop.

The skeleton of an unfinished apartment building rose over them, steel spires and rafters jutted into the night sky. A crane sat at the top, its folded arm was the highest point they could find in this part of the city, the view of the lights alone was breathtaking. Joker flexed his left wrist, where a leather and metal contraption was concealed under his sleeve.

"You might want to hold on, Mona."

Mona hunkered down and dug his claws into Joker's shoulder.

He smirked as he flung out his wrist and a silver wire shot out, spiraling through the air until the hook impaled the concrete. Their hearts went into their throats as the mechanism reeled them up like fish, the wind howled in their ears as they were vaulted several feet in the air, Joker grasped the ledge of a window and pulled himself inside. The grappling hook disengaged with a satisfying *clink* and the wire snapped back into the mechanism.

"Giran wasn't kidding." Joker said as he rubbed his wrist, "It's not bad for something so small."

“Hmph,” Mona jumped from his shoulder, “I think I could do a better job.”

“Don’t tell me you’re *jealous*, Mona.”

“Of course not!” Mona stuck his nose in the air, his tail flicked, “I’m just saying that I could do better if I had the proper materials. That’s the truth, you know!”

“Sure it is. Although, it wouldn’t hurt to look for other resources.” Joker took a glance around the unfinished building, “Our stock is limited, so we need somewhere to replenish it. I’m sure Giran wouldn’t mind supplying everything for the right price, but I don’t want to invest too much into him.”

“Yeah, especially after he acted strange when you wouldn’t sell him any more items. Having more sources would benefit us in the long run, too.”

Joker frowned. It was also true that Giran didn’t have the same aura as Tsukauchi, Eraserhead, Midoriya, or anybody else he would’ve forged a not-confidant with. He would still keep an eye on the shady man, but he wouldn’t feel bad if they decided to cut ties altogether.

Giran was not Iwai, after all.

“Well,” Mona sighed and stepped towards the hallway, “I’m going to patrol the lower floors to make sure we’re alone. Think you can stay out of trouble while I’m gone?”

“I’ll be sure to have a party,” Joker waved his hands around the room, “Maybe set the whole building on fire just to spice it up a bit.”

Mona rolled his eyes, but at least he had a smile on his face as he left.

Joker sighed when he was alone, he rolled his shoulders to get a crick out of his neck, then his eyes glossed over the room.

The interior of this unfinished construct was bland, gray walls with swipes of plaster here and there. A few metal rods and beams were still exposed to open air, power tools lay in unorganized piles, tarps covered what little space was left. Acrid dust hung in the air. Whatever the reason, nobody has been working on this place for a while. It was the perfect spot to hunker down after hours of scouting the city for a serial killer. He tapped the ground with his foot, if only to watch the vibrant ripples trail across the dull concrete, he scraped his boot against the floor and released a bone-deep sigh.

“Welp, I’m already bored,” He whispered to nobody, “Anyone want to practice while Mona is gone?”

Joker grinned at the buzz of activity in his mind.

“Oooh, me! Me!!”

“I do not think it wise to practice with me in such a small space.”

“Pfft, that’s an understatement, grandpa!”

“Bah, this place is far too tiny for my wings as well.”

“Perhaps the Trickster would like to dance with me?”

“Why dance when we-hee can make mischief together, ho!?”

“Me want to play with Master!!”

“I don’t suppose you’ll choose me, Trickster? It gets dreadfully boring in here sometimes.”

Joker’s grin melted into an honest smile. Their excitement buzzed pleasantly through his mind, but one was being quiet, he allowed his silence to be overtaken as he watched with muted interest. It was almost like a father watching his children from afar. Joker held up his hand and they quieted.

“Arsene!”

Fiery wind ruffled his clothes as Arsene was pulled into reality, the brilliant blue flames were extinguished with a mighty beat of his wings, azure ash added a splash of color and any lingering dust was obliterated. There wasn't much room to float around, so Arsene planted his heels on the ground and tipped his hat.

"So, thou has finally summoned the Pillager of Twilight once more?" Arsene teased with a head tilt, "A wise choice, Trickster. For a second I thought you had forgotten about me."

"Hey, nobody else got to wreak havoc on a police station," Joker snickered and shoved his hands in his pockets, "But it's always good to see you in person, Arsene."

"Of course, likewise," Arsene cleared his throat as Joker's chest was filled with warmth that wasn't his own, "Now, let us test the strength of our bond! You know what to do, correct?"

Joker nodded and closed his eyes.

He furrowed his brows as he concentrated until he saw the manifestation of their bond. It was a length of chain, black as pitch as if it was forged in the bowels of hell itself, metallic rattles and a strange chilliness seeped into him as he imagined himself grasping it. He gasped at the freezing river of power that flowed up his arm, his whole body stiffened. This feeling was... familiar.

It was exactly the same as when-

"My control shall not bow down to Ruin, nor shall the will of the masses overcome my power! I am the ultimate truth of this world, and will not lose to the likes of you mortals!"

"Heh, the vanity of this god knows no bounds! Show this failure what it feels like to be purged! Come, unleash my full power!!"

"Wait. He's doing something- GET DOWN NOW!!"

“Trickster-”

“What did he do!? I can’t feel my persona!”

“Mine is gone too...”

“The sin of rebelling against a god is severe. As punishment, I banish you to other worlds unknown!”

“This isn’t possible!”

“What is it Oracle!? What do you see!?”

“Snap out of it, Trickster!”

“You have no means of escape, humans. Accept your fate with dignity!”

“Everyone, hold on!!”

“Joker!”

“QUEEN!”

Yaldabaoth’s laughter still haunts his every waking moment-

The voices stopped as his grip on Arsene’s chain was ripped away. He doubled over, his gloved hand clawed at the front of his chest as he struggled for breath. It was as if a hole was blown straight through his heart, the pain was *excruciating*, and it suffocated him until black spots entered his vision. The ringing in his ears was too loud, a cold trickle of sweat beaded his forehead.

A pair of large hands gripped his shoulders, the claws poking into his back somehow grounded him.

“Breathe,” Arsene’s steady voice broke through the haze, “In and out.”

He sucked in a shaky breath, then wheezed it back out. The hands on his shoulders tightened, forcing him back into reality as he struggled for air, gulping in gasps and straining it out through the ball of emotions lodged in his throat. The ringing slowly faded, his vision cleared as Arsene gently instructed him.

Joker blinked several times before he straightened. All of his energy had been sapped, his mind felt as if it were trapped in disorientating static. He shook his head and looked up to Arsene, his gloved hand still grasped over the pain in his heart that sharpened with every beat.

“What... what happened?”

Arsene was silent for a moment, his iron grip was still on Joker's shoulders as his wings circled around protectively.

“You had a flashback,” Arsene said, “Perhaps the feeling of our combined power made you relive *that* .”

“... Oh.”

The others were dead silent as if a gaping void had infested his mind space, but they were all watching, their unwavering concern trickled over him and made a shiver crawl up his spine. He barely managed to suppress the shiver. It rather felt as if he was under a microscope, he didn't like it one bit.

“I'll...” Joker ran a hand through his hair and forced a shaky smile, “I'm fine now.”

Arsene scrutinized him from head to toe, the mask of fire and brimstone showed no emotions, but he didn't need any facial expressions to feel his unease. Joker was about to step away when he was pulled forward into an embrace, one of Arsene's hands rested on the back of his head, the other pressed on his shoulder blades. Warmth and the whisper of overlapping feathers surrounded him like a wool blanket.

“Did you forget our vow?” Arsene’s voice was gentle, “I am thou, thou art I. Your pain is my own, so don’t pretend that it doesn’t exist. Even the leader of the Phantom Thieves can show weakness from time to time. There are many people in this world with whom you’ve struck a bond with, and you have me and the others at your side. Don’t shoulder this burden alone.”

Joker’s smile fell and he glared at the ground. Certain thoughts had plagued him for weeks, ever since they were thrown into this world with no way to get back. He spoke before he could stop himself.

“I... what if I fail everybody again? What happens if we can’t ever go home, what if Yaldabaoth has already won? All of this happened because I wasn’t fast enough, I wasn’t *strong* enough!”

“Trickster,” Joker looked up at Arsene’s burning eyes, “Don’t forget what happened back in Kamoshida’s dungeon. Did you give up then, just as your friend was about to die? No! Remember your companions’ sacrifices, remember why you chose to fight against fate! If you find yourself lost, then use their willpower to bolster your own. Temper your rage and show the strength of your resolve as the leader of the Phantom Thieves!”

Joker inhaled sharply.

The thought of his friends, his *true* family, sparked warm tears. They fell freely as he put his forehead to Arsene’s chest and wept silently, Arsene would deny the tightness in his throat as he and all of the other personas shared the Trickster’s sorrow, but that sadness gave way to a flicker of strength. A silent promise blossomed within them, a pledge to repay Yaldabaoth a hundredfold for the pain he caused.

Time ticked away within this dull gray room as he finally pulled himself together. Arsene relented as Joker pulled back, face tear-stained but he had a tiny smile that reached his eyes.

“Thanks.” His blood-red gloves wiped away the excess tears, “I’ll be okay now, for real this time.”

Arsene finally let go, crossing his arms as his wings fell back to their natural place.

“You should get some rest. We have quite a trial ahead and you need your sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joker smirked despite the exhaustion, “Who knew you were such a mother hen?”

“I am purely your other self,” Arsene’s laughter bounced around the room, “So what does that say about you, Trickster?”

Arsene vanished before Joker could answer, though his psyche was consumed with the persona’s smugness. Joker shook his head with a sigh, then finally released his costume. He lifted his glasses and scrubbed the remainder of his breakdown from his face, the last thing he wanted was to tip off Morgana.

A few more minutes pass and the not-cat pranced back in.

“Well, I scouted around and we’re alone in here!” Morgana rubbed against his ankles, “So it should be safe to call it a night.”

“Nobody was here last night, either.”

“Yeah, but it never hurts to check.”

Akira snorted as they wandered down the hall and to another room. This one had a blank mattress shoved into the corner, with a thin pillow and blanket that was no more than a rag. Akira’s bag was a crumpled pile next to it. This room was the least drafty and it was a decent number of floors up, so nobody would be able to sneak up on them.

“Remind me again why we can’t just check into a hotel?”

“Call it a hunch.” Akira shrugged as he sat down on the mattress, “We shouldn’t leave any traces that we were in Hosu, even under a false identity. It’s not worth the risk.”

“I.... guess you’re right.” Morgana wrinkled his nose, “I think?”

Akira simply rolled his eyes as he dug through the bag for their supper. Morgana was rewarded with a can of tuna pate, while he got some onigiri, they were a bit stale compared to this morning’s breakfast. They ate in silence, and although it *wasn’t uncomfortable* per say, Morgana kept looking at him strangely between bites. The quiet made worms wriggle under his skin, until he couldn’t take it anymore.

He put down his onigiri and fished out the map of Hosu and a growing collection of colorful pens.

“What are you doing?”

“Marking where we patrolled tonight,” Akira scribbled over certain streets with a red pen, others in green, “Yatagarasu didn’t find anything in his area either.”

“Stain is proving tricky to find.” Morgana said with a sigh, his dinner forgotten, “It’s too bad we can’t just invade his Palace. We are certain that he’s still in Hosu, right? He tends to move on after a few targets.”

“According to Aiba, he should have one or two more targets before going to another city.” Akira hummed, “We’ll stop him before that happens.”

Morgana watched as Akira circled one district in red, the next in green. Akira dropped the pens, watching them roll over the map.

“We’ll cover that district tomorrow, Yatagarasu will circle the next one over.”

“Understood, Trickster.”

Akira cleaned everything up when they were done, then took off his glasses and fell back onto the lumpy mattress. He lay on his side

and Morgana immediately crawled in between his arms, snuggling right next to Akira's hurting heart.

"Hey..."

"Yeah?"

Morgana stared into his eyes, he opened and closed his mouth several times before he actually spoke.

"I'll always be here for you no matter what." Morgana head bumped him on the chin, "Don't you ever forget it."

"I know." Akira held Morgana close as his eyes drifted shut, though a tiny smirk broke through, "Now hush and get some sleep, you seem pretty tired after today."

Morgana scoffed, "How dare you use my own words against me!"

He waited for Akira's reply, but it never came. Akira's breathing evened out as he fell asleep on the spot. Morgana's ears drooped as he snuggled closer to his partner, a jumble of emotions surrounded his heart like thorny bramble.

"Oh, Ren." Morgana whispered as he closed his eyes, "What am I going to do with you?"

Dusk painted the city with fading golden rays.

The dying light was a beacon. A final bastion between the day to day life of normal citizens and the gateway before the dark and seductive denizens that crawled out from the gutters. A city this large should be drowning with small-time hoodlums, but they had yet to encounter anybody.

No criminals or drug dealers, not even a lone thief attempting to steal an old lady's purse. If anything, they expected at least *some* action,

not the scarily vacant alleyways. Stray cats and the occasional raccoon dug through the refuge, but no sign of any dubious characters.

"You know, Mona," Joker stood on the corner of a rooftop, watching the fiery sky, "This area is calm, too calm. It's boring!"

Mona chuckled, "At least we had shadows to fight during our time in Palaces."

"I blame Endeavor."

"It makes sense," Mona shuffled his paws on Joker's shoulder, "Normal criminals have gone to ground with the number two hero in town, or maybe they're hiding because they're afraid of Stain."

"Probably a mix of both." Joker sighed as he hopped over to the next building, "Let's-"

"Trickster!" Joker froze at Yatagarasu's urgency, *"I discovered something, and you're not going to like it."*

"You found Stain?"

"I believe so, his soul is drenched with the blood of innocents and sinners alike." Apprehension trickled through their bond, *"But he's not alone. Shigaraki and Kurogiri are with him. Stain has parted ways, but the man-child is planning something. What do you wish for me to do?"*

Joker glanced at Mona, who watched him carefully.

"What happened?"

"Yatagarasu found Stain, but he's with those two weirdos from the USJ."

"They're here?" Mona asked with wide eyes, "But why are they with Stain?"

"Trickster! The man-child has summoned three Nomu!"

"Nomu?"

"You mean that huge monster with its brain sticking out!?"

"And three of them," Joker cursed under his breath as he took off.

"What are you doing!? This might be our best chance to confront Stain before it's too late!"

"I have a bad feeling that the Nomu will do something a lot worse than Stain," He said, "We can't let them hurt people!"

"I.... I'll follow your call, leader." Mona hunkered down on Joker, "Let's hurry!"

"How do you expect to make it across the city at such a slow pace?"
Seth purred, *"We can soar through the skies upon my wings, Trickster!"*

Joker skid to a stop, *"Yatagarasu?"*

"We are all one, Trickster." Yatagarasu said, *"Seth already knows where to go."*

Joker grinned as Yatagarasu fell back, "Mona, don't hate me."

"Oh no, I know that look," Mona said with narrowed eyes, "What are you planning? It won't get us killed, will it?"

"Maybe, but it'll be a lot more fun."

A fantastical pillar of twisting blue flames shot into the sky, it drowned out the twilight's final splashes of gold and painted the world with its blinding light. Heat spilled out into the night as Seth emerged, his bulk left no room to maneuver on the small rooftop, his wings and claws grated into the stones and left gouges. His tail batted with

excitement, it slammed into the next building's wall, bricks rained down and clattered into the alley below.

"Well?" The god of storms and chaos lowered his head to the ground, "Get on, Trickster! A great hunt awaits!!"

"N-now wait a minute!" Mona's jaw dropped and his fur stood on end, "You can't be serious."

Joker's grin widened as he climbed on Seth's neck, nestled in between the two tiny wings sprouting from his jagged crown of horns. He tucked Mona safely under his arm and grasped Seth's horns to stabilize himself, a giddiness bubbled up as the dragon shuffled his wings. Seth bore their extra weight as he swung his head over the side of the building, the sky called to him. His muscles tensed when he raised his wings like great blackened sails.

"H-Hold up!" Mona said, his eyes going comically wide, "Can't we talk about this!? Don't you think this is a bit too cra-ZY!!!"

Seth shot off into the heavens with a mighty wing beat, Mona's screams were snuffed out by the raging winds around them, the powerful *thud* of Seth's wings struck the air. Joker just couldn't help himself. The unadulterated sense of *freedom* and *power* rushed through him like a shot of adrenaline, the howling gales blew his hair back and whipped at his coattails. Seth grinned as Joker let go of his horns and splayed his arms out.

"You now know what it feels like to be master over the skies, Trickster!"

Joker's pure jovial laughter was lost amidst the pandemonium, "Look Mona, no hands!"

"Would you cut that out!?" Mona snapped, "Do you want to fall to your death!?"

“Oh, come on!” Joker snickered as he grasped Seth’s horns, “You’re no fun!”

“*Excuse me* for wanting to keep you alive!” Mona rolled his eyes and batted Joker’s cheek with his tail.

The rooftops below were but a blur as Seth banked to the right, cries of shock and surprise echoed when they soared right over a busy street. Cars screeched to a halt when they flew over, a rush of air followed them like a storm front, the people shielded their faces as the blast of wind buffeted them. Endeavor swore when his flames were almost blown out like a candle.

He tried to shoot the dragon out of the sky with a fireball. The attack hit it square in the chest, but the fire washed harmlessly over its skin like water. Seth laughed as they left the flame hero in the dust.

“You alright, Mona!?” Joker had thrown his body over the not-cat.

“I’m fine, the fire didn’t touch me!” Mona’s claws dug into Seth’s leathery skin, “Are we almost there yet!?”

“Yes!” Seth bellowed, “The prey is-”

An explosion rocked the city to its core. Seth splayed his wings and slowed to a stop, they hovered high over the city as smoke clouded the night sky, a heated glow spilled out into the streets like rivers of lava. Screams of terror reached their ears as the drifting plumes burned their eyes.

“What now?” Mona said, “What’s going on!?”

“The scent of the Nomu is strong, Trickster!” Seth snorted and shook his head, “They are the cause of this. Ah, what I wouldn’t give to challenge them, it might be a worthy battle!”

“You want to?” Joker teased.

Seth's sunny eyes widened as elation flooded his veins. He snapped his jaws together with a guttural *crunch* and his tail thrashed through the air.

"Nothing would please me more, Trickster!" Seth lurched forward and released a trumpeting roar, "I'll devour them!!"

"What about Stain or Shigaraki?" Mona asked, "Shouldn't we go after them?"

"A lot more people will get hurt because of Handy Man and Smokey's Nomu." The nearing flames cast them with fierce highlights, "Besides, these *heroes* probably don't have what it takes to bring them down, so we have to show them how it's done. We'll find Stain after."

"Got it." Mona's eyes shown with determination, "I'll support you the best way I can!"

Seth dove through the smoke cloud, another roar drowned out the rest of the chaos. They only had a few seconds to drink in the disarray, from the fire spewing out of the buildings, to citizens cowering over the sidewalks. Any heroes froze and gaped up at them.

If they were a moment earlier, they would've seen a familiar head of green hair run back into the alleyways.

The Nomu stood tall over everything, their inhuman croaks and gurgles were like nails down a chalkboard. Joker was filled with Seth's battle driven euphoria as he chose the first target. The green skinned Nomu, with four eyes planted in its brain, looked up as the dragon's shadow pooled around it. It witnessed its own demise as Seth *dropped* out of the sky, the landing was louder than a crack of thunder, the earth shattered under his wings and kicked up a dust cloud.

Joker hopped down and eyed the unmoving Nomu crushed at the bottom of the crater, wiping the dust from his coat.

The world froze, countless eyes were upon the strange boy with the cat on his shoulder, flicking between them and the mighty dragon that just took down a Nomu. Joker pet Seth's snout as another Nomu growled at them, this one was as big and muscular as the one at the USJ.

USJ Junior had no face, nor eyes protruding from its brain. Scars littered its body as it lumbered closer. Joker grinned and waved his red-gloved hand towards it, his boundless poise never wavered at the approaching giant.

"Seth, you know what to do!"

His commanding voice cut through the roaring flames and the heroes' panicked shouts like a knife, unknowingly sparking hope in the eyes of surrounding people caught up in this mess. Seth roared his challenge to the Nomu, then planted his spiked wings into the ground and flung himself forward. USJ Junior raised a meaty fist and punched Seth with a sickening *crack*, but Seth dug his claws into the earth and met the hit head on.

The behemoths' power clashed in the middle, Seth pulled his lips back in a frightening sneer as the Nomu's punch did nothing.

"You call that an attack!?" Seth roared, "I'll show you what real power looks like, whelp!"

USJ Junior croaked when Seth flung his body around and used his tail like a whip, the Nomu was thrown back into one of the burning buildings. The force of it made the entire wall crumble, embers and debris peppered the air.

Seth snapped his jaws, then looked skyward to the final Nomu. The winged creature shrieked in fear, flapping its pale yellow wings frantically. It dropped the victim and fled over the rooftops. Mona's

magic charged the air as an emerald green whirlwind cushioned the man's fall.

Seth spread his wings and was about to give chase, but Joker stopped him.

"Let it go." He said, "We need to put out these fires."

"Hmph, abandoning the hunt leaves a foul taste on my tongue."

Seth snorted but didn't object as he vanished into cinders. Joker ignored the gasps at the dragon's sudden disappearance, he looked over his shoulder to a hero with a blue finned helmet, he used water from a crushed fire hydrant to douse the buildings, to little success.

"What should we do?" Mona whispered, "My wind will only make the fires worse."

Joker's grin was still plastered on his face as his eyes flooded with gold, his piercing gaze was hotter than the licking flames.

"Titania!"

Cerulean and crimson pyres danced together under the full moon, the queen of fairies appeared, the scent of fresh morning dew drifted on the hot breeze. Azure embers fluttered around her like miniature stars, highlighting her gossamer wings and shimmering emerald dress.

"You know what to do."

"Are you ready?" She winked at Joker and twirled around.

Enchanted ice erupted through the streets and encased the burning buildings in a layer of pristine diamonds, the sweltering heat was blown away by glacial blasts of air. The ice hissed and steamed, but the fires were extinguished.

Silence reigned for a few moments as Titania tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Amazing...”

“He took out the Nomu like they were nothing.”

“And put out the fires!”

“Who is he?”

Other whispers permeated the street as Titania floated to Joker’s side, she matched his triumphant smile with one of her own.

“I have to admit, that was pretty cool,” Mona whispered as he rubbed his cheek on Joker’s.

“Of course it was,” Titania twirled her locks around her fingers, “He summoned *me* after all.”

“You!” They turned to see the blue finned hero approaching, “My name is Manual, you really saved us back there.”

“You’re welcome.” Joker tilted his head to the side with a smirk, “But you still have some work to do, Manual. These civilians need to be evacuated.”

“Right,” Manual eyed Titania, who didn’t bother to conceal her distaste towards him, “What about you? Who are you?”

Titania huffed and crossed her arms.

Joker stiffened when they heard a choked warble from behind. The green skinned Nomu somehow survived, it crawled out of the crater on its hands and knees. Titania’s face twisted in disgust as it dared to reach for the Trickster, her power spiked and she was about to put it out of its misery.

Permanently.

That was until there was a sudden rush of air. A yellow and white blur collided with the Nomu's head. The monster was thrown back into the crater, unconscious. The blur landed beside them, revealing a tiny old man in a yellow jumpsuit, his white cape billowed around him, he blinked up at them and grinned.

"You zygotes need to pay more attention to your surroundings!" The old man tapped his cane on the ground and sighed, "I swear you youngsters are too cocky for your own good."

"Be wary of this one, Trickster." Titania narrowed her eyes and whispered to his mind, *"There's more to the old one than meets the eye."*

Joker studied the old man. There was a certain sharpness to his eyes, the way he carried himself was like that of an experienced veteran. Mona pressed himself into Joker's fluffy hair, eyes narrowed. The old man's gaze swept over the icy landscape.

"Well, don't just stand there!" He barked, making Manual jump, "We have civilians to evacuate."

"Yes, sir!" Manual saluted, then looked to the group of pros and civilians behind him, "We'll follow the police guidelines and get everyone to safety. What's your name, sir?"

The old hero glowered, "Gran Torino."

Manual nodded, "By the way, you haven't seen my intern, have you? He disappeared shortly before this whole mess began, his name is Tenya and his costume resembles a suit of armor."

Joker raised a brow and exchanged glances with Mona, "No."

Gran Torino shook his head, and Manual sighed, "Alright, I'll look for him after I get these people evacuated."

Titania stiffened as her ears picked up the unnatural crackle of ice.

“We have company.” She drifted closer to Joker, “This Nomu is tougher than it looks.”

True to her word, the faceless Nomu finally emerged back onto the streets. A few shards of ice and broken cement clung to its skin, but its wounds were regenerating.

“Go.” Joker held his arm out to Gran Torino and Manual, “I’ll distract it while you flee.”

“Ha!” Gran Torino grinned, “As if. I haven’t had excitement like this in years.”

“We’d only slow you down,” Manual and the other heroes formed a protective wall as the citizens scurried away from danger, “We’re counting on you!”

Joker sighed in relief as they disappeared down the street. USJ Junior gurgled and tore the icy chunks from its flesh, its wounds stitched back together in seconds. Mona scoffed and glared at the Nomu, which only made Gran Torino raise a brow at him.

He would help the hero with the last Nomu, as long as they didn’t get recognized, he flexed the hand with the grappling hook hidden underneath his sleeve, eyes scanned over the rooftops. It never hurt to have an immediate escape.

“Well, let’s get-”

“Look out, big brother!!”

A stream of fire shot through the air. The blast hit USJ Junior and threw him back into the building. Joker frowned and turned to look over his shoulder. Endeavor stood at the opposite side of the street, hands smoking. The ice melted under his feet.

“It’s... it’s him!!!” Alice’s power trickled into his mask, *“I told him to be nice to my big brother! I’ll make him pay!”*

“Alice, no!” Arsene yanked her back, *“Stand down, your power is not what the Trickster needs right now!”*

“But...” Alice’s rage was colder than arctic ice, *“But I warned him. I want him to suffer!”*

“No, little one. Leave him to me!” Cerberus said, *“His flame shall not burn me!”*

Alice scowled, and she whisked off into the depths of Joker’s mindscape without another word.

Joker smirked as he met eyes with Endeavor, “Cerberus!”

Titania disappeared, Cerberus rose in her place and stepped in front of Joker protectively.

Rage flashed over the hero’s face as he thrust his arm out, a stream of red hot fire reflected within the icy mirrors. Gran Torino cursed as he soared to safety, he landed next to Endeavor and smacked the man’s leg with his cane.

“Endeavor!” He shouted, “What are you doing!?”

“Eliminating a criminal.” Endeavor cut off the stream, “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, esteemed elder, since he manipulated you. That boy is Joker, a vigilante wanted by the Hero Commission.”

“The one who took down Silver Falcon?” The old man’s eyes flew wide open, he whipped around to face the unharmed vigilante and his beast, “I guess you really can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Hmph,” Cerberus yawned as tendrils of steam wafted from him, “Even my flames are hotter than these embers.”

“You’ll be safer on Cerberus.” Joker whispered to Mona.

The not-cat grimaced, but hopped from his usual perch. Mona looked rather adorable when he climbed on Cerberus, like a tiny lion

cub pestering its parent. Endeavor sneered as Joker scratched Cerberus behind the ear, then stepped around the beast to give them his best shit eating grin.

“I was wondering if anybody would actually recognize me.” Joker said, he gave Endeavor the two-finger salute, “Flameo, hotman!”

Endeavor’s eye twitched, his flames fluctuated as his hands curled into fists. Gran Torino held out his cane to stop him from firing, then glanced over at Joker with narrowed eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Joker splayed his arms out, his devious smirk split his face in two, “Not going to attack? Why don’t you use your flames again, *hero* ?”

Endeavor’s temper boiled over and the whole street was alight with a righteous blaze. Gran Torino swore, but it was already too late to act. Ice melted into puddles, which then evaporated into steam by the volcanic heat, the vigilante was utterly consumed in the white-hot blaze.

Endeavor cut off his attack with a smirk of his own.

Both of the heroes startled when laughter echoed from the pyre. A shape emerged from it, the boy with glowing sunset eyes and a grin to match his undying gall. He was *untouched*. There were no burns or any sign of injury, despite the cement melting at his feet. Joker looked like the Prince of Hell, with how the fires danced around him and shadowed his glowing eyes.

A true master of the underworld.

Color drained from Endeavor’s face, his eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” Joker placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward, “Is that all you have, number two?”

"If... if you know what's good for you kid," A healthy mix of disbelief and awe came into the old hero's eyes, but he went into a battle stance, "You would turn yourself in."

"That sounds fun and all," Joker's smirk grew and he bowed like a true showman, "But I have bigger fish to fry. See ya!"

Joker backflipped onto Cerberus, snowy white fur spilled from between his fingers as he clung to the persona's mane. Concrete scraped underneath Cerberus's claws as he bounded down the street, his steely tail flailed behind them. USJ Junior emerged from the broken building as they sped passed.

"I'll get the kid, you handle the Nomu."

"Fine." Endeavor growled as the old hero shot off.

Endeavor launched himself at USJ Junior, their fists colliding in a brilliant display of power. Mona snickered at Gran Torino as he shot towards them like a missile.

"I don't think so."

Magical winds knocked the old man from the air, Joker felt a little twinge as he plummeted back to the ground, locked in place by a ruthless tornado.

"I'll keep him there until we get away," Mona said, "Hopefully the Nomu keeps Endeavor busy."

They left the sounds of battle behind and slinked into deserted streets, Cerberus slowed to a stop when he deemed it safe enough.

"You were amazing back there." Joker patted the massive beast's shoulder, "All of you were."

Seth snorted and Titania chuckled. Yatagarasu ruffled his feathers and puffed his chest out in pride.

“Always happy to serve, Master!!” Cerberus said, his tail wagging, “It was really fun!”

They hopped down from Cerberus's back and the guard dog bowed his head before becoming nothing more than embers himself. Other voices welcomed Cerberus back to the mind space, but Joker only had eyes for the rooftops. The grappling hook hurled them to the top of the closest building, he just dusted himself off when Mona spoke.

“That battle is bound to get attention,” He said, “Not to mention how we flew halfway across the city on Seth.”

“The news stations are going to have fun tonight.”

Joker half shrugged, then turned to look out into the city. It was.... rather devastating. The night sky was snuffed out by great pillars of smoke, sirens rang out across the city locked in an aura of panic and fear. Hot winds disheveled his hair, if that was even possible. He dug into his pouches for his phone.

“What are you doing?” Mona asked.

“I'm sure Aiba will be able to give us the full scope of what's going on. Maybe she'll know where...” Joker furrowed his brow at a new text from Midoriya, sent only minutes ago, “What's this? A location? Why would he send all of his contacts a random location?”

“Hey, weren't we in that area last night?” Mona peeked at the screen, “That *is* here in Hosu, right?”

“What's Midoriya doing in Hosu? Why did he...?”

Dread spiked in his heart and he cursed under his breath. The phone was thrown back into his pocket as he took off towards Midoriya's location.

“Ahh!” Mona clung onto his shoulder for dear life, “Where are we going!?”

“I have a hunch,” Joker scowled and forced his legs to move faster, “That I know *exactly* where Stain is.”

Mona gaped at him, but he met Joker’s eyes with a determination of his own.

“Alright then, let’s do this!”

“We’ll get there faster on Seth.”

“F-fine.”Mona bristled, his ears went flat against his head. “The faster the better.”

Seth’s excitement redoubled when he was summoned and they took off into the sky, he yearned to taste the blood of his prey.

Joker hoped they would make it in time.

Arsene is officially Bird Dad.

One thing I would like to point out is the skill Titania used, it's actually a skill from SMT Nocturne called Glacial Blast. Along with her 'Are you ready?' Now would be a good point to say that I have taken a few creative liberties with some of the personas, including a slightly larger stock.

We also made it to TV Tropes??

Blood Of Villains

Chapter 22: Blood Of Villains

The role of Leader fell onto his shoulders so naturally, the faces of the U.A. teens blurred into that of his friends, if only for a fraction of a second.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[FAN ART!!](#)

Bloodlust cascaded over the alleyway in raging waves, it drowned everything from the stones to the garbage bins and refuse, even the stars above were suffocated by it. The children soaked in terror didn't pay attention to the skies above, every fiber of their being was fighting for the next heartbeat, the next breath.

Thud.

Ice and fire danced in harmony, but it didn't stop the onslaught of a desperate serial killer, his jagged blade sang the song that summoned countless bloodbaths. Midoriya collapsed as he was paralyzed, the wall offered no comfort as he watched on in horror, the mighty sword was about to cleave his friend in half.

Thud.

"Todoroki!"

"Recipro Burst!!"

The *snap* of metal echoed as Stain's sword broke amidst engine fire. Iida twisted around, his other leg spewed smoke and flame as he

kicked Stain with his full power. Stain was thrown back in a hail of flowing scarves as he slid to a stop, his expression cut into a dangerous frown as he dropped the sword with a clatter.

Thud.

"Iida!" Midoriya's eyes teared up in relief.

"You can move!" Todoroki sighed, a knot in his chest unfurled, "His quirk isn't so great after all."

"Todoroki, Midoriya," Iida hung his head in shame, "This has nothing to do with you, and I apologize."

The bloodlust spiked as Stain's eyes glowed with malice. He whipped out a serrated dagger and lunged forward, but he never managed more than a single step.

THUD.

The odd pressure that had hounded their ears increased tenfold. A massive black shadow fell over the alley, followed by a stormy winds. Todoroki and Iida shielded their faces against it, but Midoriya and the unresponsive hero were left helpless. Another form dropped from the sky, draped in the silver light of the moon. Joker plummeted like a fallen angel, golden eyes crinkled from the grin upon his face as he pointed a gun at Stain.

Gunshots pierced the air.

Stain growled as he backpedaled several steps, a hiss of pain escaped him as one bullet pierced his shoulder. The wind died down as the vigilante landed as graceful as a dancer, weapons gleaming under the bleeding moon.

"Sorry for the delay, everyone." Joker stood fully, holding the smoking gun, "It's not a real party unless somebody arrives fashionably late."

“J-Joker!?” Midoriya’s jaw dropped as relief flooded his eyes, “What are you d-doing here!?”

Iida tensed, “The same vigilante from the USJ...?”

Todoroki said nothing, his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

“Joker?” Stain took a step closer, eyes narrowed, “You’re the one that brought down Silver Falcon.”

The man looked worse than Joker imagined, scarves hung around his neck and his mask tied a mess of black hair back. He was built for combat, with plated metal armor and more weapons strapped to him than Joker could count. And... he had no nose.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Stain.” Joker smirked and twirled his gun around his finger, “You’re just the man I’ve been looking for.”

Stain lowered his serrated dagger, his lips quirked, “Why are you looking for me?”

Joker tilted his head, amused, “Oh, no reason in particular.”

His free hand dug something out of a hidden breast pocket. It was a red and black card, to which the vigilante held between his pointer and middle finger. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the card hurling at Stain like a throwing knife. Stain caught it, his eyes narrowed as he scanned over it.

“What is this *drivel* ?” Stain spat, lips curled as he crushed it with his fist.

“It’s your calling card, Stain.” Joker took a stance and pointed his gun, “Think of it as a personal invitation for me to put a stop to your slaughter. You should be honored.”

“*Stop* me? I’m almost disappointed in you, Joker. I thought you would be one to understand my creed.” Stain tossed the card aside like

trash, “So, you are not a kindred spirit like I thought you were. You’re just like the rest of these fake heroes!”

“Fake heroes?” Joker slowly tilted his head to the side, “Tell me Stain, why do you choose to kill the ‘fake heroes’?”

“Because it’s the only way!” Stain jabbed his dagger towards Iida, “False heroes plague this society, they are a disease that must be cleansed. Only true heroes like All Might deserve the title!”

“I’ve proven you don’t need to kill them. Silver Falcon is imprisoned, and the way it’s going he’ll be there for a long time.”

“What does that matter when he’ll just repeat his crimes once he goes free?” Stain sneered, “Don’t tell me that you’re so blind. A man like Silver Falcon will be stuck in his ways for the rest of his life. That ‘hero’ should’ve been purged properly.”

“I agree that people can’t change if they don’t want to, or if they don’t have an outside influence to help them,” Joker’s smirk fell, his eyes turned thoughtful, “But that doesn’t mean you should hold every hero to the same level as All Might. That’s an impossible standard to hold them to, given that he’s the *number one* hero.”

Midoriya’s fingers twitched in the corner of his eye. Good, he just needed to keep Stain distracted for a little bit longer. Seth’s wing beats still pounded the air as he circled overhead, Mona huddled near the edge of a nearby rooftop. Magical energies flowed through his veins, ready to support his partner without a moment’s hesitation.

“I see that words won’t get through to you,” Stain growled as he shifted on his feet, “Then you’ll just die like the rest of these fakes!”

Stain leapt, blade held high over his head, Seth howled into the forefront of Joker’s mind, eager to rise to the challenge. Another smirk split his face as he pointed his gun, but no shot went off. Heat exploded behind Joker and almost singed his hair. Stain growled as he got hit, flipping back to the other side of the alley to recover.

Joker looked over his shoulder to Todoroki, his left side steaming. They met eyes once again, but there was no inclination of his hostility from the USJ, there was almost a strange sort of *reverence* in his eyes. Todoroki broke eye contact and walked in between Midoriya and Iida.

"Don't face him alone," Todoroki stopped beside Joker, flames licked at his left side, "He's far too dangerous."

"I know, Peppermint," Joker chuckled, "Can you use those flames of yours to keep him away from your friends?"

"Peppermint...?" Todoroki muttered quietly, then he shook his head, "I can, you can leave it to me."

"Todoroki," Iida stared at his friend in shock, "You're trusting a vigilante?"

"What choice do we have?" He glanced between his friends then glared at Stain, "I don't think we can handle a three-way battle."

"Todoroki..." Midoriya glanced over to Joker, "Iida, he's right. Joker's on our side!"

"But he's a criminal! I..." Iida scowled and curled his hands into fists.

"Criminal or not, you're injured." Joker held his arm out, "Let me handle him from here on out."

Iida's eyes went to the ground, but he said nothing.

"Trickster! The alleyway is too narrow for me!" Another tempest beat them down as Seth flew over, *"I want to devour Shitstain!"*

"Follow through with Plan C," Joker's smirk grew, *"We'll flush him out into the street."*

"Roger!!"

“At my signal,” Joker whispered, “The two of you will carry Midoriya and the hero, then we need to flee the alleyway.”

“What!? What kind of plot are you hatching!?” Iida shouted.

“Got it. But we better make it fast,” Todoroki said, his eyes were locked on Stain, “I don’t think he’ll let us pull anything.”

A great shadow hovered ominously at the mouth of the alley, Seth’s pure golden eyes were trained in on the serial killer.

He opened his great maw and bellowed a war cry, shaking the foundations around them. Joker chuckled as the others covered their ears and dust rained down from above, garbage cans and dumpsters toppled over. They were struck by a whirlwind as Seth flapped his wings and flew off into the night sky, he disappeared like an arrow shot into the heavens. Midoriya and Todoroki watched with awe.

“Stand back and wait for my signal.”

“Wait!” Midoriya furrowed his brow, “What do you-”

Joker charged, brandishing his pistol and dagger. Stain’s manic grin matched the masked vigilante as they clashed. The unmistakable clang of metal grated in their ears, their movements nothing more than a cacophony of sparks and carefully attuned reflexes, Joker flipped and pirouetted like an acrobat. Stain wasn’t as dexterous, but he matched Joker’s speed step for step.

A surge of killing intent suffocated Joker, the mere moment it took to recover cost him.

“Joker!!”

Todoroki and Midoriya’s voices shouted in unison as Stain ran his rugged blade down Joker’s torso. They expected a pained cry or a splash of crimson, but instead a shower of sparks spat back at Stain.

The murderer's eyes flew wide open as Joker's clothes deflected his weapons, as if they were made of titanium.

"Ha! Better luck next time, Stain!"

Joker flowed into an elegant roundhouse kick, the blow knocked his opponent back. He could feel the U.A. kids' horror melt into relief when not a single drop of blood was shed, Stain glowered at his clean daggers before he looked back at Joker. His grin showed far too many teeth.

"You have some impressive friends, Ingenium!!" Stain howled with mad laughter as he swung his blades and charged, "But don't think that this is enough to stop my crusade!"

Ingenium?

Joker filed that information away for later as he ducked underneath a deadly swipe, Todoroki snapped out of his awe and shot a stream of fire to give him some breathing room. Desperation lined Stain's movements as he threw himself to the side, Iida's engines roared and he was nothing more than a silver blur as he rushed at Stain.

"I thought I told you to stay back, Motorboat!" Joker teased.

"As if I should listen to a vigilante!!" Iida shouted right back, his eyes held a mix of rage and guilt, "Besides, I can't let anyone else get involved with this! They're injured because of me!"

Joker threw his head back and laughed, "Isn't it a bit too late for your pity party?"

Iida scoffed as his jet-fueled leg flew through the air, Stain sneered and lifted his dagger to counter him.

Joker smirked as he fired his gun, the bullets pierced the ground at Stain's feet. It was enough of an opening for Iida to land a kick on his

abdomen. The villain was flung back into an ice shard, shattering it into a thousand tiny jewels that powdered the air.

“Enough!”

Stain panted and hauled himself to his feet, he dug something out of his pouches. Joker recognized it with a start.

It was a Life Stone.

Stain crushed it in his hand, and they watched with muted horror as his injuries healed. Joker’s grin fell and he surged forward, dagger at the ready, but Stain had another idea in mind. Three flashes of steel sliced through the air. Iida cried out as a throwing knife was embedded into his shoulder, the other sailed straight for Midoriya and Todoroki.

Joker snapped his fingers, a hidden signal.

A wall of wind kicked up in front of them like a wave, the knives were batted away and clattered useless against the brick wall. Iida wasted no time ripping the metal from his shoulder, and it joined the others on the ground, delicately draped with crimson.

“What was that!?” Midoriya shouted.

Joker was about to answer as he aimed his gun at Stain, but then Seth hit the zenith. He felt an *unimaginable* sense of joy as Seth hung in mid-air for a single heartbeat, he floated at the edge of the clouds, before dropping.

“Fall back!” Joker shouted, “Get out of the alleyway!”

Todoroki threw up a jagged spire of ice at the Hero Killer to slow him down, then threw Midoriya over his shoulder and made a run for it. Iida knit his brows together, but he grit his teeth and scooped up the hero before he followed.

There was a whistle to the air, almost like a bomb dropping.

Joker stood in front of the other kids as they huddled around the corner. Seth waited until the very last moment, right before he would crash into the buildings, then he reared up. He splayed his wings to catch the air, his muscles strained as he focused all of his strength into this one wing beat.

The alleyway *exploded* into a maelstrom, a veritable tornado that devoured anything in its path. It ripped through stone and ice alike, Stain was no match as he was thrown out into the streets like a puppet with its strings cut. The dust and wind settled, and the streets were quiet.

"Did... did it work..?" Iida whispered as he gently set the hero down.

"Todoroki, I can move now."

"Oh," Todoroki helped Midoriya stand properly, "Does that mean we won?"

"No." Joker grimaced, "He's not done yet."

Midoriya inhaled sharply as Stain, bloodied and bruised, scraped himself off of the concrete. Crimson streaked the Hero Killer's body, a terrifying smile split his face and his eyes were alight with stomach-churning intensity.

"He's mine!"

A dragon's cry made the night air tremble, and Seth jumped from the rooftops. His claws dug gouges in the concrete as he slid into his landing, his lips curled back in malicious delight as Stain whipped towards him. Seth used his momentum to swing his head like a battering ram, Stain was no match as he flew through the air for a second time.

Joker wouldn't waste this opportunity.

The role of Leader fell onto his shoulders so naturally, the faces of the U.A. teens blurred into that of his friends, if only for a fraction of a second.

“Now!” Joker was the first to move, “Surround him and do an all-out attack!”

They briefly exchanged glances, but scrambled to follow before the Hero Killer could prepare. Stain was trapped, his opponents stood on every side of him, like points on a compass. Todoroki was the first to attack, he stomped his right foot, and clusters of ice encased Stain’s legs.

Wild green electricity ran over Midoriya’s body like serpents, the concrete cracked underneath his feet as he jumped in with a punch. Some of the ice cracked at Stain’s feet, but it held steady. Iida rushed in, his engines glowing red hot as he kicked Stain’s side.

Joker heard the crack of ribs as the two fell back, but Joker surged onward, his dagger leaving a sizable gash on the Hero Killer’s shoulder. The trio was as one as they went in for another synchronized attack of dagger, punch, and kick. Todoroki finished the attack with a frozen wave, his crackling ice consumed Stain’s entire body. There was a beat of heavy silence.

The Hero Killer didn’t move.

“He’s...” Midoriya swallowed as he stared at Stain, “He’s finally down...”

Joker tugged on his blood-red gloves, “Well, this show’s finally over.”

“You!!”

Joker dropped as Iida’s leg soared over his head, the roar of engines screamed in Joker’s ears as Iida continued his onslaught. Joker weaved and bobbed the attacks with a grin on his face, but that only sparked anger in Iida’s eyes.

“Iida, stop!” Todoroki shouted, but it was futile.

Midoriya paled and waved his hands, “Wh-what are you doing!?”

“Stain is captured, now it’s his turn!”

“Oh, so that’s how it is, *Ingenium* ?” Joker teased with a limber backflip, “I’m glad you still have energy for a dance! What shall it be then? A foxtrot? A waltz? Maybe a tango? Well, I don’t think you’re the romantic type-”

“Shut up!” Iida scowled and his eyes darkened into something dangerous, “How dare you mock the name of Ingenium!!”

Joker’s grin was still plastered on his face. Seth howled his fury, the earth shook as he hurled himself at Iida, jaws wide open. The mirth was wiped from Joker’s face.

“Seth, *no!* ”

The dragon had no choice but to obey, he whipped his tail to change course. Iida used this chance as Seth narrowly missed them like a swerving semi truck, dust and chunks of concrete strewn through the air. Joker’s back was against the wall and Iida’s hand shot out to grab his high collar. Seth snarled as Joker was pressed into a corner, his growls struck them in a deep bass. Joker held his hands out, both to stop Seth and the hidden Mona from doing anything drastic.

Seth’s golden eyes were ablaze, but he stayed his claws by stomping in place. Midoriya and Todoroki ran up to them, Iida harshly shrugged Midoriya’s hand from his shoulder. Tension filled the air as Joker and Iida stared at each other, flickering gold to sapphire blue.

Todoroki was torn between his hero and his friend.

Midoriya wrung his hands together, mind whirring to find a peaceful solution.

Joker simply chuckled, that infuriating grin slithered back onto his face.

“Why are you still smiling?” Iida got right in Joker’s face, “You’re going to be arrested and thrown in prison! How are you so calm?”

“Hmm, I wonder why?” Joker slowly tilted his head to the side, “It’s not obvious? It’s because you’re going to let me go.”

Iida flinched, his rage fell into shock.

“Let you go? As if! Why would you think that I would release you, after everything you did?”

“You’re going to release me,” Joker’s grin fell into a more genuine smile, “Because I can heal your brother. Ingenium *is* your brother, right? I can see the vengeance in your eyes. He could be back to normal by tonight, even. Think of it as a favor in exchange for my freedom.”

Iida reeled back. His breathing became ragged and his hands shook, tears threatened to fall, yet he managed to hold them back.

“How dare you lie about something like this! Do you think you can just toy with me!?”

“Iida-kun...” Midoriya stepped beside his friend, “Please calm down.”

“I’m a lot of things Ingenium Junior, but I am no liar. How do you think I healed your sensei at the USJ? Or...” Joker snapped his fingers again, “How I’m about to heal you?”

Their faces were priceless as Mona’s magic filtered through the air, their bodies gained the subtle green glow from a Mediarahan. Scrapes and bruises bled away into smooth skin, fatigue lost in the grueling battle trickled back, sharp pains vanished altogether. It was as if they didn’t just fight tooth and nail for their lives.

“But... but my brother’s paralyzed...” Iida hung his head as tears fell to the ground, “Not even Recovery Girl can fix him...”

“Well, I have powers that can surpass even hers.” Joker tilted his head, “How else do you explain Eraserhead’s miraculous recovery? He would’ve spent weeks in the hospital, even with someone like Recovery Girl looking after him.”

“He’s right.” Midoriya looked at the ground as he sunk into himself, “I saw when the Nomu hurt Aizawa-sensei, and I also witnessed Joker save and heal him, too.”

Todoroki slowly nodded, his expression was a stoic mask, but there were lingering emotions in his eyes that told a different story.

“I... you...”

“What is your answer, Ingenium Junior? We can call it nothing more than a mutually beneficial.... contract.”

Iida bit his lip. His hands shook as he waged a battle within himself. Finally, after a few moments of strained silence, he released Joker. His hands curled into fists and he couldn’t look the vigilante in the eye.

“Why?”

“Why?” Joker felt a rush of déjà vu from his last conversation with Aiba, “Because I know what it’s like when your family is hurting. You sought revenge for your brother because you thought it was the only way to deal with this pain. You felt powerless, didn’t you? Like there’s nothing else you can do, but those feelings will eat away at you. It’s slow at first but that pain burrows deep.”

Joker placed a hand right over his aching heart. Iida’s head snapped up, the darkness in his eyes was ousted by a desperate hope, his face softened with understanding.

“You’ve also felt like this? Did...” Iida swallowed, his eyes searched Joker’s face, “Did your family get the help they need?”

Joker stepped away, eyes cast down to the beautiful colors of his footsteps. He forced his frown to turn into a smirk, it came off as more of a forced grimace.

“No. I wasn’t strong enough to help them when they needed me most,” He looked over his shoulder, “And they paid the ultimate price for it.”

Midoriya paled.

Todoroki’s eyes became somber, but his expression remained neutral.

Iida said nothing as his heart lurched. Joker offered so much, to save himself and his brother such pain, but nobody came to Joker’s aid when he needed it. Iida felt shame crawl up his back, and he thought he could live up to his brother’s name...

“Oh, one more thing.”

Midoriya gasped as Joker rushed at Iida, he held his dagger to Iida’s throat and pointed his gun right in Todoroki’s face. Iida froze like a statue, while Todoroki didn’t bother hiding betrayal and faint embers of hurt.

“Wh-what are you doing!?” Midoriya took a battle stance, but he could do nothing when the dragon’s shadow fell over him.

Seth towered over Midoriya as his throat lit up with a Maragidyne, the flames leaked from his jaws like an open furnace, ready to torch his enemies at the Trickster’s signal. Joker stayed like that for several seconds, his eyes a pool of molten amber that peered into their very souls. Then, just as fast, he lowered his dagger and pistol with a sigh.

“I just saved you from getting into trouble.” Joker stepped away and sheathed his weapons, “Now you won’t be lying when you say I threatened you to escape. I don’t think the police would let something like this slide so easily.”

Iida rubbed at his neck, a bead of sweat dripped down his forehead, “A-at least warn us next time.”

“Now where would the fun in that be?” Joker said with a wink.

Seth snapped his jaws shut, the fire in his throat was extinguished and curls of smoke escaped from his jaws. Joker still felt their eyes on him as he approached the hero, who had yet to awaken. No, it was something much worse than that.

“Trickster, this hero...” Arsene whispered, *“He’s....”*

“I know.”

“Are you going to heal Native, too?” Midoriya whispered, “Is he-”

Joker stood in front of the hero to block their vision. They didn’t need to see this.

“I’ll take care of him.” He said, “You guys should go to Stain and make sure he’s properly restrained.”

They flinched when the playful sarcasm was gone from his voice, replaced with something that left no room for argument. Midoriya gently grabbed Iida’s arm to lead him away, but Todoroki stood there, eyes wide in realization. He opened his mouth to speak, but Joker held up a hand.

“I’ll take care of him.” Joker reiterated.

Todoroki’s jaws snapped shut. He slowly nodded and turned to follow his friends.

"I sense no other Metaverse items on Shitstain," Seth said to fill the dreaded silence.

"Good."

He turned and knelt next to the hero. Native had one shallow cut and another slice across his chest. There wasn't much blood, but from the bruising, it must've been internal.

"What do you plan to do?" Arsene said.

"Perhaps we do nothing, leave him for the other heroes." Yatagarasu suggested.

"And what?" Titania crossed her arms, *"What if they blame the Trickster for his death?"*

"Why blame the Trickster when Stain is the obvious answer?" Yatagarasu said, *"It wouldn't be logical."*

"Maybe, but who knows? Can we really take a chance like that?"

"We can surpass death."

Joker shivered at this persona's voice.

"You!" Titania snapped, *"Can't you just-!"*

"Silence! Let the Trickster think about it."

Joker bit his lip. The hero hasn't been dead for more than ten minutes. What was the risk? What was the reward? The hero wouldn't remember dying, would he? Joker clutched his chin in thought as he rolled the various situations around in his mind. At the same time, there wouldn't be another chance to test this spell.

Aside from breaking into a morgue.

He might be a thief, but even he had standards.

"Big brother," Alice whispered, "I believe we can break the cycle of life and Death. Our powers are unmatched in this world."

"Are you saying that as the ultimate persona of Death?" Arsene asked.

"... I am."

Joker sighed sharply through his nose.

"Alright." He said, *"Let's give it a shot."*

Seth faded away as silent as a breeze. He brought another persona to the forefront of his mind, but did not let them manifest. He took a deep breath, then cast Samarecarm. Vines and flowers sprouted around Native, glowing faintly like the aurora. A divine floral scent crept onto the breeze and a crystal butterfly fluttered from one of the flowers to land on Native's chest.

Joker's jaw dropped as the butterfly melded into the man, and he jolted to life with sputtering coughs. He cursed under his breath as he reached out to cover the man's eyes, whispers of Dormina put him to sleep, the silent song of a Makajama would make sure he would never remember this.

He felt eyes on him, and he turned to see the three U.A. kids staring at him, highlighted by the fading glow of life-giving plants. Stain was melted from his icy prison, ropes bound his arms together.

Joker gave them a nod, and Midoriya's relieved smile was akin to sunshine. Iida put a hand to his heart and sighed in relief, but it was Todoroki who gave Joker a bewildered look. Joker winked at him and put a single finger to his lips. The boy blinked several times but slowly nodded.

Then, like a ghost, he slipped into the nearby alley when the unmistakable glow of Endeavors flames emerged down the street. Seth shuffled within his mind.

"What about Shitstain?"

"We have to leave him for the heroes."

"Bah!" Seth snorted and shook his head, "Shitstain wasn't even a challenge, more of a one-trick pony. What a disappointing hunt."

Joker snorted as he stepped over icy shards, *"I'll make it up to you somehow."*

"Hmph. I crave the thrill of battle, only a fight to the death will satisfy me! That shall be my reward, Trickster."

"I'll... keep that in mind."

"Flying upon my great form would only draw unwanted attention," Seth's grumbled, *"We must make haste, like a rabbit fleeing the fox's jaws."*

"I know."

He only stopped when a light crinkle came from his boots. He blinked, then looked down.

"Huh, how did you escape Seth's wrath?" He whispered to himself as he picked up the crumpled card.

With a shrug, he deposited it back into his pocket. It would make for a nice souvenir, at least.

Joker shot out his grapple, the ride up to the rooftops was nowhere near as exhilarating as the first time and it had nothing compared to riding upon Seth. A wisp of wind caressed his face. He turned to look just in time to see Mona leap over the rooftops with feline finesse.

Mona smirked as he cast magic mid-air, the wind launched him straight towards his partner like a rocket. Joker almost toppled over when Mona's tiny body crashed into his chest.

“What was that for?” He asked as he cradled the not-cat.

“I was worried!” Mona narrowed his eyes, tail flicked back and forth.

“Why were you worried? You were backing me up.” Despite himself, he let his best grin shine, “Don’t tell me you doubted my abilities, Mona.”

“O-of course not!” Mona climbed from Joker’s arms to his shoulders, “I wasn’t worried about Stain, he went down easily thanks to the help of those other kids.”

Joker raised a brow, “Then?”

“Fine.” Mona sighed and rubbed into Joker’s hair, “I was worried about what the U.A. kids would do to you after, but it seems like my fears were unfounded. Besides, I would’ve intervened anyway if that blue-haired kid didn’t let you go.”

Joker simply nodded, then turned to look to the streets. He fell into a crouch when Endeavor, Gran Torino, and a small group of heroes approached Midoriya and the others.

“We should leave before they spot us.” Mona whispered.

“In a minute,” Joker’s eyes narrowed, “I just want to make sure that Stain will be properly taken care of.”

Joker sighed in relief when the heroes took him and turned on his heel to sneak away. That was until chaos broke out onto the street.

“Midoriya!!”

They whipped around just as the winged Nomu soared over the rooftops, with Midoriya in its clutches. Joker whipped out his pistol.

“Shit, Seth-!”

The Nomu gurgled and lurched as if it were struck with an invisible force, then it fell. A shadow zoomed past before the persona could materialize, the moonlit form of Stain stabbed the Nomu in it's exposed brain, then rode the beast into a crash landing. Midoriya was under his arm, paralyzed by fear as the Hero Killer set him down on the pavement. Seth was held back, thrashing and stomping, but his master did not let him into the physical plane.

He aimed his pistol as Stain ripped the blade out of the Nomu's brain.

"Joker..." Mona's fur stood on end as the air was permeated with pure malice, "I don't like this..."

"What are you standing around for!?" Endeavor stomped down the road, his flames roared.

"Endeavor." Stain's mask fell, revealing his gruesome face, "You fake..."

Goosebumps broke out on Joker's arms as the bloodlust skyrocketed, it choked the air and dyed the silver moon to a bloody hue. Alice stepped into the forefront, her power shielded Joker from the heart-rending fear, but Mona was left helpless.

"Well!? Come and get me, you fakes!" Stain stumbled forward a step, "The only one I'll let kill me is the true hero, All Might!!"

The evil aura vanished as soon as it came. Joker sighed as Stain dropped his bloody knife.

"He's..." Mona swallowed as he shivered, "I think he's unconscious."

Joker lowered his gun. New blotches of crimson stained Midoriya's costume, he switched out Alice for Titania. Midoriya blinked in rapid succession when Titania's Mediarahan healed his injury, the boy looked around while the others were still locked in fear from Stain's suffocating aura.

They met eyes, Joker winked at him before they turned tail. Mona was silent as they slinked across the rooftops like true Phantom Thieves, they crossed halfway through the city before Joker slowed to a stop. Smoke still billowed from a few buildings, the wail of sirens and distant shouts echoed through the streets. The turbulent night was finally coming to an end.

“What a mess,” Mona whispered, “It’ll take some time for things to return to normal.”

Joker shook his head, then held out his arm as he summoned Yatagarasu, the faithful bird ruffled his feathers as he awaited his orders. Mona blinked curiously as Joker dug out his phone with his other hand and flicked through his contact list. He scrolled past Taneo’s number. That man would be getting a call soon, whether he wanted it or not.

“What are you doing?”

“That hero was dead.” Mona inhaled sharply, but Joker continued as his thumb hovered over the screen, “You saw me use the Samarecarm. It actually revived him, so I want to test the strength of other spells. Now we have the perfect reason to.”

“Joker,” Mona was suddenly serious, “We *absolutely* can’t let it get out that we revived a dead hero. That’s far too dangerous.”

“I know that. I put him to sleep and cast Makajama on him for good measure. I doubt he’ll remember what happened tonight at all.”

“Good thinking. So, what were you thinking with these other spells?”

“I’m going to heal Ingenium. I made a promise to his brother.”

A beat of silence.

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, but I think it’ll work. If Samarecarm can revive the dead, then what can’t our most powerful healing spell fix?”

“Wait a moment. If it *does* work... ” Mona hummed in thought, “Ingenium was a victim to the Hero Killer.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And instead of just healing *one* victim, why don’t we heal them all? It will definitely send a message that we aren’t like him!” Mona grinned and bounced on his paws, “It’s perfect! The other heroes will probably try to cover up our involvement in any way possible, but if we heal Stain’s victims and leave a calling card with each one...”

“We’ll sweep them off their feet before they can get a chance to recover! I’ll set something up with Taneo before the heroes can get a handle on it, just to make sure.” Joker grinned, “Now there’s the Mona I know and love. I’m glad Stain’s little performance didn’t turn you into a scaredy cat.”

“H-hey! I wasn’t scared before! Not at all!!”

“Of course not,” Joker looked to Yatagarasu, who had watched the entire exchange with thinly disguised amusement, “Patrol the streets around here, make sure no heroes will get the drop on us.”

“Roger, Trickster.”

Yatagarasu leapt from his arm and soared into the sky. Joker watched the graceful persona for a moment, then pressed the one and only speed dial. It rang once.

“*YOU IDIOTS!!*”

Joker held the phone away from his ear as there was a clatter of dishes.

"Manami, please calm down!" Gentle's voice filtered through the background, "You almost spilled the tea."

"Oh! Sorry, Gentle!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear you guys getting along."

"You!" Aiba's wrath returned in full force, "Do you have any idea how worried sick I've been!? Hosu has been all over the news! There are already several videos all over the internet, and don't think I didn't recognize you! You guys promised me that you would be careful!"

"New videos are up already?" Joker teased, "At least it isn't a slow news day."

"Can't you take this seriously!?"

"Alright, fine. Tell me about these videos."

"W-well, where to even start?" He heard the iconic keys typing, "There are several with a dragon flying down the street, most of them are only a few seconds before they cut out from the wind. There's one with an aerial view of your dragon, then one more with it's battle against the Nomu. It captured you ordering it to attack those monsters. It only shows your back though, so your face hasn't been shown. There's also a lot of interference, so your voice doesn't come through that well either."

"Is that all?"

"No! Online discussions about them have stormed the forums. The media only aired a few videos once since they don't know who you really are, but they did call you a 'mysterious new hero'. There is simply a flood of information about the Hosu attack for them to linger on it." Joker burst out laughing, and Aiba sputtered, "Stop laughing! This isn't funny!"

“Of course it is! If only they knew the irony of it.” Joker’s grin smoothed over, “Anyway, I called to ask for a favor.”

“Fine! Just tell me that you two are okay first? No injuries, right?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. Not even a scratch.”

“Good, that’s... good.”

Aiba was silent, he could tell she was still fuming. She sighed in defeat after a few moments.

“Alright, what is it?”

“I need to know where all of the victims for the Hero Killer are located, the ones that are still alive at least.”

“Why..?”

“I made a promise to somebody and I plan to keep it.”

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, right?”

“Me?” He placed a hand over his heart in mock injury, even though she couldn’t see, “Never. I’m simply doing them a favor.”

“Okay, I’ll trust you.” Another sigh came over the line, *“I’ll send you the information once I have it, it should only take an hour. Two at the most.”*

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

“I demand a plate of curry as recompense!” Aiba chuckled, *“Don’t ever make me worry like that again, okay? I don’t know what I would do if I lost my boys.”*

She hung up.

“Your boys...?”

Joker stared at his phone for several seconds, Mona cleared his throat to snap him out of it.

“I heard all of it.” Mona said, “We have lots of things to do, and not much time to do them.”

“Yup.” Joker pocketed his phone with a sigh, then looked out to the city, “Lets try to get back to the hideout and rest before she gets the information.”

“Agreed.”

With that, they disappeared into the smoldering city.

Oh, you thought it would just end with Stain? Oh no, nope. Joker has plans in place that'll give every hero a massive migraine, good luck to them :D

A few people guessed that Ingenium might get healed or that Native would be dead and Joker revives him, to those people here's a cookie!

Butterfly Kisses

Chapter 23: Butterfly Kisses

“It seems your prediction was right, Tsukauchi.”

“Oh no,” Tsukauchi said, “I know that look. Joker really did it, didn’t he?”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Iida Tensei was as still as a corpse.

Anyone might mistake him for one, by the stiffness in his body or how his legs were icy and numb. Death had not come to claim him yet, the calm hisses and beeps from the surrounding machines were the only thing that kept him alive. He tasted nothing more than bland oxygen carefully fed to him by the plastic mask. It dug into his face, but he barely had the energy to adjust it.

He sunk into his pillows with his eyes closed. Despite how floaty and dizzy the pain killers made him, he just couldn’t fall asleep. His mind relived the final moments from his encounter with the Hero Killer, of the horror and sorrow that marred his mother’s and little brother’s faces in the aftermath. He would’ve shaken his head to clear his thoughts, but the sudden movement would make him nauseous.

He simmered in his misery for a few moments more, until a soft breeze kisses his face.

It was pleasant and whisked away the horrors whispering in his mind. It was comforting in the same way as when his mother would always open his window to let in fresh air in the mornings, back

when he still went to school. He sensed a presence by his bedside, but there had been no footsteps.

He furrowed his brow and blearily opened his eyes when there was a soft crinkle of paper. It took a few long seconds for him to comprehend the beautiful woman floating serenely at his bedside. Her hand, as delicate as a flower, placed a card on the bedside table. He blinked a few more times. Was this a hallucination?

But no, the woman was still there, untied by the laws of gravity.

Long golden blonde hair flowed down her back, upon her head were two asymmetrical horns. She had pointed ears, and her expression showed such beautiful tranquility that it would make any painting of it into a masterpiece. Her clothes were the purest of white silk. The moonbeams outlining her body gave her an ethereal glow.

She opened eyes like liquid aquamarine jewels to stare at him. His heart almost stopped when a kind smile graced her lips.

“Take heart, hero.” Her voice whispered like velvet in his ears, “The Trickster has found you worthy of Salvation.”

The woman drifted through the air, almost as if she were underwater, until she was suspended above him, her body parallel to his own. Her hands cupped his cheeks and she leaned forward to place a kiss on his forehead. He gasped as his body was filled with icy cold energy, it flowed and crashed through him like a typhoon, but it didn’t hurt.

It was the opposite.

The cool sensation washed away his aches and pains, it cleared his mind from the haze of several medications. But most importantly, something *snapped* back into place. The mysterious woman held his gaze as the energy flowed out from his legs. She chuckled, the sound as enchanting as bird song, then she floated away, her touch gently traced down his face before it was gone.

“W-wait!” He shot straight up, pulling on numerous wires, “What’s your name?”

She placed a single finger on her lips, then she vanished in a rush of sapphire cinders.

He sat there, stupefied. With shaky hands he reached over to the red and black card she left behind, there was an insignia of a flaming top hat and mask.

“Take your heart?” He flipped the card over, “To the heroes whose livelihoods were unjustly taken by the King Of Wrath, who’s reign of bloodshed has been put to an end, we return what was reaped. Beware, what was given can easily be taken away again. Use this gift wisely. From, the Leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts - Joker?”

Tensei looked to the little sticky note on the bottom.

‘Tell your brother I said hi. :)’

His heart pounded in his ears. What did this mean? He stared at his legs, they were neither numb nor did they feel like dead weight. He swallowed and stared at his toes. His vision became blurry when they *moved*, he could feel the silky texture of the blankets on his feet and across his legs.

Was this a dream..?

There was only one way to find out. He removed the oxygen mask and various other wires attached to him, then tore off the blanket. His eyes were wide in disbelief as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, and stood to his full height. The machines’ shrill cries were nothing but background noise as he walked from one end of the room to the other, he clutched the card in his hand like a lifeline.

Suddenly, the doors flew open and a medical team rushed in with a crash cart. They froze when they saw him standing in front of the

open window, the pale moonlight spilled in and painted him in silver hues.

“Iida-san!?” The doctor gaped at him like fish out of water, “What... how.... how is this possible?”

“I think...” Tensei looked up from the card, eyes wide, “That I was kissed by a goddess.”

The hospital room was silent.

Three of U.A.’s finest sat on the edge of their hospital beds, all of them plunged deep into their own thoughts. They were uninjured, but the hospital had kept them overnight for observation, in case there were any unknown side effects. Judging from the bags under their eyes, none of them had gotten any sleep.

The sunlight draped in from the windows and birds sang their morning songs, but the happiness and purity of dawn didn’t reach this small, cold room. Finally, the morose atmosphere was broken by the first spoken words of the day.

“Do you think...”

Todoroki and Midoriya looked to Iida, who hung his head, his hands were tight fists on his lap.

“We would’ve won without Joker?” Iida’s shoulders shook, “If it wasn’t for me and my blind hatred of Stain... If that menace had somehow killed either of you, then I don’t think I could ever forgive myself.”

“It’s hard saying.” Todoroki said after a moment of thought, “Stain was getting desperate when it was just the three of us. If we were somehow all unaffected by his quirk, then we might’ve been able to take him down ourselves. It’s no use stagnating on what could’ve been.”

“I do wonder though,” Midoriya clutched his chin in thought, “How did Joker know where we were? Was he just in the area by chance or did something draw him there?”

“I have a feeling he was in Hosu because of Stain.”

“Why do you say that, Todoroki?” Iida asked with furrowed brows.

“I briefly saw him on the rooftops the night before the Hosu attacks.” Todoroki was content to study the corner, “He was there and gone again before I could-”

They were interrupted when the door opened. They stood from their beds when a canine headed man walked in with Gran Torino, Manual, and Detective Tsukauchi.

“Hmph, so you brats are awake.” Gran Torino grumbled.

“G-gran Torino!”

Iida's eyes shown with guilt, “Manual...”

“I have half a mind to run you through the wringer!” Gran Torino snapped at Midoriya, “But I think the Police Chief will do a fine job of it instead.”

Midoriya flinched, then stared at the Police Chief's imposing figure, he towered over everyone else in the room.

“As Gran Torino said, I am the Chief of Police, Tsuragamae Kenji. So, you are the U.A. students who took down the Hero Killer, woof?”

Todoroki narrowed his eyes, “We are.”

“Hmm, in regards to the Hero Killer's arrest,” Tsuragamae studied the teens, “He had fairly serious injuries. Broken bones, significant bruising, burns, even a few slash wounds to the shoulders. There were traces of a bullet wound, but it seems to have recently healed

over, so that can't be counted towards you. He is currently being treated under guard, woof."

They exchanged hasty glances.

"What about Native, sir?" Midoriya asked.

Todoroki's hands balled into fists to hide his shaking, the knuckles turned white.

"The hero is also being treated," Tsuragamae cocked his head to the side, "He's groggy and heavily disoriented, and he doesn't remember what happened within the last 36 hours. He strangely seemed to have lost some muscle mass as well, but he should make a full recovery with time and physical therapy."

Iida wasn't the only one to sigh in relief, but Todoroki remained silent. Tsuragamae's expression fell into a sudden seriousness, his eyes sharpened as he took in the three children in front of him.

"With that aside, the three of you should already know how the laws treat the use of quirks. For an individual's use of force and power that can easily kill another, actions that would be appropriate to denounce, to be officially accepted, is in thanks to those first brave people who had taken up the mantle of the first heroes. They followed those rules and laws to the letter," Tsuragamae's expression became grave, "Even up against the Hero Killer, the use of your quirks, without express permission from your guardians, is a violation of these rules. As such, the three of you and your guardians must receive proper punishment."

Todoroki bristled, "You can't be serious!"

"T-Todoroki!" Midoriya jumped and stared at his friend in shock.

"If Iida hadn't been there, then Native would've been killed." Todoroki stepped around Midoriya's bed with an icy cold glare, "If Midoriya and I wouldn't have come, then Iida could've been killed! If..."

Todoroki trailed off. The room went silent. Tsuragamae cleared his throat after a few moments, his eyes sparked with an indiscernible gleam.

“Do you wish to finish that train of thought, woof?”

“If...” Iida hung his head, “If Joker hadn’t been there, then all of us might have been killed.”

“Iida!” Todoroki snapped his head towards his friend.

Tsuragamae and Tsukauchi exchanged significant looks, and Gran Torino grumbled to himself.

“So, the reports are correct.” Tsuragamae ran a hand over his snout, “The notorious vigilante has caused waves during the Hosu attack.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Midoriya said with furrowed brows.

Tsuragamae glanced at Tsukauchi, who nodded. The detective dug out a notepad and pen, then took a step forward, his face etched with a calm smile.

“I figured you wouldn’t know yet, being cooped up in a hospital room,” Tsukauchi said, “Joker fought the three Nomu and put out a majority of the fires they caused. He had a brief encounter with Gran Torino and Endeavor before he ran from the scene and disappeared, but it seems he ended up running into Stain.”

“It was awe-inspiring.” Manual spoke for the first time, “He possessed incredible power with those monsters.”

“That’s an understatement,” Gran Torino said with a scowl, “He took the full brunt of Endeavor’s flames and came out completely unscathed.”

“He *what* ?” Todoroki asked with wide eyes.

“Come to think of it,” Manual said, “I believe he said the names of those monsters he summoned, there was something familiar about them.”

Tsukauchi turned to him, pen at the ready, “Really? Do you remember what they were?”

“I believe the big dragon’s name was Seth,” Manual frowned, “Then the winged woman was Titania.”

“And Cerberus,” Gran Torino said, “A big white beast with a metal tail. He summoned that one when Endeavor arrived on the scene.”

“Titania, Cerberus, Seth...” Midoriya gasped, “It can’t be.”

“What’s wrong, Midoriya?” Iida asked.

“Titania is the queen of faeries. Cerberus is usually depicted as the three-headed hound that guards the gates of hell, but Joker’s Cerberus doesn’t match that. And Seth...” Midoriya bit his lip and he looked up to Tsukauchi, “I don’t know that one.”

“Seth would be an Egyptian god. The god of storms, deserts, and chaos to be more precise.” Something like sorrow and regret appeared in Gran Torino’s eyes, “In the legends he murdered his brother Osiris, to take his throne.”

Tsukauchi paled, the scratch of his rapid pen strokes filled the silence.

“A quirk that can summon gods and mythical monsters,” Gran Torino shook his head, “I’ve never heard of such a thing. No wonder the brat was so cocky.”

“How many of them does he have under his control?” Tsuragamae asked as he turned to Tsukauchi.

“We’re not sure, we have records of a few of them. The three we just discussed, and two others, but we don’t have names for either. It

wouldn't be far fetched to say that he has any number of them under his sleeve."

"And he can heal grave injuries as well, a dangerous ability given his status as a vigilante." Tsuragamae released a heavy sigh, but he noticed how the three teens blanched, "I find it suspicious that you all escaped the Hero Killer with no injuries. So be truthful, did Joker use his powers to heal you after the battle?"

"He did." Todoroki said with a frown, "Stain managed to cut me a few times, but nothing serious."

"A few cuts and an injured leg." Midoriya said.

Their eyes turned to Iida, who had his hand clasped around his shoulder.

"When I first confronted Stain," Iida grimaced as he remembered the searing pain, "He stabbed me all the way through my shoulder. My hand and some of my forearm had been numb for most of the fight."

"Iida-kun..." Midoriya looked down at his own scarred hand.

"I see, woof." Tsuragamae crossed his arms, "And how does it feel now?"

Iida flexed his hand a few times, "It's... back to normal."

Tsukauchi filled out more of his note pad as Manual grimaced.

"He also did something to Native," Iida said, "But it was different to how he healed us."

Tsukauchi looked up from his notes, "Different how?"

"W-well" Midoriya tapped his chin, "A soft green light appeared around us when we were healed, but it was a lot different with Native. There were glowing vines and flowers, and a crystal butterfly too. I also smelled those flowers, like irises."

“Really?” Iida raised a brow, “I smelled a mix of geraniums and tiger lilies.”

Todoroki’s heart pounded. He knew what he saw. Native was still, far too still, his chest didn’t move and he heard no breath. Neither Midoriya or Iida seemed to notice that Native was....

He knew that Native was dead, until *he wasn’t* .

Because of Joker.

Just thinking about it made his scalp prickle. It was the sort of power that had kept up him all night, flitting together with their battle against the Hero Killer. The vigilante walked away from that fight without a scratch. Was Joker even *human* ?

“Todoroki?” The boy snapped out of his thoughts and stared at Midoriya, “What flower did you smell?”

“... Amaryllis.”

“Different smells for different people? I wonder why that is? Does it rely on some sort of memory? Hmm, a smell...” The gears cranked in Midoriya’s mind, “Oh, maybe it worked like smelling salts?”

“Can you clarify?” Tsukauchi said, “What do you mean by smelling salts?”

“Native was already unconscious when I confronted Stain,” Iida said as he stared at the floor, “And he didn’t wake up until Joker healed him.”

“I see.” Tsukauchi made another note, “So he healed your injuries and helped Native regain consciousness?”

Todoroki chose to remain silent, even as Midoriya nodded.

“But why put Native back to sleep again...?” Midoriya whispered, he was cut off when the Chief cleared his throat.

“We have wandered from the main topic, but we have gained valuable intel for a wanted vigilante.” Tsuragamae shook his head, his jowls wobbled, “But my main point is this: If it gets out that you took down the Hero Killer, then you must be punished for your actions.”

Midoriya stiffened, Iida sank into himself, his expression carefully neutral, accepting even.

“No.”

Todoroki marched straight at Tsuragamae, it was almost comical how Todoroki had to crane his neck up to look in the Police Chief’s eyes.

“Isn’t it a hero’s job to save people? I would’ve done the exact same thing again and again, I don’t regret what I did.”

“Hmm, so it’s okay to bend the law when you see fit?”

“What?” Todoroki took a step back, “That’s not what I-”

“There is still one other option.” Tsuragamae bent down over Todoroki, “Say we give Endeavor the credit of capturing the Hero Killer. The burns and bruises can be covered by his fighting style, the destruction and debris on that street could have cut him in the shoulder during their battle.”

Todoroki narrowed his eyes, “And Joker?”

“That complicates it even more.” Tsukauchi sighed, his cravings for caffeine had skyrocketed in the past hour alone, “We can’t cover up all of the dragon videos and the Nomu attacks, but we can direct the media away from it.”

“We’ll conceal his involvement in regards to the attacks. There were no witnesses to his battle with Endeavor and Gran Torino or with the Hero Killer. But there’s always a possibility that people may connect the new mystery hero to Joker.” Tsuragamae rubbed at his eyes, “If it

comes down to the wire then Endeavor will claim to have fought both, but arresting the Hero Killer took top priority compared to capturing a vigilante.”

The three U.A. students exchanged glances.

“So? Which would you prefer?” Tsuragamae asked as he lowered his hand, “I personally wouldn’t want to find fault with such promising young heroes.”

“Either way,” Manual smiled and put his hands on his hips, “We’ll need to take responsibility for being so negligent.”

Iida walked up to Manual, and bowed, “I am truly sorry.”

“All right.” Manual playfully chopped Iida on the head, “If you really understand, then you won’t do it again!”

“I won’t!”

Tsuragamae looked expectantly at the other two. Midoriya was the first to bow, Todoroki hesitantly copied.

“I’m sorry too.” Midoriya said.

“Please take care of it.”

“Very well. You will not receive the praise you deserve, but you will not be punished.” It was the Police Chief who bowed next, “But at least, as someone who protects the peace, I can say thank you.”

Todoroki crossed his arms, “You really should have started off with that.”

“Now,” Tsukauchi stepped closer to them, “If you don’t mind, I would like to ask a few more questions about Joker’s-”

A knock on the door silenced them all. Tsuragamae nodded towards Manual, who went to open it. A cat headed police officer rushed in,

eyes as wide as dinner plates and fur that stood on end. Tsuragamae bent down so he could whisper in his ear, then handed him a piece of paper. Tsuragamae took a moment to read it.

The Chief of Police stiffened, his jaw went slack as he blinked several times. He collected himself, cleared his throat, then glanced at Tsukauchi.

“It seems your prediction was right, Tsukauchi.”

“Oh no,” Tsukauchi said, “I know that look. Joker really did it, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“And all of the extra security?”

“Did nothing.” Tsuragamae shook his head, “He slipped through those hospitals like a shadow.”

Iida’s heart hammered in his chest as Tsuragamae handed the paper to Tsukauchi, then looked straight at him.

“It seems...” Tsuragamae said, words coming as slow as sap, “That victims of the Hero Killer, those heroes who have been permanently disabled, are being miraculously healed. Our latest intelligence tells that he has just managed to heal the final hero, despite our best efforts to apprehend him at those hospitals.”

Midoriya and Todoroki’s jaws dropped. Tsukauchi, Gran Torino, and Manual looked at the Police Chief as if he had sprouted another head.

“Don’t tell me...” Iida whispered.

Was it too good to be true?

Tsukauchi scrubbed his eyes and released a bone-deep sigh before the Chief finished.

“Indeed, Iida-kun. Your brother was one of the first on the list, Joker has claimed responsibility for each one through calling cards.” Tsuragamae held a mix of unsteady emotions within his eyes, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get ahead of this before the media storm arrives.”

He bowed his head, then left the room with the officer at his heels.

“Now that this has happened, it’s more important than ever that you tell me the truth.” Tsukauchi stepped forward, his eyes sharp, “I know your battle with Stain was harrowing, but can you tell me everything about your encounter with Joker? How he fought, how he escaped, his unusual powers or any other details you can think of.”

Iida began the tale with a shaky voice, he avoided Manual’s eyes until Midoriya added to the story. Todoroki shared his part with ruthless efficiency. They tapered off near the end, but Todoroki looked Tsukauchi right in the eye when he told of Joker’s ‘escape’ and omitted the part where Native was actually dead.

In the end, Tsukauchi didn’t pick up any lies.

“Shigaraki Tomura, please sit down,” Kurogiri said, “You might reopen your wound.”

“Shut it!” Shigaraki scratched angry lines in his neck, he paced back and forth as his shoulder burned with vengeance, “It’s happened *again* ! Stain, Stain, Stain, *Stain* . And that annoying secret boss is getting so much attention too! It’s all they’re talking about! Why aren’t my Nomu on the news? Why aren’t I getting the credit I deserve for the destruction in Hosu? Why!?”

“The Hero Killer is still being associated with us because of that new video.”

“That’s not enough!” Shigaraki hissed, “They barely glossed over it!”

Kurogiri silently sighed, the action came off as nothing more than wavering mist. Thankfully, the tension was cut short when the door opened and Giran walked in with a greasy smirk. Shigaraki glowered at him.

“What do *you* want? I’m not in the mood.”

“Now, is that any way to greet someone who comes bearing gifts?”

Shigaraki narrowed his eyes as Giran approached the bar. He dug into his pockets and placed a few odd stones on it, two were perfectly round and smooth, the others a bit more jagged and rough.

“What the hell are these supposed to be?”

“Patience, Shigaraki Tomura.” Kurogiri ignored Shigaraki’s glare as he turned to Giran, “Well, what are they? I didn’t think you would be one to deal in petty drugs, Giran.”

“These are better than any drugs you’d find on the market, and no side effects or addictive properties to boot.” Giran huffed in amusement, and held out a jagged stone, “They’re healing items. Why don’t you try one for that shoulder of yours, Shigaraki? You just break it in between your fingers.”

“Quirk enhanced items?” Kurogiri mused as he watched his charge.

Shigaraki’s eyes widened when he broke the stone, and cool energy washed over his body. The burn of his shoulder wound lessened, but it was still tender and twinged with pain if he moved too fast.

“Where did you get these?” Kurogiri asked with growing interest.

“A little bird recently sold them to me, they didn’t say exactly where they got the goods.” Giran shrugged, “I’m going to try and get more out of them first, before I share their name. Also, the two smooth ones are a more powerful version. I thought your boss would be...

interested . I expect my usual price to be paid, with a little bit of interest.”

Shigaraki scoffed, “Gifts don’t come with a price, Giran.”

“I gave one to the Hero Killer as a sign of good faith, but we all know how that turned out.”

Kurogiri nodded at the man, the rest of the stones were consumed by purple mist before they disappeared.

“Fine. Your accounts will be filled later.”

Shigaraki huffed and sank into a bar stool.

“I’ll keep you updated on this special source.”Giran turned on his heel and headed for the door, “Who knows what other goodies they might have? I’ll be bringing you some new recruits, expect them within the next few days.”

“Giran.” The man looked over his shoulder to Shigaraki, “I like you a lot better when you don’t stink like an ashtray.”

Giran chuckled as he left the bar behind.

“The analysis is complete, sir.”

“And?”

“W-well, this isn’t a simple item enhanced by a quirk, you see. I didn’t detect *any* signs of quirk usage at all.” The doctor approached All For One, “But it has the same energy signature as the anomaly we picked up from the USJ. So the only logical explanation for its origins would be-”

“Joker.”

All For One grinned as he leaned back into his chair, the various tubes and wires shifted, but he paid them no mind.

“The boy has gained such value since his debut in the USJ,” All For One tilted his head, “Just where did he come from? How were these items created, if not by a quirk? He’s such an exquisite mystery.”

“I don’t know, sir.” The doctor held out the tiny bundle of stones, “Do you want to try one? The wound Shigaraki received from Stain seems to have been healed for the most part, but I would like to check it to make sure. If there’s any chance it could heal you...”

All For One hummed. He reached over and pinched a rough stone, a simple flex from one of his quirks reduced it to dust. The doctor bit his lip as he watched his master for any sign of change, any inkling in the machines that indicated better readings.

There was nothing more than a mild buzzing in his fingertips.

“Hmm, it didn’t work. How disappointing.”

“Perhaps we should try the smooth ones? Giran said they were more potent.”

“Very well.”

All For One felt the smooth little orb as it rolled around in his palm. He activated one sensory quirk, then another, to piece together how it came into this world, but the quirks only perceived a strange static.

Interesting.

Without hesitation, he crushed it between his fingers. His skin pleasantly buzzed, it slowly trailed all over his body before it faded, like a limb recovered from falling asleep. The doctor swallowed as he fiddled with the mountain of machinery around All For One.

“Any difference?”

The doctor hummed, "If I didn't monitor these machines constantly, I would say it's nominal. You don't think Giran lied, do you?"

"No, he knows the consequences of dishonesty." All For One frowned, "Perhaps my injuries are too grave for such simple trinkets. It's a shame, really."

"Do you want to try the second one, sir? Perhaps it'll-"

"No. Keep the rest for further study." All For One waved his hand, "See if we can unlock any secrets that it might hold."

The doctor opened his mouth to respond, when a particular screen suddenly lit up. Demizu Mika, the newswoman from when Silver Falcon's travesties were announced to the world, came into view. The little picture next to her made the doctor stiffen.

"S-sir, it's showing Joker's logo."

"I wonder what the boy has done now?" All For One's grin widened, "What will he do to upend hero society this time?"

"This just in," Her voice shook, but it wasn't from fear, "Several proclamations are coming out this morning, from famed doctors who have taken it unto themselves to treat heroes disabled by Stain. They have made miraculous claims that all of Stain's victims have been completely healed, but the culprit behind these actions leave the hero world baffled."

The image changed to another, a card with letters cut out from a magazine.

"Joker, the vigilante behind Silver Falcon's fall from grace, has left calling cards with each hero. Police have scoured the surrounding areas, but have been unsuccessful in his recapture. We now go live to a press conference currently being held outside of Hosu General Hospital."

The doctor's eyes flicked to another screen, where Shigaraki began dusting everything in his reach, rage rolled off of the boy in waves. Kurogiri, with sagged shoulders, released a sigh as he tried to calm the boy down, to no success.

The scene shifted to a sea of reporters crowded in front of the hospital, the Chief of Police was at a podium, behind him were a few of Stain's victims, Ingenium being one of them. They stood, as healthy as horses, as if they were never touched by the Hero Killer's blade. Doctors in lab coats donned serious expressions as Tsuragamae was hounded with questions.

"How did he sneak past security to reach the heroes' rooms!?" One man shouted, *"This brings into question the security of the hospital itself!"*

"I assure you," Tsuragamae said, *"That the hospital and its staff remain safe. Joker used unorthodox methods to bypass security, those which are now being patched."*

"I have an inside comment that states it was a beautiful woman who had stolen into their rooms to heal them, but the calling cards are all from Joker. Does this mean that she was another of his supposed demons? What exactly is his quirk!?"

"We have officially deemed it as a rare type of summoning quirk, and each of his monsters has unique abilities all of their own."

Tsuragamae said, *"It's more likely that his quirk is a powerful mutation."*

"Does this mean that he could potentially heal villains too? He's already a vigilante on the run from the law, so what happens when Joker falls to villainy!? Is there no way for you to stop him before then!?"

"We don't know his current goals or why he has chosen to heal Stain's victims," Tsuragamae said, *"But we are pouring resources into this investigation, this includes getting Endeavor and All Might*

onto our team. We will also get considerable funding from the Hero Commission."

The reporters went wild, blinding camera flashes and countless microphones were shoved closer to the podium. One could barely hear one question over another.

All For One chuckled as he muted the screen.

"S-sir, this is...." The doctor swallowed, the first sparks of insanity lit up his eyes, "If we can get a hold of Joker's quirk...."

"Yes, it's possible that his powers could bring me back to my prime."

"Th-then!" He was practically vibrating, "Shall I gather the Nomu and-"

"Not so fast." All For One swiveled in his chair to face the doctor, "Joker is a rather unique specimen, who knows how to adapt to any given situation. We must observe him, see more of his powers, demons, and special skills, before we can act. Perhaps we can feed Giran some lines and have him set Joker up with a 'job', maybe introduce a temporary rival or a suitable target. All for observation, of course. We must know what makes him tick before we even have a chance to capture him."

"While that is true sir, what would happen if the heroes got to him first?"

"Please," All For One's chuckle echoed within the dark room, "The rat hasn't picked up the strange energy signatures practically *leaking* from the USJ, what chance do the rest of them stand? Look."

All For One turned his head towards the screens, even though he was blind. Shigaraki was still destroying the bar in a mindless rage, while the Chief Of Police, heroes, and doctors were battered with endless questions. The reporters swarmed like roaches.

“The heroes are floundering. They don’t know how to handle someone as uncontrollable as Joker, the media will eat that up, people are drawn to him like sharks to a fresh kill. Even if the heroes somehow get the jump on the boy, I doubt they will keep him for long.” All For One’s grin returned, it sent a chill down the doctor’s spine, “If, by the unlikely chance they do capture him and find a way to keep him contained, then not even a cell in Tartarus will keep his marvelous quirk safe from me.”

“I understand.”

All For One leaned back in his chair, as content as a king on his throne.

“Then we have our work cut out for us.”

“Y-yes, sir!!”

Hitoshi had been blindsided when he woke up this morning.

The news stations and forums exploded with Joker’s newest accomplishment. Healed heroes, with ruthless security supposedly increasing at those hospitals as the hours went on, yet the vigilante was still at large. Radio hosts and newscasters alike debated on this topic, their voices growing ever more fervent as the morning dragged on.

He scrolled through the endless feed on his laptop, the taste of his mother’s coffee fresh on his tongue. Hitoshi set the cup down with a frown. He still loved his mother’s coffee, but it had nothing on Akira’s nectar of the gods. The cafe seemed emptier without Akira for some reason. He was a new addition, and yet he had stolen into their hearts and minds as if he were always meant to be here.

Hitoshi shook his head and downed the rest of the coffee.

He was about to close his laptop, when a new message pinged on his Herocord server. It was from a user he often debated with, one of many that had joined the server to talk about any number of heroes and vigilantes alike. Joker was the main topic more recently, though.

[Cyn.der]

So get this I was in my apartment in Hosu and the new mystery hero lands on the next building over!!

[Sharky2194]

Wait, YOU WERE IN HOSU??

WHILE IT WAS BURNING

And you stayed in your apartment smh

[KuroNeko]

this better be a good story

[CoffeeAddict2.0]

If he's not lying, that is.

[Cyn.der]

NO YOU GUYS I HAVE PROOF!

I got a picture!!

It looks like the exact same dude who fought off the Nomu with his dragon!

Hitoshi rolled his eyes, but he froze when the picture was uploaded.

[KuroNeko]

you call that blob of pixels a picture?? I have an ancient pre-quirk polaroid that takes better ones

[Sharky2194]

You might see a hidden message if you squint and tilt your head

[Cyn.der]

Oh come on you guys! I was shaking from excitement!!

Can you blame me???

He ignored the rest of the conversation, his eyes glued to the photo. It was dark and hard to see, but faint figures on the rooftop were highlighted by the city lights. One could see a person with long coattails and fancy, high-end boots, there was a feline on his shoulder and on his other arm was-

Hitoshi squinted and zoomed in, then flinched back as if he were struck.

He had seen that bird before. It was iconic and unmistakable. Three legs and a necklace of magatama, the green hue to its feathers was almost washed out, but it was there.

His face drained of color and his heart rate picked up. No, Akira was simply off helping a friend, wasn't he? Off to a town that *wasn't* Hosu, that *hadn't* been on fire or under attack from Stain and Nomu.

One that didn't get a glimpse of a mysterious new hero. But the news had mentioned Joker's possible summoning quirk and healing abilities...

Hitoshi rubbed at his stomach.

"You can thank the raven for that. And no, before you ask, he's his own entity. I really am quirkless."

The monster with slick black wings and a top hat, the dragon, a healing demon, and now the raven. Was Akira lying then? No, every fiber of his being told him that he was telling the truth when he said he was quirkless. Was really possible for the demons to be their own entity? If that was true, then why did they obey him?

Then... was Akira the new mystery hero? Or...

Was he Joker?

"Geez, would it kill you to make any noise when you walk? You remind me too much of my mom."

"Actually," Hitoshi had picked up on the odd mix of emotions in Akira's eyes, *"In some circumstances, yes."*

"I'll pretend that was just a joke."

He pulled up the video with Joker's winged demon blowing Eraserhead off of the roof. Hitoshi scoured over the video countless times. There, in the corner of the screen, was movement. It was easily hidden by the blinding blue flames and the demon's powerful wings, but it was there. The movement itself was in an odd shape, almost as if they were flowing pieces of fabric.

Or the end of coattails...

His breathing grew ragged as he rewatched all of the videos with the dragon. There he was again, commanding the dragon to attack the Nomu.

Hitoshi slammed his laptop closed, eyes wide and palms sweaty. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

"What would you say to Joker if he were standing right in front of you?"

He remembered how Akira seemed hesitant to ask, how he had stiffened when Hitoshi gave him an honest answer. He thought nothing of it at the time. His heart hammered out of his chest and he clutched the desk to ground himself from the sudden dizziness.

"Why are you so interested in Stain?" Hitoshi remembered asking, *"You've been asking a lot of questions."*

"I just want to stay informed in case there's anything new," Akira had a smile that screamed innocence, *"Better than being completely ignorant, right?"*

It didn't make any sense when apart, but if he lined up all of the pieces, then...

The 'mystery hero' was Joker.

"No way..."

Akira was Joker.

Taneo jumped when the editor-in-chief slammed her hands on her desk. Her eyes shone with such zealous hunger that made them lean away in near cowardice, as if they were under the scrutiny of an angry goddess. The sudden movement threatened to topple the towering boxes that littered this tiny office space.

"You're telling me nobody has any ideas?" She sighed and tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear, "Are we simply going to let our competitors trample all over us!?"

Taneo glanced over to his two coworkers.

One, Minato Haruka, was a round man with thick glasses, his dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The other, Yuma Takashi, was the youngest in the group, he sported spiked up hair and baggy clothes.

“B-but,” Minato said, “Other stations already covered everything. There hasn’t been any new information on Joker since the press conference in Hosu. Maybe we can break down the message on Joker’s calling card?”

“Already been done a dozen times over.” She said, “We need something *new* .”

Taneo drummed his fingers as he stared at his phone, the darkened screen reflected his mismatched pupils. He couldn’t focus on his work, his eyes were drawn to his phone like a moth to a flame, impatience and fear swam around his heart like hungry piranhas. If his gut instincts were correct, then it would only be a matter of time before *he* called.

“And we can’t just write random bs either,” Yuma leaned back on his seat, “Unless you want our reputation to go to shit.”

“You’re right.” She got up from her desk and paced the room, “I know! How about we do an article on Stain, then? The comparisons between he and Joker are uncanny if you ask me. Or, we could do a poll and have our readers vote which-”

Her voice was silenced by a shrill ringtone. Taneo’s heart thundered in his chest as an unknown number flashed across his screen, but he knew who it was. He ignored the editor’s piercing eyes as he held it up to his ear. His mouth suddenly went as dry as a desert.

“H-hello?”

“Greetings once again, Taneo.”

Joker's voice was as chilling as the first time he heard it, he sat straight up in his chair and gripped his jacket, if only to hide his trembling. Minato and Yuma exchanged glances as his boss narrowed her eyes.

"I take it you've been expecting my call?"

"To put it bluntly, yeah. What do you need?"

Joker was silent for a few moments.

"What else?" Sarcasm dripped from his voice, *"I would like to offer you the chance of a lifetime, Taneo. The media will continue to fan the flames if I don't cull the rumors and lies. Being compared to a serial killer sends the wrong message. It's time for the truth to be revealed."*

Taneo cleared his throat, "What are you getting at?"

"An interview, my dear man." Joker chuckled, *"I'm offering you a live interview with yours truly. Japan is dying to get my side of things, the 'bringer of justice', the vigilante, the villain, the demon master, the healer. Whatever new names they come up with in the next half hour. So, what say you?"*

"I..." He swallowed, "Can I call you back? I need to think about this for a bit."

"Alright. This number will be available for one hour. Do call back before then."

Joker hung up, Taneo tore the phone away from his ear with a face splitting grin. He laughed, despite the thrill of fear and excitement dancing across his nerves.

"T-Taneo, are you okay?" Minato said with wide eyes, "You're scaring me."

"And you're awfully pale, dude." Yuma said.

Taneo placed his phone on his desk, then leaned forward with steepled fingers. His boss placed her hands on her hips, her expression as unreadable as a boulder.

“Who was that?”

“That,” Taneo’s grin turned into a smirk, “Was our one-way ticket to greatness. My best source just called with a juicy offer. I don’t think I can refuse.”

“About Joker?” She asked, to which he nodded, “Hmm, then I would call them a liar. Joker’s gone to ground ever since he healed those heroes.”

“And what if I told you that this source were Joker himself?”

The room went silent. Tension and shock stifled the air so much that he could cut it with a knife, perhaps serve it alongside some cheese and wine. He’ll definitely need a drink after this.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Where do you think I got the video that ended Silver Falcon’s career?”

“That was you!?” His boss lunged at him with a manic look in her eyes, “Then you have to say yes!! No wait, a regular article just won’t do! A live radio interview, on the other hand...”

“W-wait a second!” Minato stood from his chair, “Wouldn’t that be illegal?”

“Nothing our lawyers can’t get us out of if it goes south. Do you remember when we interviewed a yakuza boss that one time? Or got a juicy scoop on a quirk kidnapping ring?”

“Y-yeah, but because of us the leaders of the kidnapping ring got away, and the yakuza boss interview was years ago-”

“Details, details!” She waved her hands, “Taneo, call him back and get it scheduled! I’m pulling in a few favors to secure us a studio!”

“Now, wait a minute.” Taneo held his hands up, “Why don’t we talk everything out with him, first? We might scare him off if he thinks we’re setting up a trap. He has powerful allies too, ones who could easily dox every one of us if we do this wrong. Or possibly worse.”

“And waste this *one* chance to talk with him? To get information that nobody else will, not even the heroes? It would be foolish.” She clapped her hands together, her eyes full of stars, “Well, what are you waiting for!? Call him back this instant!”

Taneo huffed in amusement as he picked up his phone and dialed.

NEXT TIME on 'Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?'!!!

Fish...?

Wake Up, Get Up, Get Out There

Chapter 24: Wake Up, Get Up, Get Out There

The voices reverberated in a double echo, Joker and his interviewer were just past this door.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The stage was set.

Mona patrolled the surrounding buildings, any nearby heroes would be none the wiser to the pleasant breeze that swept through the streets. He was more than ready for this debut, Aiba was waiting for his signal to spread the radio broadcast all over Japan.

The studio was a tiny little building placed in Musutafu, right under U.A.'s shadow. It was a better part of the neighborhood, and Yatagarasu had watched this building for the last several hours to make sure it was safe. His personas, Arsene in particular, buzzed with excitement as Taneo opened a side door and stepped out into the alley. The man looked up and down the dark path with furrowed brows.

"Let the show begin." Arsene whispered.

Taneo jumped out of his skin as Joker dropped from the sky and landed at the mouth of the alley. The street lights behind him obscured his face, his shadow stretched and overtook the cramped alleyway.

"Geez, kid." He put a hand to his heart, "You know how to scare the bejeezus out of someone."

Joker stood fully. He dusted himself off, his gentle footsteps echoed as he walked with practiced confidence. An easy grin was plastered on his face.

Taneo blinked, his eyes scanned up and down Joker's intricate costume. From a single glance he could tell that the quality of the tailcoat alone cost tens of thousands of yen, if not more. The weapons on his hips were of the same quality, but another item caught his attention. It was an immaculate crystal skull, it hung off of Joker's belt and gently bounced with each step, its hollow eyes sent chills down his spine. His gaze snapped to the ground when Joker approached with puddles of brilliant color, then held out a blood-red glove.

"It's nice to officially meet you, Taneo."

"Likewise." Taneo shook Joker's hand, "Is that part of your quirk?"

Joker chuckled as he kicked the ground with his heel, shades of neon vermilion and purple radiated from his boot.

"Why don't we save the questions for the interview?"

"Right," Taneo turned and opened the door, "The rest of the team is already inside. They can't wait to meet you."

Joker smiled as a light breeze ruffled his hair, a 'good luck' from Mona. Taneo led him through empty hallways and vacant rooms before he stood at another door. They stepped into a larger room with a couch and plush chairs, a coffee table littered with refreshments, windows on the left side of the room showcased equipment, and the live studio itself. They weren't alone.

Suddenly, he was rushed by a woman with long hair and eyes as sharp as his dagger.

"Joker!" Her hand jutted out, "I'm so glad we could meet in person. My name is Mitsuo Chihiro, editor-in-chief for Juzo News!"

Joker shook hands, then glanced at the two men behind her. The younger one was giving Joker a bug-eyed look, he blinked several times as if he thought this was a dream. The other wasn't as shell shocked, but admiration and awe lined every part of his body.

"M-my name I-is Yuma Takashi, Joker sir! I'm a big fan!!"

"Minato Haruka. I-it's nice to meet you. What should we call you?"

"Just Joker would be fine."

Taneo chuckled as Joker shook their hands. Yuma's soul was about to float out of his body, and he stared at his hand in a way that suggested he might not ever wash it. Mitsuo shook her head and sighed, but there was a playful smile to her lips.

"Alright," She said, drawing their eyes to her, "As agreed, Taneo will host the interview. Yuma, Minato, and I will be in the other room managing the technical side of things."

"And one other." Joker said.

"One other?" Mitsuo furrowed her brows, "Who?"

"One moment."

Joker dug out his phone and sent the text to Aiba. Suddenly, the surrounding speakers buzzed to life and a familiar voice came through.

"I'm in!" Aiba chuckled, "That was easier than I thought it would be."

"What? Who are you?" Taneo asked.

"Nice to meet you, everyone! You can call me La Brava, I'm going to broadcast this interview all over the country!"

La Brava? Joker smiled softly, it seems living with Gentle Criminal has already gotten her out of her shell. And she gained a code name

to boot. He was so proud.

“Right, we were just about to begin!” Mitsuo turned to Yuma and Minato, “You two start setting up, I’ll be there in a moment!”

“Y-yes ma’am!!” They shouted in unison and darted into the other room.

Mitsuo stared at Joker, her brows furrowed.

“There is one thing I don’t understand,” She said, “Are you sure you don’t want your voice to be disguised like Taneo’s? It’s going to be even more dangerous for you since your friend is spreading it all over Japan.”

“Oh, that. You don’t need to worry,” Joker ran a hand through his hair and smirked, “After all, I won’t be the only star of the show.”

Taneo and Mitsuo cried out at the bright flash of blue and smothering heat, Minato and Yuma pressed their faces into the window to watch. Arsene was bathed in flames, the light cast a myriad of colors on his wings and made his eyes smolder like pure hellfire.

The flames fizzled out as Arsene spread his wings, encompassing the whole room in velvety black feathers. Joker experienced a wave of smug satisfaction when their jaws hit the floor, Mitsuo in particular was grinning like a madwoman.

“I am Arsene, the Pillager of Twilight!!” Arsene tipped his hat, “At your service.”

“N-nice to meet you, Arsene.” Taneo then stared at Joker, “I don’t understand. What does he have to do with disguising your voice?”

“I am thou, thou art I.”

Joker and Arsene’s voices trilled through the room, they harmonized like the unified strings of an orchestra. A violin and cello with perfect melodies.

“A few of us wanted the chance for our voices to be heard,” Arsene said with a wave of his arm, “And will partake in this play.”

“I hope you don’t mind a few more actors?” Joker tilted his head, “I just couldn’t say no to them.”

“The more the merrier!” Mitsuo cackled and rubbed her hands together with a devilish smirk, “This will be the best interview of our career, boys! Let’s get this show on the road!”

Taneo chuckled as he stepped into the next room, Joker and Arsene were at his heels.

It was dark, the walls were lined with sound proof pads. Arsene had to duck and fold his wings to fit through the door, but it was spacious enough for him to stand comfortably as Joker sank into the closest chair. Taneo adjusted the various microphones and handed him a headset, then took the chair opposite of Joker. He placed a small notebook on the table and opened it.

“You ready for this, you two?”

“More than ready.”

With a confident nod he signaled the others, they fiddled with the machinery and Mitsuo gave them a thumbs up. The green ‘On Air!’ light turned on.

The interview began.

“You should get more sleep, Tsukauchi. The bags under your eyes are getting deeper than mine.”

“Funny. I could say the same to you, Eraser.” Tsukauchi said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Sleep does the body good.” Nezu sipped his tea and hummed, “The both of you should adopt proper sleep schedules. Just look at my fur, for example! You can’t get this marvelous sheen by skimping out on rest!”

Tsukauchi glanced around his office littered with ceramic cups.

The aroma of cheap coffee was permeated within the walls at this point. The pile of papers on his desk were *this* close to turning into a skyscraper, not to mention the cork board turned pincushion on the wall behind him, it labeled all of Joker’s ‘accomplishments’ so far. The entire mess with Joker, Hosu, and the healed heroes was a riot with the media, he and the Chief had barely contained the fallout.

They would scrape by at this rate, as long as Joker didn’t do anything else.

“As much as I would like to,” Tsukauchi said with an exhausted sigh, “I don’t think it’s possible at the moment. The police force has been really understaffed since the former commissioner and his cohorts went to jail. There’s simply too much work to be done and too few hands on deck.”

“I blame our problem children.” Aizawa said, “And one cocky brat in particular.”

Nezu swirled his tea, “It is... an interesting conundrum. Our precious students have already faced harrowing situations, throw in the Nomu and Hero Killer and it could have been a tragedy beyond our imagining. But, we throw in the wild card-”

“Joker.” Tsukauchi said.

“Yes. Joker appears in Hosu, he wipes out the Nomu and extinguishes the fires that other heroes had trouble with. All in the blink of an eye.” Nezu took a breath and sipped his tea, “Then, he rescues our precious students from the clutches of a serial killer. Tell me, detective, did my students lie when you interviewed them?”

“No,” Tsukauchi pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off a headache, “I didn’t pick up a single lie, not even when Joker threatened them and made his escape.”

“Hmm, but that was a lie.”

Aizawa narrowed his eyes, “What do you mean, Nezu?”

Nezu shook his head. He leaned back and crossed his legs, then looked in between them with those beady eyes.

“Iida Tenya has a strong sense of justice. I find it hard to believe that the boy would willingly let Joker go, even under a threat.”

Aizawa and Tsukauchi exchanged glances, then Tsukauchi leaned forward on his desk.

“But, Joker did threaten them-”

Nezu held up a paw, “He did, but not for the reason you’re imagining. The most logical thing for Joker to do was to guarantee Ingenium’s health in exchange for his freedom.”

“Then why threaten them at all?” Aizawa muttered.

“To cover their bases.” Nezu set his cup on the table, then smiled, “Joker is intelligent enough to foresee the consequences of his actions. The media would be in an uproar if they ever got hold of the truth over Stain’s arrest. That, plus promising young heroes letting a known criminal go in exchange for a personal favor? They would have an absolute field day. But if Joker ‘threatened’ them and your quirk didn’t pick up a lie...”

Tsukauchi face-palmed, “I see what you mean.”

“I’m giving them detention.” Aizawa growled, “They never should have been in that situation.”

"Well, what's done is done, Aizawa." Nezu suddenly grinned, "Besides, all of this is just mere conjecture. I doubt the boys would sell out Joker, much less now that several heroes have been healed."

"There's something else, too."

"Oh?" Nezu's eyes lit up, "Do go on, detective."

"Joker said something to your students that's been bothering me," Tsukauchi reached into his desk and pulled out the note pad, he opened it to a certain page, "Joker implied that he had family, but they 'paid the ultimate price because he wasn't strong enough to help them.' I made sure to write down Iida-kun's exact words."

"Family?" Aizawa said with narrowed eyes.

"He wasn't strong enough to protect them...?" Nezu froze, then his fur bristled, "It can't be."

"What?" Aizawa said as he and Tsukauchi exchanged uneasy glances, "I don't like that look in your eye, Nezu."

"On Joker's recent calling cards, he said he was the 'Leader of the Phantom Thieves Of Hearts', thieves as in plural. What if..." Nezu glared into his empty cup, "What if Joker and his cat weren't the only experimental subjects? What if there were others? The most likely case is that it was a small group of children. Did they sacrifice themselves during their escape, to allow their leader to go free? Does he blame himself for not being strong enough to protect them?"

"It might piece together why he was at the USJ." Aizawa said.

"Maybe." Nezu's paws came together, a silent rage bubbled in his heart, "If they chose that moment to make an escape, with their captors preoccupied during the attack..."

Tsukauchi went as pale as a sheet, his lips pursed, "That... could make sense."

"What monster would experiment on children?" Aizawa growled as his eyes glowed crimson.

Nezu and Tsukauchi looked at each other. Perhaps it was time to clue Aizawa in on the evil known as All For One, but that was a conversation best had with Yagi in the room. Tsukauchi released another sigh as his heart sank like a rock.

They steeped on those thoughts for several moments.

"Joker's powers are..." Tsukauchi bit his lip, then shook his head.

"More than what we could've imagined?" Nezu said softly.

"Yeah, something like that."

"He's painted a hefty target on his back, restoring those heroes to full health without any side effects. Everybody will want to get their hands on him, villain, hero, or otherwise. His powers are truly incomprehensible." Nezu bit his lip, his nose twitched oddly, "It makes me wonder what tortures he went through to get them, or what his former keepers are doing behind the scenes. The worst part is that I believe we're underestimating him. We still have not seen the boy's true potential."

"And that's what worries me." Tsukauchi said, "What would he do if he were backed in a corner?"

"That's what Midnight's quirk is for." Aizawa said as he scratched his stubble, "To put him out before it gets to that point, then we can contain him before he wakes up."

"I truly hope her quirk works on him." Nezu said.

"Why wouldn't it?" Aizawa raised a brow at Nezu.

Nezu opened his mouth to speak, but they were interrupted when the door slammed open. Officer Sansa, more frazzled than Tsukauchi had ever seen him, rushed inside.

“Sansa? What’s wrong?”

“The Chief is calling an emergency meeting!” He said, “The closest group of heroes are gathering for it, Endeavor included.”

Their eyes widened.

“What? What’s going on?” Tsukauchi asked.

Sansa withdrew his phone and unlocked it, then he selected a certain app and placed the phone faced down on the desk.

“-e’re coming at you in a live interview with none other than the infamous vigilante himself, Joker!”

Tsukauchi stood, the brisk movement sent his chair screeching back, “No way.”

“It’s a pleasure being here, T-san .”

The ethereal voice sent goosebumps down their arms. It was deep and melodic, twin voices coalescing into an unnatural and terrifying timbre. Nezu’s fur stood on end, but his maniacal grin surfaced. That frightening gleam entered the rodent’s eyes as he swiped the phone.

“Let’s get right into it, shall we? The whole of Japan is talking about you, Joker. It all started with Silver Falcon before-”

“When did this start?” Nezu asked.

“Just a few minutes ago,” Sansa took back his phone and muted it, “Our people are already working on narrowing down the signal, so we should have a location soon.”

Tsukauchi nodded, “Eraser? Nezu?”

“I’ll call Midnight,” Aizawa said, “You’d be insane not to bring us with you.”

“There’s no way I’m missing this either, detective.” Nezu said with a chuckle, “Joker has made another move, and now it’s my turn. Will we be able to checkmate him, or does he yet have a deeper strategy? Ah, what I wouldn’t give to have a conversation with him over tea.”

“The tea in prison isn’t that good,” Sansa said.

“The kid needs our *help*,” Aizawa said, “Not a prison cell.”

“Yeah, with everything that he’s done so far?” Sansa rolled his eyes, “Good luck convincing a judge that the chaotic menace needs ‘help’.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Tsukauchi snatched up his notebook and pen, then rounded his desk, “Where’s this emergency meeting, Sansa?”

“Not too far. I’m driving.”

“We’ll be there in no time with your erratic driving skills.”

“As long as we get there in one piece.” Nezu hopped down and skittered towards the door, “Let’s go!”

The officer grinned as he led the way.

The sound of a spoon scraping on a plate was unnaturally loud in the empty nest.

Akira and Morgana had yet to return.

Kaito sighed and leaned back in his chair, the flavor of the last bite of curry simmered on his tongue. He should be used to it by now, the loneliness that accompanied a tiny internet cafe such as his, nestled away in some small street that barely had any foot traffic. It was a

miracle that the Raven's Nest lasted this long, and would continue thanks to a snarky kid and his cat.

Kaito had no family left, and he rather liked the atmosphere that Akira and Morgana brought in. Getting a taste of Akira's homemade cooking was a bonus. He knew they would find their way and leave like Aiba did, and he would be alone again, but until then they would be welcome at his door.

Suddenly, his phone chimed with countless media notifications. It vibrated nonstop until he thought it would crash, then it stopped. With a slow blink, he unlocked it. His spoon dropped with a clatter when he saw the title of the first news article. He swiveled his chair and practically lunged to the computer. Kaito had seen the videos and the media discussions since Hosu, but this was on another level.

The broadcast was easy to find, and Joker's dual voice banished the isolation choking his heart.

A tiny smile bloomed on his face. A bubbling laugh, such a foreign sound these days, escaped him. He slipped off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes as his smile turned genuine.

"This kid...."

"Let's get right into it, shall we?" Taneo said, "The whole of Japan is talking about you, Joker. It all started with Silver Falcon before Stain came into the picture. How did you do it?"

"I'm afraid you have to be a little bit more specific."

"That's fair." Taneo chuckled, "Before we dive into Silver Falcon, why don't you share why you became a vigilante in the first place?"

"To help people."

“Help people? But then why not go through proper channels, like applying to a hero school? Or becoming a police officer?”

“Alright, I’ll answer your question with one of my own. What would you do if you saw someone suffering before your very eyes and every adult you confided in turned their back, or worse yet, covered the abuser’s tracks? Do you abandon the victims because you don’t have the ‘training’ or a fancy licence, or take justice into your own hands to help?”

“That...” Sadness flooded Taneo’s eyes, “That’s a tough question.”

“Is it?”

“Why not report the abuser to the heroes or police?”

“No so-called ‘heroes’ came to help, and any call to the police was swept under the rug.”

“It sounds to me like you’ve personally lived through something like that.”

“I have. I’ve dealt with people like Silver Falcon before, the ones who think they can trample over the innocent and get away with it. Silver Falcon was getting too arrogant though, and that made him sloppy.”

“Sloppy how?”

“He left all of the evidence right in his office.”

“You *broke* into his office? A hero agency is supposed to be well secured.”

“It was, but it’s nothing we haven’t encountered before.” Joker smirked and leaned into the microphone, ***“We only needed to get the evidence to the right hands, but the police were riddled with his spies.”***

“Is that why you sent one of your demons to the police station?”

Arsene’s feathers ruffled at being called a demon. Joker reached over and ran a hand down one of his wings to calm him down.

“One thing to note is that they hate being called ‘demons’.”

Taneo’s eyes widened, “Oh, my apologies.”

“As long as you learn from your mistakes. Now, as for the police station...”

“Mere theatrics to expose the villains!” Arsene stated with a dramatic bow, “Our ruse made their treachery known, thus they fell with their master.”

“Ah, one thing I should mention to our listeners,” Taneo looked at Joker, who nodded, “As I’m sure you’re all aware by his voice, Joker isn’t the only star of today’s interview! I have the pleasure of sharing our studio with the infamous being who blew Eraserhead off of a rooftop. And also might have been responsible for destroying a police station.”

“And I shall not be the only one!” Arsene held out his arms, “A few of us shall speak here today.”

“I look forward to it. Moving on from what we already know about Silver Falcon.” Taneo clasped his hands together on the table, “Another popular question that’s been bouncing around are the specifics of your quirk, Joker. A few of your friends, specifically the one with you right now, have made waves via viral video. What I’m asking is, where do they come from? How does your quirk work exactly?”

“Oh? And where is the fun in spoiling the surprise?”

“You don’t want to share?”

“Well, a magician that shows his hand ruins the entire show, does he not? Once you know how the trick works, then that’s it.”

“You can’t give us even a little hint? It’s been a hot topic to debate online.”

Joker and Arsene laughed. The microphones picked up the gentle *woosh* of flames as Arsene fell back, then the fluttering of gossamer wings and the gentle folds of a silk dress. Titania smirked when the others’ jaws dropped at her beautiful visage.

Joker leaned forward and spoke, the intricacies of feminine and masculine voices wove together in an enchanting waltz.

“Fine, perhaps I can share a tiny tidbit. A small hint just for you, T-san. Let’s just say... that most people cannot dive into the Sea of Human Souls without going mad.”

A few seconds of silence pass, and Taneo raised an eyebrow. Mitsuo and the others were giving him weird looks through the window, too.

“I honestly have no idea what that even means. Is that all you can give us on your quirk?”

“That’s it. Make of it what you will.”

“Alright, we’ll look forward to any theories that pop up online.” Taneo’s eyes lingered over Titania, then he glanced down at his notepad, “But back to the topic at hand. We covered Silver Falcon, so the next thing would be Stain. People began to compare you to Stain after Silver Falcon and Commissioner Inu were arrested. How did you feel about them comparing you to Stain?”

“I would like to get one thing straight,” Joker and Titania tilted their heads in eerie unison, **“I am not Stain.”**

“And how would you separate yourself from him?”

“Stain was a serial killer. He wanted a more just society through an ocean of bloodshed, but that just doesn’t work. Fear only works for so long before people decide to rise up against it.”
They sighed in harmony, **“Sure, the hero society could use a bit of readjusting, but as I said to Stain, its unrealistic to compare each and every hero to All Might.”**

Taneo’s jaw dropped, “Wait, back up a second. You *talked* to Stain?”

“I did. I gave him a calling card and then he tried to stick me with his sword.”

“You... you fought Stain.”

“Yup. The media didn’t cover that, did they?”

“They didn’t. What did you say to Stain in your calling card?”

Joker got out the crinkled card, **“Here, see for yourself.”**

“Can I read it out loud?” Taneo reached for it in awe.

“Be my guest. I’m sure our listeners are dying to hear it.”

“R-right.” Taneo cleared his throat, “Akaguro Chizome, formerly Stendhal, now the King Of Wrath known as Stain. Thy creed is based on misguided justice, a wrongly forged contract written in sanguine innocence. Denounce thy crown cast from an ocean of blood, or face the consequences of your own actions. From, The Leader Of The Phantom Thieves Of Hearts - Joker. Wow, that’s... how did you get some of this information?”

“A little bird told me. Stain didn’t like it very much, hence why it’s so crinkled.”

“I’m sure.” Taneo handed back the card, “Any other comment you’d like to add in regards to Stain?”

“Well, not Stain in particular, but in regards to the Hosu attacks. The media glossed over the epic fight between me and the Nomu, but a civilian got video proof of that.”

“You’re the new mystery hero that they’ve been going on about!?”

“The one and only. I’ll bet every last yen that the heroes already knew, but wanted to keep it quiet to save face. Can’t have a dashing handsome vigilante coming to save the day, can we? Didn’t you notice how they talked nonstop about the mystery hero the night of the attack, but then haven’t said a peep about it since?”

“That... yes, actually. Your demo- er, *friends* are as varied and frightening as they are powerful, then. To have fought both the Nomu and Stain is nothing short of incredible. There’s not only a video of what happened with the Nomu, but a few that have captured the dragon flying over the city.”

“You’re telling me. My dragon would love to give his thoughts on everything, but he’s too big for this studio. I doubt you’d want to pay *that* repair bill.”

“No thanks.” Taneo chuckled, “What was fighting Stain like?”

Joker frowned. The media claimed that Endeavor was solely responsible for Stain’s arrest. There were no mentions of Midoriya, Todoroki, or Iida. Either it was a move to protect the kids, or to gather up any shred of dignity that the Hero Commission could get. Probably a bit of both, but he would rather not throw the 1-A kids under the bus.

“I won’t lie and say that it was easy. Stain was a skilled assassin, many heroes have fallen because of him.”

“Then how did you survive?”

“Well, as you can see, I don’t fight alone. Stain and I crossed blades until Endeavor showed up.”

“Okay. Hold up.” Taneo’s grin turned feral as excitement lit up his eyes, “You claim to have fought the Nomu and Stain. Now you’re throwing in *Endeavor* ? As in, the number two hero?”

“I am, my good man. I danced with both Endeavor and Stain. Luckily the Hero Killer misstepped and got the short end of the stick, so here I am while Stain has all the comfort of a cold cell.”

Taneo whistled, “Your skills speak for themselves.”

“Thank you, I try my best to put on a good show. Old Flameo wasn’t very happy about it, though.”

He sputtered, “Old Flameo?”

“Flameo, hotman! I don’t think Endeavor appreciated my godly sense of humor, because he shot fire at me. It was pretty rude.”

“Uh... I bet.” Taneo wrote the name on his pad and circled it, “You must have your own take on society then, having fought against Stain and his ideals. He idolized All Might above all others.”

Joker nodded.

“So I guess my next question is this. What do you think about-”

Midoriya had stood frozen in the middle of the darkened street. His simple night time jog to clear his head turned sour when his radio station cut out and there was nothing but static, then the interview started.

He gaped at his phone as it progressed. Joker’s voice was mesmerizing, it sounded ethereal and omnipotent, then switched on the fly when the woman’s voice filtered through. The hint about

Joker's quirk left his mind reeling at the possibilities. The Sea of Human Souls? What was that? How did it coincide with Joker's quirk? Did it have something to do with mythological figures like Cerberus and Titania?

If only he had his notebook to write his theories down.

His heart rate spiked when the interviewer continued.

"So I guess my next question is this. What do you think about All Might and today's hero society as a whole?"

"Hmm, I'll start by picking apart the number one hero."

"Oh?"

"He's the Symbol Of Peace. All Might has saved tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives all by himself. He curbed crime and took down more villains than we could ever hope to count. The man is pretty much a god among men."

"I'm sensing a 'but' in there somewhere."

"Right. He's pulled off all of these great things, but there is something that people tend to forget."

"And that is?"

"That he's not a god, he's a mortal man. The singular pillar of society, the 'Symbol Of Peace' that has guaranteed Japan's safety for decades. What I'm getting at is that this pillar will collapse, All Might can't continue like this forever. He will fall one day and pass on into the history books. What do you think will happen when he does?"

Midoriya clutched his phone tighter. The plastic creaked in his hands as he bit his lip, his stomach dropped in icy cold dread. The 1-A chat room exploded in the past few minutes and he got endless

notifications from media websites scrambling to cover this, but he silenced them all so he could listen.

"I..." T-san cleared his throat, "I can imagine a surge in villain activity, not to mention unrest within the country."

"Exactly."

"But that's why we have other heroes. Endeavor would take the title of number one."

"Perhaps. While Old Flameo is a powerful hero, nobody will be able to replace All Might."

"Then what are you proposing? You have a solution to replace the Symbol Of Peace?"

"Well, why does it have to be just one Symbol? Why not two or three, perhaps ten or more? Nobody should have to shoulder the weight of the world by themselves. I honestly feel sorry for All Might, he must be a lonely man."

"Who would fill those spots though?"

"Who else? With All Might gone, the next generation of heroes will go through a trial by fire. I fought alongside some of Class 1-A during the USJ invasion. Those kids have the talent to walk through that fire and come out for the better."

"So you think all of 1-A should be the new pillars?"

There was another hiss of flame in the microphone and T-san's gasp could be heard.

"Not just 1-A."

Joker's voice changed again. The woman's beautiful tone alternated into a more masculine voice, it rang through with such crystal clarity and noble grace that it could belong to an emperor.

“What about 1-B? I feel like they don’t get enough credit when they work just as hard as their sister class. They might even surpass 1-A if they put in enough effort. Not to mention the senior classes at U.A. or those of other hero schools. Or... anybody who longs to be a hero can be one. Everybody has that potential to rise up, but it is up to them to do something with it.”

“I see your point. I might regret asking this question, but when do you think the singular pillar will fall?”

“Who knows? It could be tomorrow, a month from now, a year. Maybe a few years if you’re lucky.”

Midoriya released a shaky breath as he hugged his phone to his chest.

Joker wasn’t wrong, but All Might wouldn’t just collapse one day, right?

All Might would stay at his side and help him train with One For All, wouldn’t he? There was no way Joker could know about All Might’s injury, but the media has picked up on All Might’s lessened time in the public. Maybe Joker just put the pieces together?

Midoriya’s heart clouded with uncertainty.

“All Might...”

The tissue came away with crimson blotches.

Glass shards stabbed at his insides as he collapsed on the couch in a coughing fit. Yagi Toshinori’s throat burned as he gulped in a few ragged breaths, his hand clutched his scarred side. He waited in agony for it to subside, paralyzed by pain.

Joker’s otherworldly voice trilled through his apartment.

Tsukauchi sent him a text about it, but his friend had said they would take care of it, to not push himself. He wiped away the trickle of blood on his lips. If only he hadn't run out of time today, if he had just conserved some tiny fragment of his strength, then he would be at his friend's side in a heartbeat.

"Another question, and I have no doubt that listeners will be on the edge of their seats for this one! Why did you decide to heal Stain's living victims?"

Yagi flinched. It was as if the gods decided to taunt him tonight.

"What other way to prove that I am not like him? To heal those afflicted was to undue Stain's work."

"And that you did. What do you think they'll do with their second chance?"

"If they don't return to being heroes and try to pursue a normal life, that's their right. If they return to heroism and do more good by it, then all the better."

"And if they don't use it for good?"

"I made it clear in my calling card. A gift given can easily be taken away, it's up to them on what they do with it. We'll be keeping a close eye on them."

"I'll take that as a warning to them. Now, a lot of people have wondered how such miracles were possible. All of the heroes claimed to have seen a floating woman in their hospital rooms."

Yagi's eyes snapped to his phone on the coffee table when sizzling fire crackled over the microphone.

"You mean me?"

This woman's voice drifted through the air like velvet.

"It was you?"

"Indeed," She said, "It is I who healed those heroes."

"How did you do it?"

"Hmph, my healing magic is the best in the stock."

"Did you say magic? Don't you mean a quirk?"

"I-" There was a ruffle in the background, "Yes, that is what I meant. My abilities are powerful, but it is Joker who commands them. My eternal vow stands with him, and him alone."

"Alright, there's no need to glare at me. I know when to move on." T-san cleared his throat, "But people will want to know if you'll continue using your powers to heal? If not heroes, then perhaps civilians in hospitals?"

"My ultimate goal is to help people," They answered in unison, ***"So... anything is possible."***

Yagi reached for his phone. His hand trembled and it tumbled onto the floor, silencing the broadcast. He cursed under his breath as his insides rejected the sudden movements, the wad of tissue in his hands gained several new blotches.

He gasped when the fit was over, sunken eyes flicking down to his phone.

If it's possible....

No, he shouldn't get his hopes up. What vigilante would heal the number one hero? Maybe he could make a public request, appeal to Joker's skewed sense of justice? But no, that wouldn't work either, it would be a PR suicide. Tears burned in his eyes as his side spasmed. Despite himself, he couldn't help the sudden longing.

For the first time in five years, he had a tiny chance to return his body to normal. His doctors all said it was impossible to make a full recovery, but Joker took what was 'impossible', spat right in their faces, and accomplished it with a suave smugness as if to say 'You didn't try hard enough.'

Then... could that mean that his old friend's prediction could be avoided, too?

He grasped his chest at a sudden rush of warmth, it pounded with the final strengths of a dying star. What was this feeling? It couldn't be...

A vigilante sparked hope in his heart.

Yagi decided not to linger on the irony of it.

The quiet neighborhood was hounded by police cars, the crackle of radio static and hushed voices filtered through the surrounding streets.

Heroes and officers swarmed around the small building nestled within the city. It was unassuming at first, but the signal their teams worked so hard to track down was located here. Kamui Woods covered the south with a squad of policemen, Mount Lady and Death Arms covered the north with their own. Edgeshot patrolled the eastern side. Backdraft worked to block off the nearby streets, Endeavor had his sidekicks cover the rest.

That just left the small infiltration team.

"Midnight and I will go in first." Eraserhead said as he stepped towards the alley.

She nodded and readied herself.

“Alright.” Tsukauchi took a deep breath to calm his rabbiting heart, “I’ll follow just behind you with my team.”

“And me!” Nezu climbed on Tsukauchi’s shoulder, “I wouldn’t miss this for the world!”

“Does everyone have their masks?” Tsukauchi said, “The last thing we need is to be affected by Midnight’s quirk.”

Tsukauchi’s officers shuffled as they placed their masks, Eraser’s gas mask was hidden by his scarf. Nezu had one made just for him.

“And I’m supposed to just wait out here?” Endeavor growled.

They all had earpieces to listen in on this ‘interview’, which was still in progress, but not for much longer. Endeavor’s temper flared when Joker called him ‘Old Flameo’. Any chuckles from that died underneath Endeavor’s fiery glare.

“Yes. We have all the other exits and entrances blocked off.” Tsukauchi said, undaunted, “Wait here with the rest of our teams in case Joker makes a run for it. You’ll direct them as you see fit.”

The hero scoffed, but he crossed his arms and planted himself in front of the alleyway like a brick wall.

“Let’s go.” Eraserhead was the first to move.

His footsteps were as soft as silk, Midnight trailed just behind him. They reached the side door and Eraserhead put his ear to it, then opened it with a curt nod. He cringed when the door hinges screeched.

A few seconds pass and nothing happened.

Midnight winked at him, to which he rolled his eyes. It was obvious that the building had still been in use recently, with the lack of dust and grime on the floors. They crossed one hallway and into another,

then he pressed his back to the wall as they neared their first room. He slowly peeked around the door frame.

"It's clear." He whispered.

"Roger."

Midnight stalked into the room after him. It was empty, for the most part. A few random chairs and a table, boxes and other miscellaneous items were piled in the corners. It was a shabby break room by the looks of it, and they didn't give it another glance as they went into the next hallway.

He jumped when Midnight suddenly grabbed his shoulder and whirled around to glare at her. She put a single finger to her lips and pointed to the door on the opposite end of the hall. There were voices.

Eraser turned on the device in his ear.

"It is I who healed those heroes."

"How did you do it?"

"Hmph, my healing magic is the best in the stock."

"Did you say magic? It's not a quirk?"

The voices reverberated in a double echo, Joker and his interviewer were just past this door. He gave Midnight a nod, and she stepped back and whispered into her communicator. Eraserhead reached under his scarf to make sure his gas mask was secure, he inched towards the door and got his capture weapon ready. Midnight crept to the other side, a sudden seriousness came over her as she prepared to rip her sleeve.

He gave the signal.

Three...

Two....

One....

He kicked the door open and they leapt in together.

The air gained a deceptively sweet scent, the vapor dyed the room in a purple mist. Eraserhead grasped at his scarf as his eyes glowed red behind his goggles.

But...

There was nobody here.

“Eraserhead! Midnight!” Tsukauchi called.

“It’s clear!”

Tsukauchi and his team flooded the room, weapons at the ready.

“It looks like...” Midnight stepped up to a table and picked up a phone, “We’ve been duped.”

The interview played over the phone. Tsukauchi hovered next to Midnight, the device was cheap, most likely a useless burner.

“Search the room,” Tsukauchi said as Midnight muted it, “There could be some clues.”

Nezu’s ears flicked as he picked up a certain noise, “Wait, do you hear that?”

Everybody went silent, ears strained.

“Is that...” Midnight whispered.

“Ticking?” Eraserhead’s eyes went wide in realization, “Shit! Everybody get down, *now* !”

Eraserhead tackled Midnight and Tsukauchi as other officers hit the floor. He expected an explosion, heat, maybe blinding pain before it rendered him unconscious or worse. Not... this.

No explosion went off.

Instead, there was the sound of party poppers, streamers and glitter rained down from the ceiling in a deluge of red, black, and gold. It showered everything in a thick, sparkling layer.

"Uh, you think you can let us up, Sho?" Midnight teased, "I think the danger has passed."

He scoffed as they stood, covered in cursed glitter.

"Is anybody injured?" Tsukauchi called.

"No sir!"

"I'm going to have glitter in places where glitter should never be..."

"Too much information, Officer Kai."

"Ugh," Eraserhead dusted himself off, only to attract more sparkles, "What the hell is this?"

A sudden *thunk* made them jump. Eraserhead's hand latched onto his capture weapon as something fell onto the table from a latch in the ceiling. It was a white box with a voluptuous red ribbon tied around it. Nezu jumped from Tsukauchi's shoulder, more glitter than mouse at this point, his nose twitching.

"Ooh, a present!" He stated happily.

"I'm not sure we should open it." Eraserhead said.

"There's nothing explosive inside, at least." Another officer with red eyes approached, dark hair smothered with twinkling colors, "My quirk confirms it."

“Thanks, Officer Akane.” Tsukauchi said, “But we should wait until- Nezu!”

Nezu already untied the ribbon and tore apart the wrapping paper. The bland cardboard box was ripped open and Nezu peeked inside. His fur puffed up and his tail straightened as if he had been electrocuted.

“This... this is... !”

Eraserhead rolled his eyes and peeked inside, “Is that a stuffed animal?”

“Not just any animal, Eraserhead! Don’t you understand what it is!?” Nezu pulled out the brightly colored plushy from the box, it was as big as Nezu himself, “It’s a herring! But more than that, it’s a *red* herring!!”

Eraserhead groaned as Nezu fell back onto the table with the plushy in his arms, he rolled around in the glitter as his manic laughter permeated the air.

“There’s something else,” Aizawa pulled out the infamous calling card with a glower, “It says ‘Better luck next time, heroes!’ Then there’s a smiley face on it too. That cocky brat.”

Tsukauchi paled, “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

Eraserhead handed him the card. Tsukauchi blinked at the card several times, his shoulders dropped and he ran a hand down his face, displacing a lustrous cloud. He turned on his earpiece to listen in on the broadcast.

“-ast question of the night before we wrap up, Joker. How do you feel about the number of heroes that are calling for your arrest?”

“Oh, you couldn’t have better timing if you tried, T-san.” There was another flicker of flames before his voice changed again, ***“I just got a special notification on my phone, hee ho!”***

This voice was childlike, almost impish. It clashed so heavily with Joker’s natural tone that it was jarring.

“Eh? What’s this?” Something slid across a hard surface, *“I-is that....? Are those heroes covered in glitter!?”*

Tsukauchi flinched and looked around the room, where he spotted a camera high in the corner. Eraserhead followed his gaze and stiffened.

“Indeed, hee ho! It was- hee my idea - ho!!”

“... Hee ho?”

“Wave to the camera, Tsukauchi! I see that Eraserhead, Midnight, and Nezu are with you. An entire squad of police officers, too. Ah, not that we can hear you if you wanted to say anything. I hope you like my present, I made it myself.” Joker’s invisible grin hovered over everyone in the room, ***“That’s what happens when they try to track me down.”***

“Where exactly are they?”

“An office building close to the Kamino Ward, hee ho!”

“Kamino!? But that’s so far away!”

“You can thank this little cutie for the idea, hee ho.”

“You’re welcome, hee ho!”

Tsukauchi and Eraserhead exchanged glances.

“I’m going to kill that brat when we arrest him.” Eraserhead growled.

Midnight joined in on Nezu's laughter, scooping up entire hand fulls of glitter to shower them with.

"Clear out," Tsukauchi said, deflated, "We're not catching Joker tonight. We were never even close."

Tsukauchi's team grumbled as they vacated the room, their footsteps kicked up more clouds of glitter.

"Well, that's all the time we have for this interview! Are there any parting words you'd like to say, Joker?"

"Hee ho!"

"Er, hee ho?"

"Hee ho!"

"Hee... ho? What does that even-"

"HEE HO!!"

The signal cut, and an eerie silence stretched.

Tsukauchi and Eraserhead stood there, covered head to toe in glitter, dumbfounded. Nezu still lay flat on his back with a crazy grin on his face, the plushy held securely in his arms. Midnight had piled an ungodly amount of glitter around him.

"I'm going to forget that this night ever happened." Tsukauchi said.

"Good luck." Aizawa slipped off his goggles, there was a perfect ring of untouched skin around his eyes, "I don't think a dozen and a half showers will ever rid us of the glitter."

"Or the second media fallout that's bound to happen over this stunt." Tsukauchi wanted nothing more than to go home and collapse in bed, "Let's just gather up any evidence we can and get out of here."

Nezu dropped the stuffed animal and jumped onto Aizawa's shoulders, covering him with another layer of glitzy glamour. Aizawa sputtered and almost choked on the cursed stuff.

"Well, this was an interesting turn of events!" Nezu exclaimed, "I certainly had fun, hee ho!"

"Nezu." Aizawa's eyes went red and his hair floated amidst a sea of sparkles, "Not. Another. Word."

"Oh come on, Eraser!" Midnight bumped shoulders with him, her other hand flicked glitter right in his face, "Learn to live a little, hee ho!"

"That's it."

He shrugged off Midnight, picked up Nezu like the grinning toddler he was and placed him on the shining table. Aizawa shoved his hands in his pockets and walked out, but not before he stopped at the door frame.

"I hate all of you."

Nezu and Midnight's roaring laughter followed him down the hallway.

This night would irritate him for *months*, just like the flecks of glitter that trailed behind his every step.

I told y'all there would be a fish :D

ALSO we hit some crazy milestones!! 30K hits? 1300 kudos?? Almost 250 bookmarks??? I just....

I do not comprehend.

Have A Short Rest

Chapter 25: Have A Short Rest

In which Cerberus proves he is the best boy of the whole stock.

Hee Ho!!

Kaito's head snapped up at the ring of a bell.

Akira, with his bag dangled over his shoulder, walked in, absolutely exhausted. There was no small amount of victory in his posture though, from the subtle smile to the way he held his head high. He carried himself with a certain swagger as he walked up to the front desk.

Kaito blinked owlshly at him several times. His electric blue eyes rippled like a disturbed desert oasis, his pupils gained a cloudy hue. It was there and gone so fast that Akira barely noticed it, no wonder he missed it the first time they met. The man froze for a moment as if he fought off shivers.

"*You,* " Kaito sighed and rubbed his temples, "Are the most insane teenager I have ever met."

Morgana popped his head out of Akira's shoulder bag, grinning, "That's an understatement!"

"And here I thought you were the sane one, Morgana."

"Hey! I'm not as bad as Akira!"

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Akira said with a proud smirk,
“Wouldn’t you be bored without me around?”

“Bored? You think I’d be *bored* ?” Kaito gently, scarily, placed his hands on the desk and stood, “While I admit most days are dull in my line of work, I would take boredom over the mountain of anxiety you’ve caused in the past few days alone. I’m going to have grey hairs at this rate.”

“But your hair is already white.” Akira said, his voice tinted with amusement.

“Hush, you. That is not the point.” Kaito glanced at the computer, “The media is going insane with all the new information on you, the heroes and police are in a frenzy to contain everything, and failing miserably. I saw the dragon videos, Hosu, the newscasts, listened to your little interview over the radio. I was... frightened. Now even more so that I just experienced your battle with the *Hero Killer* . Kid, I don’t want you to end up dead in a ditch somewhere, or get arrested, or somehow get caught up in something *worse* .”

Akira tilted his head as Morgana’s eyes widened.

“So, you’re saying that you actually care about us?” Akira asked,
“Now that’s rare.”

Kaito reached out and karate chopped Akira’s head. It didn’t hurt, not really with Seth active, but it was best not to give Kaito any impression to start using a sledgehammer to get through his thick skull.

“Ouch.” Akira deadpanned as he rubbed the spot.

“That’s for being a heroic idiot.” A hint of a fond smile appeared,
“Now please tell me you’re going to lay low for a while? I don’t think society can handle another one of your foires, unless you want it to collapse like a house of cards.”

“That’s the plan.” Morgana climbed out of the bag and perched on Akira’s shoulders, “I think we’ve shaken up society enough for now.”

Kaito blinked slowly like a cat, then took off his glasses and scrubbed at his eyes.

“You say ‘for now’ as if you’re going to keep doing these crazy stunts.” Kaito sighed in defeat and replaced his glasses, “You’re not going to take any of my advice seriously, are you?”

“Nope.”

“In one ear and out the other with this sort of stuff,” Morgana said with a sigh, “I’ve tried plenty of times, trust me. There’s no stopping him once he has his mind set on something.”

“You act as if that’s a bad thing.”

Morgana scoffed, “No, but it does get us into trouble more often than not.”

“Fine, whatever.” Kaito motioned to the lounge door, “I made sure that your cubicle was untouched while you were gone, aside from the occasional dusting. Not that anybody has come in since you left with Aiba.”

“You’ve been alone for an entire week?” Morgana asked.

Kaito shrugged, “I’m used to it.”

“How about I make some curry for dinner tonight?” Akira said, “We could all eat together?”

“That... sounds nice.” Kaito’s eyes softened, and he sat back down, “It’s proper compensation for worrying me so much.”

Akira huffed, “Aiba said the exact same thing.”

“Then she has a good head on her shoulders,” Kaito waved his hand in the iconic ‘shoo’ motion, “Now, stop making me all sentimental and go get some sleep. You two look exhausted.”

Morgana beamed at Kaito, “At least we agree on something.”

Akira nodded, then walked through the doors. They were doused in the blessed silence of a small cafe, away from the fire and brimstone that had overtaken the media world. The lounge was the same as always, he stopped in the next hallway. Aiba’s cubicle was open for once, empty. Barren. She was in a much better place by Gentle’s side, but something was amiss without her. The Raven’s Nest would never be the same.

Akira buried the sharp pangs and opened his door, then froze. Inside, rolled up on the desk, was an extra blanket and pillow, Morgana hopped down to inspect them, sniffing curiously.

“Wow, he must actually like us.” Morgana said, “They even smell fresh and clean!”

Akira chuckled as he set them out, then practically collapsed on the cushions, Morgana curled up on his chest. The duo fell asleep within seconds, but Akira’s personas had other things in mind. His psyche was alight with conversation as he drifted off.

Alice clasped her hands behind her back as she looked up at Arsene.

“Well, it looks like you have competition.”

“Competition?” Arsene turned to her, his horned head tilted, *“Competition for what?”*

“What else?” A sinister grin lit up her eyes, *“For the title of Dad! You would be Bird Dad though, I’m not sure what Kaito could be yet.”*

“B-bird Dad!?” Arsene startled, *“But... I am not a bird?”*

Byakko chuckled, *"You did not object to being a father?"*

"Th-that's beside the point!" Arsene said, his voice in a higher octave, *"Yatagarasu, please tell them I am not a bird.... or a dad..."*

Yatagarasu shuffled his feathers but kept silent. The traitor.

"Come now, Arsene," Giant crimson eyes stared down from on high, *"If I am the grandfather of the group, then you are the father. Avian Father to be more precise!"*

Arsene facepalmed, *"Not you too, old boy."*

"So, if Arsene is the father, then I have to be the cool aunt, right?" Titania said.

"Oh please, Titania," Ishtar's gentle expression turned sour, *"I would be the cool aunt."*

Titania fluttered beside Alice and patted her head.

"Alice, be a dear and tell Ishtar how wrong she is."

"Hmmm, I don't know." Alice swayed her hips and blinked her large eyes, *"I think both of you are great big sisters."*

Titania and Ishtar froze, briefly glared at one another, then looked away with scowls on their faces.

"Oooh, what about me!?" The bubbly one asked, *"What would I be?"*

"You would be the cool aunt."

"What!?" Titania and Ishtar shrieked in unison.

"Me next!?" Cerberus bowled past Titania to sit in front of Alice, tail wagging like an excited pup, *"What would me be!?"*

Alice smiled. She stood on her tippy toes to scratch that spot behind his ear.

"Maybe the middle brother that everybody adores?"

"Oh, I think you mean the idiotic brother." Byakko muttered, *"Alice would be the youngest sister, then."*

"Yup! The most adorable little sister!" Alice grinned at him, *"You'd be the cousin that doesn't know how to have fun."*

"Blasphemy!" Byakko cried as he shook his great, furry head, *"I know how to have... fun."*

Alice moved right along as she smiled at Black Frost, *"You would be the youngest brother, always doing pranks and causing mischief."*

"Hee ho!!"

"Yatagarasu would be the wise uncle," Alice pointed to the Caped Warrior next, *"You would be the awesome big brother, but nobody outmatches the Trickster as the oldest though. He's the firstborn that we all look up to!"*

She pointed to all of them and casually named off familial terms, she nodded in satisfaction when she was done.

"Wait a moment," Yatagarasu cocked his head to the side, *"If Arsene is Bird Dad, then who's the mother of the group?"*

Silence reigned over the mindscape. All eyes turned curiously to Arsene, who sighed like the weight of the world was upon his shoulders. His claws scraped down his metal mask as he turned his back on them. He didn't like the way Titania smirked.

"We are not having this conversation." His wings ruffled as he floated off, *"Nope."*

"Wait, Arsene!" Titania called, "Which one of us would you take as your wife!? I would obviously be the best choice! Oberon's not here to object!"

"I'm not listening." Arsene departed for the darker depths of the Trickster's psyche, "If you must have an answer, then I choose to be the sole parental figure."

Chitters, chuckles, guffaws, and belly-aching laughter followed Arsene who, despite himself, smiled underneath that terrifying mask.

The sounds wilted any nightmarish seeds in Akira's mind before they could sprout.

It was everything he could've hoped for.

Tensei sat across from him as they ate breakfast, he was discharged from the hospital two nights ago. There were no small amount of interviews, tests, and various debriefings before he could actually come home. It was as if everything were back to normal, as if Hosu had never happened! But... something *has* changed. It stained the air. The table was quiet, save for the natural clatter of dishes.

Mother kept looking in between them. She was happy, smiling even, but there was something in her eyes that Tenya didn't like.

Thankfully, the lost conversation was filled in by the drone of the nearby television. He concentrated on the host's voice as he poked at his rice.

"There's been no shortage of comparisons between Joker's dragon and you, Ryukyu." The horned man said, "What's your opinion over this? I'm sure you have something to say in regards to the monsters that Joker controls, especially his dragon."

"I do, Yakana-san." Ryukyu crossed her legs and leaned back into the plush couch, "But there is one thing I would like to point out."

Yakana-san's brow raised, *"Really? I'm sure the audience would love to hear it!"*

"I've seen a few people point out that Seth isn't a dragon at all. They say he's more of a wyvern."

"Eh? Is there a big difference?"

"Well, that's the thing. Dragons are synonymous to many cultures spread across the entire globe. There are many interpretations of what can be a dragon. Take Quetzacoatl from Aztec mythology, Jormungandr from Norse Mythology, or something along the lines of Ouroboros, the dragon who's eating its own tail."

"What about them?"

"Like I said, there are many interpretations on what makes a dragon, those included. These are a few examples, but take my form for instance. It's a western style dragon. Asia has dragons with long serpentine bodies as well as a mix of other animals, a good example would be the Yellow Dragon, Huanglong. Europe and Africa have their own interpretations, too."

"So, what you're saying is that Joker's dragon isn't a wyvern?"

"It's quite possible. From what I've seen, Joker's dragon doesn't have a poisoned barb on its tail. That's an indication of a wyvern."

"But from the videos, it appears that Seth has an additional pair of wings on his neck and decorations around its tail, too. Does that make any difference?"

"Not really," Ryukyu shook her head, "They are small enough to be considered ornaments at best."

"I see. You've provided quite a hefty debate, Ryukyu."

The hero chuckled, *"Trust me, I've had plenty of time and practice about this topic."*

Yakana-san leaned forward, hands folded on his desk, *"But the bigger question is, which one of you would come out victorious if you had to battle?"*

Ryukyu hummed, a thoughtful frown creased her lips.

"It's hard to say." She narrowed her eyes, "I think I would have the advantage in size, as well as a front pair of limbs to maneuver with. Seth is longer than I am, and most likely more agile."

"You're implying that you could lose?"

"There's always that possibility, Yakana-san. We don't know the full range of Seth's capabilities, and there's a high chance that Joker would be with him too. It seems Joker can switch between his monsters on the fly, so he can have any number of strategies up his sleeve. You should always be prepared for a battle to go south and have backup plans just in case."

"What would you do if you ever encountered Joker?"

Ryukyu looked directly at the camera, as if sending out a challenge to the vigilante himself.

"First, I would politely ask him to turn himself in. His powers can do so much good in this world, when used correctly. If he truly wants to help people then the best way for him is to go through a vigilante reform program, then become a licensed hero." Ryukyu's eyes sharpened like a blade, "If not, then we would do it the hard way-"

The television turned off. He and his mother glanced at Tensei, who set the remote down with a sigh.

"Nii-san?" Tenya furrowed his brows, "What's wrong?"

Tensei looked between his brother and mother with a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes.

“I...” Tensei cleared his throat and pushed his dishes away, “There’s something that I wish to discuss.”

Tenya put his chopsticks down and gave his brother the utmost attention.

“Go on, dear.” Mother adjusted her glasses and then folded her hands on her lap, “I can tell when one of my boys has something important to say.”

Tensei chuckled, but his smile fell just as fast. He took a moment to collect himself, then took in a deep breath and stared them right in the eye.

“I don’t know if I’ll return to being a full-time hero.”

The words hung in the air, cut and dry.

“Tensei-”

Mother was interrupted when Tenya shot out of his chair, his arms chopped wildly.

“What are you saying, Nii-san!?” Tenya yelled, his eyes burned traitorously, “You... you have to return to being a hero! You’re *my* hero! Are you abandoning our family legacy!?”

Pain flashed in Tensei’s eyes, “Tenya...”

“Tenya, sit down.” Mother’s expression hardened, “Please. Let’s listen to Tensei before we start jumping to conclusions.”

Tenya’s cheeks burned, but he sank into his chair, his posture as rigid as a statue.

“I’m not saying I’m giving up completely.” Tensei stared down at his hands, “I still have an agency to run, and I refuse to leave all of my sidekicks high and dry.”

“Then..?” Mother goaded.

“The Hero Commission is publicly calling for Joker’s arrest after everything he did. I’m positive that they’ll wrangle in as many heroes as possible to scour Japan in search of him.” Tensei shook his head, “I can’t do that. Joker gave me my life back, healed Tenya, and saved him from the Hero Killer. I just...”

Mother reached over and squeezed his hand, “I understand.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Mother blinked as a gentle smile came over her, Tenya stiffened as her other hand came over his, “This family owes him a debt that can never be repaid. My wonderful sons are safe and sound, at home and enjoying breakfast as if Stain never happened. If it wasn’t for Joker...”

Her expression collapsed as she sniffled, the tears that rained down her cheeks startled the both of them.

“Hey, don’t cry.” Tensei squeezed her hand, “We’re right here, and we won’t go anywhere anytime soon.”

Mother nodded with a stifled sob. The warmth of her hands faded as she let go, she plucked up a napkin to dab at her eyes.

“But,” Tenya couldn’t meet his brother in the eye, “What about Ingenium?”

“What about him?” Tensei smiled as he reached over the table and ruffled Tenya’s hair, “I’m looking at him right now.”

“Wh-what!? But I... you’re...”

Tenya opened and closed his mouth several times as his arms went haywire, it was no small miracle that he didn’t start spewing nuts and bolts.

“Tenya,” Tensei pulled his arm back, “You’ve already inherited the name of Ingenium. You should get to keep it.”

“Then what about you?”

“I’ll fall back into a support role. Stay at the agency and direct the sidekicks, be the navigator, take in emergency calls.” Tensei shrugged, “Do you want to intern with me next year? I can show you the ropes so that you can take over the Iida Agency after you graduate. If you want to, that is.”

Tenya shot up from his chair, his hand clutched his chest. A strange bubble of emotion was lodged in his throat, but he swallowed it down and tried not to sound pathetic.

“O-of course, Nii-san! I would be most honored!!”

Mother chuckled despite the tears.

“It’s Tenya’s last free day before he has to return to school tomorrow,” She said with a watery smile, “Why don’t you two spend the day together? Get out of the house and have some fun?”

Tensei grinned, and it finally reached his eyes.

“Well, Tenya? Why don’t we head to the mall? Or we could race in the park like we used to when you were little.”

“Yes! I don’t mind what we do as long as we can do it together!!”

Tensei chuckled, “You need to mellow out, little bro. Let’s finish breakfast and clean up before we head out.”

“Yes!!”

Tenya devoured his breakfast with new vigor, the darkness that had stained his soul was all but gone, replaced by a bright new hope. Tensei’s grin lit up the entire room, and he ate with no small amount of gusto as well.

Iida Akari looked between her sons and decided that she was the proudest mother on the planet.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Akira asked as he packed their food.

Two bentos worth of freshly made curry, tuna sushi for Morgana, onigiri, among other tasty treats. Kaito, who had a plate of curry so large it could be considered the size of Mt. Olympus, shrugged.

“No, you two go and have fun.”

“Are you sure?” Morgana tilted his head as he sat on the front desk, “Actually, I don’t think we’ve ever seen you go outside. Or leave this cafe, or sleep...”

“I do go out.” Kaito stared down at his breakfast with a frown, “To get groceries, whenever necessary. And I actually don’t need to sleep.”

Morgana’s tail twitched. He was seconds away from having a convulsion.

Akira furrowed his brows, “You.... you don’t *sleep* ? Isn’t that unhealthy?”

“Part of my quirk, inherited from my mother’s side. I do experience dreams though, in a strange roundabout way.” Kaito scooped up the first mountainous chunk of curry, “The visions I get from peoples’ lives are dreamlike. Sort of. It’s hard to explain.”

He devoured the first bite, marking the end of the conversation. Morgana and Akira stared at each other, eyes wide.

“Alright then, we’ll be back later.” Morgana said as he climbed over Akira and dove into the bag, “Probably around lunch time.”

Kaito waved them off. Akira didn't have the heart to tell him that he had curry sauce on his chin before they departed. Yatagarasu materialized over them, his shadow floated across the pavement as he settled into a graceful glide.

"Let's go, Trickster!"

"Somebody's excited."

"Of course! Considering where we're going, how can I not be?"

Akira snorted, *"You can go and get a head start. I know how much you love the ocean."*

Yatagarasu's string vibrated with joy, and he zoomed off over the rooftops.

Morgana didn't question him as he sunk into the shoulder bag, the bentos poked into his side, but the delectable scent of tuna and curry kept him from being grouchy. It was quite early in the morning, the sun had yet to peek over the horizon, yet the sky began to lighten, as they made their way down the street. People blinked sleep out of their eyes as they meandered around like zombies.

Akira blended into the shuffling city life, until they were near a train station a couple of blocks away from Dagobah Municipal Beach. There were news crews scattered about, they hauled around cameras and a few starved reporters lunged at random people as if their lives depended on it.

"Excuse me, young man?"

Akira turned, and flinched back when a camera and microphone were shoved in his face. He didn't recognize the man in the nice suit, but the microphone was labeled for Channel 7.

"Y-yes?"

Arsene and a few others chuckled at his meekness. He naturally curled into himself as he blinked his large doe eyes, a skill that Alice would be proud of. The Trickster was a wolf in sheep's clothing, these other people didn't know how close they came to being hunted.

"What's your opinion over the vigilante named Joker!?" The man took a step closer, eyes alight with fervent hunger, "Do you think the heroes are failing us!? How do you think Joker's live interview and battles in Hosu will change things!? Is Joker a True Hero or just a common criminal!?"

"Er..." Joker pulled on the mask of pure innocence, he adjusted his glasses and smiled sweetly, "Hee ho?"

It was like somebody doused water on the reporter's fervor, he blinked at Akira several times. Somehow, Akira's voice had carried to the crowd around the station, and then, *it* began.

"Hee ho?" A woman called, "Hee ho!"

"Hee ho!!"

"Heee hooo!?"

"HEE HOO!!"

"Hee ho," A girl with pink dreadlocks cheered, "Hee hooo!!!"

"HEEEE HOOOO!!!!!" Another man pumped his fists into the air.

Groups of children giggled and chanted 'Hee ho!'.

"HEEEEEEEEEEE HAAAAAAAW!!!"

"*Hee ho!!!*" Black Frost howled proudly, even though nobody else could hear.

The cameras zoomed in on the chanting crowd, which slowly grew bigger in size. The chant traveled into the air like a song, the power of their Hee Ho exploded in size until the station square became overcrowded.

Akira bit his lip to hide his smirk, then turned tail and flowed through the mob like water.

He finally broke free of people and jogged a ways down the street. He didn't stop until they were in the clear, Akira's gut hurt from suppressing his laughter.

"Okay, *what* the heck was that?" Morgana poked his nose out of the bag.

"That is how you create a meme."

"A meme?" Morgana blinked, "You mean like those joke pictures Futaba and Ryuji would cackle at?"

"Oh Morgana, you have no idea." Akira chuckled as he stuck his hands in his pockets, "It's going to go around like wildfire."

Akira's phone vibrated, and he nearly broke into another fit of laughter.

"Case in point."

Morgana looked over Akira's shoulders to the phone. He just received a text from Aiba, a 'Hee Ho!!' surrounded by sparkling emojis. The not-cat shook his head.

"I honestly don't get it, but whatever makes people happy."

"You're missing out."

Morgana rolled his eyes, "What we're missing out on is breakfast on the beach. Are we almost there yet? We're going to miss the sunrise!"

“Yeah.” Akira pocketed his phone with a sigh, “Yatagarasu is already there.”

The hypnotic tone of ocean waves intermixed with seagulls’ cries. They stood on the edge of the seawall, the salty breeze ruffled his hair and the pristine sands sparkled under the rising sun. The waters were clear and tinted with purples and golds. Akira breathed in the crisp air and smiled, then descended the stone stairs onto the sand.

Yatagarasu drifted on the sea breeze, their bond hummed with a pleasant warmth.

“Ah... Amaterasu. Origin of all that is good and mother to us all....”

Akira blinked up at the persona, *“Are you alright up there?”*

“Hmm?” Yatagarasu stared down at them, *“Ah, er... yes. I am fine. Just revisiting memories, Trickster. Please pay me no heed.”*

Akira nodded, then chose a spot to sit. For such a beautiful beach, it was practically abandoned. They were alone as far as they could tell. Akira didn’t ponder on it as he set the bag down, Morgana emerged so he could set out the towel and their breakfast. Morgana bounced on his paws and licked his chops.

“Tuna!!”

Akira smirked, “I haven’t even opened it yet.”

“I haven’t had any tuna in weeks! Can you really blame me?”

Akira plopped down on the towel and opened the first bento, Morgana stared right into his soul until he set down the small plate of tuna. They spent a majority of yesterday resting, talking with Kaito, making an obscenely large batch of curry, which the man watched over them with peerless eyes. It was as if Kaito was scared they’d run off and cause more chaos if he wasn’t keeping an eye on them.

Which, to be honest, was wholeheartedly true. Akira stirred his curry with a faint smile.

He used chicken this time, and a variety of other spices.

It wasn't half bad.

Today would be their last day to relax before Akira returned to the Blue Lotus Cafe while Yatagarasu would continue reconnaissance on U.A. They would lay low, but keep their ears to the ground in case another potential target surfaced. If not, then Akira would do his first official patrol as Joker within a week or two.

They inhaled their food as they watched the breathtaking sunrise together, with Yatagarasu's shadow to watch over them.

"You know," Morgana just finished cleaning his plate, "This place is beautiful."

"It really is."

Morgana looked up at him, "It makes me wonder what other worlds there could be."

"Really?"

"Yeah! If this one has powers and superheroes, then there could be other worlds run with magic. Maybe one with technology so advanced that we can't even comprehend it. Oh, there could be landscapes like floating mountains and magical springs, or entire underwater cities too!"

Akira raised his brow, "When did you become philosophical?"

"Last night," Morgana said with a smirk, "I just got to thinking about the others, then what kind of worlds they could be in. I... guess my imagination just ran wild?"

He chewed on the last of his rice thoughtfully, then hummed.

“I mean, our world had an entire dimension on mind palaces and human consciousness. It’s not hard to imagine what else could be out there.”

“Huh, I wonder how people like that detective and Eraserhead would react to say... Kamoshida’s palace?”

Akira nearly choked on his rice, “I’m sure they would have certain *choice* words.”

“Yeah...”

Morgana’s ears drooped. He blinked a few times and then stared out into the ocean. Akira didn’t have to ask what he was thinking about, he missed the others just as much as Akira did. He put his bento down, then gently pet Morgana.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, bathed in the sunrise’s pure light.

Suddenly, a low whine echoed within his mind.

“What’s wrong, Cerberus?”

“Can me play with Master? Me don’t like it when Master is sad...”

“But Yatagarasu-”

“Heh, let the pup come out and play.” Yatagarasu said, *“I have had my fill of nostalgia for one day. Thank you, Trickster, your kindness means the world to me.”*

“Don’t mention it. Is there anybody nearby?”

Yatagarasu scanned the beach one last time, *“Not another soul wanders this beach.”*

Akira nodded, then stood, “Can you keep an eye out?”

“Sure?” Morgana cocked his head to the side, “Why? What are you gonna do?”

“Cerberus wants to come out. Who am I to say no?”

Morgana stretched. He splayed out on the towel and slowly blinked, his fur dyed with streaks of gold.

“Alright. I’ll just blow wind in your face or something in case anybody comes by.”

Akira chuckled. He left his shoes by Morgana and stepped out onto the warming sands. Yatagarasu returned to the mind space and Cerberus lunged at this chance, materializing in a gentle *woosh* of blue flames.

Cerberus’ silvery fur gained a golden hue to it, he shook his mane and pawed at the sand under his feet. Their shadows stretched all the way to the sea wall.

“Huh,” Joker pulled at his blood-red gloves and looked down at his costume, “I suppose this would be a good chance to practice with our bond.”

“Ooh! Good point!” Cerberus wagged his tail and sat in front of him, “My bond should be easy! Master can control it in no time!”

Easy, huh? Joker closed his eyes as Morgana watched from the sidelines. The sea breeze gained a little strength, anybody else would just say it was a natural change like the tide, but Joker and his personas tasted the magic underneath. They knew better. Joker brushed the thoughts aside and concentrated.

His eyes flew open and he gaped at Cerberus, “Our bond is a literal *tornado of fire*?”

“Right!?” Cerberus happily chimed, “Better than some lame ice ribbon!”

Byakko grumbled somewhere within the mind space, Alice pet him to keep him calm.

Joker sighed before he closed his eyes once more. How does one tame a cyclone of pure hellfire without getting burned? He breathed in, then out, and allowed the sound of ocean waves to help him concentrate. It wasn't a matter of grabbing it like a chain or a string, the flames crackled as he reached out. Fire flowed around his fingers and washed over him with its searing heat.

But the flames... didn't burn?

They parted beneath his hand. Joker's brows creased, and he imagined himself stepping inside the twister. Sparks hissed and flames roared in his ears as he stood within, the vibrant orange light surrounded him and rose high into the formless heavens. There were hints of other colors too, an occasional red or yellow, a spark of azure here and there.

In awe, he gaped up at within the eye of the storm.

His eyes flew open when there was a crisp *snap* . He caught the final embers as his costume vanished, whisked away by the gentle breeze.

"Ha!" Cerberus pranced around in a circle, spraying sand everywhere, "I told you my bond would be easy!!"

Akira grinned, but his concentration wavered. His costume flickered over his body like the dying sputter of embers in a campfire, then it was gone again. Cerberus froze.

"Well, maybe."

"We keep practicing while we play! No better training, right?"

"Right, I think?" Akira scanned the beach, "So, I didn't exactly bring a ball to throw or anything?"

Cerberus knicked at the sand as he looked around. He immediately brightened when he spotted a pile of driftwood down the way, his lips pulled back into a fanged grin and he marched over to it. One would think Cerberus would pick the size best suited for Akira to throw. Akira could throw a small one, maybe chuck a medium sized one a decent distance.

Oh no, Cerberus snatched up the biggest log of the bunch.

Akira sputtered as the beast dragged it back, the log gouged a deep trench within the sand. He tried not to picture Cerberus as the proud chihuahua that found the biggest stick in the park, legs wobbling as it barely had the strength to haul its prize home, but he couldn't help it. A grin slid onto his face and he hid his laugh with a muffled cough.

Cerberus dropped the log in front of Akira, the thing was longer than Akira was tall, and twice the width of his body. The Hound of Hell sat proudly, his tail weaved over the sand in anticipation.

"Wow."

"What's wrong? I can probably find a bigger stick if it's too small!!"

"N-no, that's alright." Akira snapped off one of the branches, "I'll make do with this one."

"Oh."

Akira grinned as he waved it in front of Cerberus. The persona really was a puppy, with how he playfully bowed, his eyes honed on the stick as if it were the greatest treasure in the world. Akira grunted as the stick was thrown.

Cerberus shot off like a bullet train, he kicked sand right up in Akira's face as he pounded down the beach. Akira was thankful he put his hand up in time to not swallow sand, but another problem arose as Cerberus snatched up the stick a good ways away, then turned and sprinted back. Just then, Akira learned the error of his ways.

How does somebody stop a several thousand pound beast barreling straight for them? The rush of panic Akira felt summoned his costume.

Joker frantically waved his arms, "Cerberus, stop-!"

It was too late. Cerberus tried to stop, he really did, but it was with the grace of a drunken bull going ice skating. Joker's cry was silenced as he was buried by the heaping pile of displaced sand, he popped his head out, gagging against the grittiness that invaded his mouth and throat.

Morgana howled with laughter in the background.

"Sorry!!"

Cerberus' massive paws excavated him out of the pile in seconds, and Joker shook the sand out of his hair.

"Its-" Joker hacked up more sand, "It's alright."

Cerberus' ears sagged and a low whine escaped him, the stick dropped from his jaws. Joker took a moment to focus, to tame that wild twister that tied them together. His costume dissipated, and he stepped next to Cerberus.

"I said it's fine," He smirked and scratched Cerberus behind both ears, "Who cares if I get a little sandy? We're at a beach, it's to be expected."

Amusement flashed in Cerberus' eyes as his massive head rubbed against Akira's chest, sending him back down into the sand pile. The persona sprawled out on top of him like a lap dog.

"Oof, you're going to kill me with how heavy you are."

"What are you talking about? Master cannot be killed!!"

“Are you sure about that?” Akira splayed out his arms and closed his eyes, “This is me. Dying. Goodbye world.”

Cerberus snorted, the hot breath washed over Akira’s face. A few moments of silence pass.

“Master?”

Akira barely stopped himself from grinning.

Cerberus’ weight lifted off of him, his wet nose sniffed at his face and ruffled his hair.

“Boo.”

“Agh!”

Cerberus jumped up on his hind legs, lost his balance, and fell onto his back. Akira laughed as the ground shook under the massive weight, Cerberus’ legs were splayed up in the air, his feet twitched oddly. Akira snickered as he rubbed Cerberus’ belly.

“You tricked me good.”

“Well,” Akira’s smirk grew, “I *am* the Trickster, aren’t I?”

Cerberus blinked, then he started to laugh. It was too contagious to not join in, and they spent a moment in peace, laughing together. Akira clutched his stomach and wiped his eyes, although he was still covered head to toe in sand.

The moment was broken by a blast of wind in his face.

Cerberus frowned, but he dissolved into cold ashes. Akira took a moment to gather himself, tried to shake any remaining sand from his hair, then stood. He just saw the tip of Morgana’s tail as he dove into the bag. He raised a brow as he studied the beach.

A familiar figure paused at the seawall stairs, looking out into the ocean with determination. Green eyes scanned the sandy expanse until they landed on him. Akira hesitantly waved.

“Kurusu-kun!” Midoriya went down the stairs and approached with a sunny smile, “I didn’t know you liked coming... here...?”

The boy trailed off as he froze in place. He took in Akira’s disheveled, sandy appearance, then glossed over the blatant destruction behind him. This stretch of sand looked more like a war zone.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Akira blinked as he looked down on himself, “I, uh... fell.”

Vague emotions passed through the boy’s eyes. There was a moment of stilted silence as Midoriya looked over their surroundings, he bore the same expression as when Futaba scanned over the Metaverse for Shadows.

Akira cleared his throat, “I’m fine, really.”

“If.... if you say so.”

Midoriya was smiling at him, but there was something so sad, so *understanding*, about it. He stared at Akira as if he were a kicked puppy.

“So,” Akira pushed up his gritty glasses, “What are you doing here this early in the morning?”

“O-Oh! I usually come here in the mornings to train, but the ocean waves help me clear my thoughts, too.”

“Is something bothering you?”

Midoriya bit his lip as he looked out into the ocean, Akira hesitantly grabbed his shoulder. The boy stiffened and blinked at him curiously.

“This should be a two way street, Midoriya.” He said, “If I can talk to you about my quirkelssness, then you can tell me about your problems too. If you want to, that is. I won’t force you.”

“I...” Midoriya dug his shoe into the sand, “I want to ask somebody something, but its really personal and I don’t know how to even start.”

“Do you trust this person?”

“With my life!” Midoriya’s eyes brightened, “I... I really look up to him!”

Akira smiled gently, the rich light painted him like an angelic halo.

“Then you should be up front and honest with him. If he has mutual respect and trust for you, then he’ll answer sincerely. Maybe invite him for tea or find a comfortable place to talk, then you can ask your question.”

Midoriya rolled Akira’s words around for a moment, accompanied by the whispering waves. Confidence radiated off of him as he stood a little bit straighter, a fire lit in his emerald eyes.

“I will! Thanks for the advice!”

“Think nothing of it.” Akira rolled his shoulders and glanced around the destroyed beach, “I suppose I shouldn’t get in the way of your training, then.”

“It’s okay!” Midoriya waved his hands, “You don’t have to leave just because of me, there’s plenty of space on the beach!”

Akira walked towards his towel, Midoriya followed.

“You’re right. I planned to stay for a while, but I think I’ll just go home and clean up. It’s not fun having sand in certain places.” He knelt down to roll up the towel and grab his bag, “Oh, I guess I can give you something.”

“Give me something..?” Midoriya raised his brow.

He retrieved the second bento, nicely wrapped up in a colorfully striped cloth, and held it out to Midoriya.

“I was going to have it for lunch, but I think you should have it instead. Training takes a lot of energy out of you, after all.” He said with a soft smile, “There’s some sushi and omelets in there, as well as some curry that I made myself.”

“I-I can’t take that! You worked so hard on it!”

Akira grinned, “Don’t worry about it. Actually, we started making curry at the Blue Lotus Cafe, and I wouldn’t mind having another opinion on a new recipe. You’ll have to be honest with how it tastes though, so no sugar coating it!”

Midoriya sputtered as he accepted it with both hands. His eyes held stars and he stared down at the wrapped bento as if he were afraid to break it.

“I’ll be working tomorrow, so you have plenty of time to give it a review.”

“Y-yes!”

Akira was about to leave, but a burning question made him hesitate. Midoriya noticed as he shuffled his weight, then glanced at him from head to toe.

“I do have to ask,” Akira said softly, “I got your message, the one with your location? I noticed it was in Hosu that night of the attack.”

Midoriya jolted, “Uh, I-it was nothing, really! I-I was in Hosu doing my internship, but I just helped civilians evacuate! Nothing major!”

“... Then the message?”

“It was a typo.” Midoriya was content to stare at the bento in his hands, “I meant to send it to the hero I was interning with and my finger slipped.”

“Alright, I believe you.”

The boy’s gaze snapped up to him, “Y-you do?”

“Just tell me you weren’t injured, right? I saw the news, and it looked really scary out there. Are you sure you’re alright?”

”Y-yeah! I’m fine, I didn’t have a scratch on me!”

Akira knew he was lying. He didn’t know what came over him at that moment. Instead of calling Midoriya out on it, Akira reached out and ruffled the boy’s hair. It was the same motion he did for Futaba countless times, some innate instinct, he supposed.

“I’m glad,” He said honestly, “The last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

At that, Midoriya stiffened. Akira’s hand was soft and affectionate like that of an older brother. It was... nice, different from the way his mother had done it. Midoriya didn’t reject the sincere warmth that wrapped around his heart like a blanket, emotions bubbled in his throat and his eyes felt the burn of tears.

“Er...” Akira pulled his hand away and rubbed the back of his neck, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry?”

“I-it’s nothing!” Midoriya scrubbed at his eyes and chuckled wetly, “You didn’t upset me, I’m just known for being a crybaby.”

At that, Akira chuckled, “Well then, I’ll see you around?”

Midoriya wiped away the remainder of tears and hugged the bento to his chest, his smile brighter than the sunrise at their backs.

“Yeah!”

Akira waved, then left him in peace. The sounds of the ocean and the salty breeze faded into the distance. Morgana carefully poked his head out when he deemed it safe.

"That was a close one. We're lucky he didn't see me or Cerberus."

"Yeah, too close."

"It was nice to see the green child!" Cerberus said, "I'm proud of him!"

"The boy has made progress since the Sports Festival," Arsene hummed, "Especially in how he fought Stain."

"Right!?" Cerberus beamed, "Hey Master, for my reward can I speak to the green child? I want to tell him how proud I am of him!!"

"That's dangerous," Akira stopped mid-stride, frowning, "Too dangerous for us to do any time soon."

"Oh..."

"But if the opportunity arises, then I don't see why not. We'll just play it by ear, okay?"

"Okay!!"

Cerberus wasn't the only persona who buzzed with happiness the whole way home.

Life Goes On

Chapter 26: Life Goes On

Dread roiled in Tsukauchi's heart, "I don't think the Hero Commission will take this laying down anymore."

Hoo boy, here we go.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tranquility.

That would be the word used to describe the Trickster's psyche. It still didn't have a definitive shape, but it was no longer the endless black void it had been when they first arrived. There was light now, similar to the glow of twilight just before sunrise. It was enough to where one could see the others in their full form, if faintly. It was quiet and serene, like a forest blanketed in fog.

Arsene folded his wings as he took stock.

The Old Boy floated high above with Yatagarasu perched upon his head, they conversed in soft whispers, enough to where nobody else could hear them.

The Bubbly One hovered over Alice and Black Frost as they played pattycake, giggling. Cerberus curled his huge body around them, tail tapping in tune to their song.

Seth slept soundly a ways away, his head tucked under his wing like a swan.

Byakko, with nothing else to do, circled the edge of the mindscape and passed the few solitary personas that had minded their own business thus far. There was one other, floating at the farthest edges of Akira's psyche. He had yet to speak or act, or really move from his place, and was aloof to everybody else's presence. The Master Of Strings even resisted Alice's attempt at conversation, and she was in a sour mood for the rest of that day.

Truly, it was as if this persona didn't belong here.

Arsene shrugged off the thought. That just left Titania, who was easy to find through following Ishtar's scathing glare.

"What are you doing?" Arsene asked as he looked over his shoulder.

"Aww," Titania pouted as she hovered at his side, "And here I was hoping to catch you off guard."

Arsene would roll his eyes if he could, "You should know that I am not easy to get caught unawares."

"Quite." She chuckled and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, "You looked deep in thought. So? What were you thinking about, Arsene?"

He stared down at his clawed hands. Something was changing. The shift came alongside the blooming light within the mindscape, energy not of his own. And yet, here he was, every cell in his body was supercharged with this foreign vigor. This happened every time the Trickster did something fantastic in this new world, it was minimal at first, but strength flowed through their veins in ever-increasing amounts.

The interview with Taneo had been different from the rest, it opened a flood gate.

Ever since he had spoken on the live radio, this raw vitality rushed into him with the power of crashing ocean waves. It was exhilarating.

Intoxicating, even. As if he could obliterate anything in their path with a sweep of his wings.

“I...” Arsene flexed his hands, “Our powers grow the longer we are trapped in this world. I’m starting to remember a past life, a little inkling here, a flash of some memory there. Before I awakened again and became the Trickster’s First persona. It’s all becoming so clear.”

“It’s the same with me.”

Arsene tilted his head towards her as she folded her hands behind her back, her feet playfully kicked at the floor.

“We are no longer mere shadows under the control of the Metaverse. We are growing into something more, being cut off from the influence of the Sea Of Human Souls.” She bit her lip as she narrowed her eyes in thought, “I wonder if it has to do with the human unconscious in this world?”

“What?”

“Think on it, Arsene.” She shook her head and smiled at him, her eyes alight like sunlit dew, “We grow stronger every time we’re put in the spotlight. For example, Seth has grown more powerful since those videos in Hosu, or how that radio interview allowed the humans to listen to a few of our voices, thus we’ve grown in strength. I feel more powerful than I have ever been. That popular dragon hero mentioned both Seth and the Old Boy as well. I’ve never seen his scales so golden before. It’s not hard to see it in any others, too.”

“What you’re saying is, the more we’re acclimated and accepted into this world and its collective unconscious, the stronger we get.”

“Correct. You’re the strongest amongst us all, Arsene. Being the First, and perhaps the Last, to manifest for the Trickster.”

Arsene grimaced but didn’t say anything more. Titania sighed wistfully as she inched closer, her morning dew scent washed over

him in a heady current. She was so close that their faces were less than a foot apart, and she whispered thus.

“But we all know that with new strengths, come new weaknesses.” Her eyes trailed over the other personas, “And I’m afraid to find out just what those weaknesses entail.”

She floated away from him then and there, left alone with that single thought.

A new determination welled up within him as he watched Titania join Alice and Black Frost in their game, patting Cerberus along the way. She was right. They all looked up to Arsene, the Trickster even more so, as the leaders of the group. They were far more than just fractured pieces of a bigger puzzle, now. They were family.

He forged a silent vow.

Arsene would take this duty to protect them to heart, his wings would shield them from any new weaknesses even if it was the last thing he did.

It was a quiet morning.

Different to the raging boil that had taken over the country, simmered down into the peaceful light of dawn. It would bubble back up as the day wore on, but for now Akira basked in the simplicity of an awakening city. These streets were engraved into his mind now, just like the network of alleyways and hidden niches strewn throughout Musutafu, drawn by the perfect bird’s eye view.

His ever faithful eyes in the sky already departed for U.A., and the Blue Lotus Cafe was less than a block away.

Akira hovered at the end of the street, staring at the cafe. There was a small crowd huddled outside, a few were seated under the awning.

Haru-san was among them, and she swiveled her head to smile at him as he approached.

“Morning, Kurusu-kun!”

“Good morning, Haru-san.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, “Why are there so many people out here? The cafe isn’t open yet.”

“Why else?” The old woman smirked, “It seems the curry became quite popular. In the past few days it’s been sold out before the lunch hour hits, so folks try to come earlier. First come, first serve, and all that.”

“Oh.”

“I’m glad to see you’re back kiddo, I’m sure Risumi and Hitoshi will be happy.”

“Thanks.” Akira chuckled and stepped around her, “I’ll make sure to save you a plate.”

Haru-san smiled and winked at him. He went up to the front door and was about to open it.

“Hey! No cutting in line, kid!”

Akira jumped and looked over his shoulder, everybody who was waiting had their eyes on him. A woman was glaring at him with her hands on her hips, red hair spilled past her shoulders and down her back. The sudden attention pinned him to the spot.

“Easy, now.” Akira recognized Akane as he put a hand to the woman’s shoulder, “The kid works here. Risumi told me that he’s the one responsible for making the Leblanc Special.”

There were a few murmurs, and the woman’s expression melted into a sheepish grin.

“S-sorry.”

Akira waved his hand, "Don't worry about it."

He went inside before anyone else could say anything, breathing a sigh of relief when the little bell rang overhead. Something unknowable unfurled within his heart. Seeing the familiar cafe booths and the aroma of sweets, spices, and coffee made him relax, the crowd outside faded into oblivion. Risumi popped her head out of the kitchen door.

"Kurusu-kun!" Her face lit up as she stepped out, "Welcome back! How did everything with your friend go?"

"There were a few bumps in the plan, which is why it took me a few more days to get back. She got moved in though, and is a lot happier there."

"That's good." She turned and motioned for him to follow, "I take it you've seen the group outside?"

Akira chuckled, "They're hard to miss."

"They're an excited lot, I hope they didn't give you too much trouble. Are you ready to get back to work?"

"Yes, Shinsou-san." He smirked, "Can't let my curry skills get rusty, can we?"

She matched his sly smile, "No, we can't."

They walked into the kitchen. Ayumu glanced over his shoulder, glowered, and returned to making baked goods. The scrape of a whisk on the bowl interrupted the quiet as she stopped in front of the other stove, where the curry bubbled.

"So, we followed your recipe to the letter and people still seem to enjoy it, but..."

"But?" Akira snatched up the ladle and stirred, "It looks alright to me."

“Maybe.” She adjusted her glasses with a small frown, “It just doesn’t have that same *oomph* from when you made it. I don’t really know how to explain it, but it seems that you have a special touch to make it... complete? Better? There was an online review that even said it was restorative, whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Risumi chuckled, “Maybe we can make another couple of batches too, at least to last into the afternoon.”

Akira nodded and went to grab an additional pot. The other door opened, and Akira looked up to see a groggy Hitoshi walk in, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, Hitoshi!” Risumi said, “Kurusu-kun is back!”

Hitoshi stopped dead in his tracks. The color drained from his face and he stared at Akira with wide eyes, as if he was truly seeing him for the first time. That thunderstruck expression stayed on his face, he didn’t budge when Akira waved at him. It was unnerving.

“Hey,” Akira said, attempting a half smile despite his confusion, “Do you want me to make you a cup of coffee before school?”

Hitoshi remained silent, gawking at Akira, as still as if he were carved from marble. His lilac eyes flicked in between his parents, then landed back on Akira with such intensity. Akira held back a shiver, the stifling atmosphere drew a few of his personas’ attention. Hitoshi’s heart pounded out of his chest as the pool of gold in Akira’s eyes grew larger, the breath caught in his throat and he couldn’t get any air. There was an odd sort of reverence in Hitoshi’s eyes. The silence stretched on for several moments, Akira felt as if he were being put under a microscope.

Akira’s smile finally fell.

Risumi and Ayumu stared at each other with furrowed brows. Risumi reached out to grab Hitoshi's shoulder. The movement snapped him out of it, gasping as if he breached water, he backpedaled several steps until he backed into one of the counters.

"I-I'm going to be late for school!"

He rushed past them in a purple flash, the kitchen doors swung back and forth ominously.

"Hitoshi!" Risumi peeked out the door, "School doesn't start for another hour!"

The boy was already gone.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Ayumu opened his mouth, Risumi gave him a look that snapped the man's jaw shut.

"No, dear." Risumi said with a sigh, "Hitoshi's been acting strange lately. I don't know what's been bothering him, but he won't talk to us about it."

"I swear if those bullies have gotten to him again..." Ayumu growled.

Akira's heart swelled with anger, "Bullies?"

"Hitoshi's quirk isn't really accepted by his peers," Risumi clasped her hands together, suddenly looking a lot older, "He's had problems with bullies since it manifested. People are not kind to those with our type of mental quirks."

Akira glared at the pots on the stove. He thought he made it clear to Wolf and his cohorts that their actions wouldn't be tolerated. If they did something to Hitoshi while he was away...

"Can you keep an eye on Hitoshi during school today? I'm worried about him, but don't let him know you're there."

“Understood, I shall be like the whispering wind.” Yatagarasu, who was perched on U.A.’s rooftop, riled his feathers, *“I fear the fate of any who truly angers the Trickster.”*

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” Arsene said, the whisper of his wings cooled Akira’s anger, *“But we’ll need to be patient with him.”*

Risumi shook her head, then glanced over at Akira with an exhausted smile.

“I’ll try to get him to talk about it,” She said, “Let’s just focus on our work until then, we’re opening soon after all.”

“... Right.”

Akira rolled up his sleeves, he had curry to make.

“Hee Ho!”

“Heee hoo!!”

“HEE HOO!!”

Mina felt a swell of pride as more people shouted up and down the street.

“Oh! That reminds me, you guys!” She said as she bumped shoulders with Kaminari, “I have something to tell you!!”

“We’re right here,” Sero said, “You don’t have to shout.”

“And where’s the fun in that!?” Mina pumped her fists, “Anyway! Did you guys see the interview on Japan Nightly yesterday?”

“Yeah!” Kaminari looked up from his phone, “Where they interviewed the lady who uploaded the Hosu dragon video?”

Mina nodded with a grin, “That’s the one!”

“What about it?” Kirishima asked with a raised brow.

“Well, you know how she described Joker’s mask and costume?”

“Yeah!” Kaminari searched the video, “There’s already a whole bunch of fan art about Joker’s costume, and his monsters-”

“Hey! I’m the one telling the story!” Mina’s hand flew to Kaminari’s mouth, “As I was saying, we all know what Joker’s mask looks like, right? So after class I went to ask Yaomomo to help me with math and I saw Todoroki *drawing* Joker’s mask in the corner of his notebook! I think Todoroki’s a fan!”

“*Todoroki* ?” Kirishima’s jaw dropped, “Are you sure?”

“I don’t see him as the fanboy type.” Sero said with a shrug, “Isn’t that more Midoriya’s thing?”

“Are you calling me a liar!?”

“Well...” Sero stiffened, “Wait a sec! He interned with Endeavor, right? Do you think he actually saw Joker in Hosu!? Did he actually witness their battle!?”

Mina gasped, “Oh my god, you’re right! He’s holding out on us!!”

“Dudes, do you think we can ask him about Joker-”

“Would you extras shut the hell up already!?” Bakugo stomped ahead of them, “It’s bad enough that my old man and the hag are obsessed with him, I don’t need to keep hearing it from you losers!”

“Why do your parents like him?” Sero said with a wave of his hand, “My dad said vigilantes should all be in prison.”

Bakugo rolled his eyes, “They’re fashion designers. They think his costume is stylish or some stupid bullshit.”

“Awww, is somebody jealous of Joker’s badassery?” Mina teased.

“Who says I’m jealous!? I’m not jealous.” A vein popped on Bakugo’s forehead, “I can take that lame vigilante down any day of the week!”

“Sure, bro.” Sero snickered, “Whatever you say.”

“Screw this, I’m going home.”

“No!” Mina wailed as she grabbed Bakugo’s arm, “We’re almost there! Will you come with us if we stop talking about him? You absolutely *have* to try this place’s food! And the *coffee*- ”

“ALRIGHT!” Bakugo shoved Mina back, “Fine! Just stop talking.”

“Great!” Mina laughed and plodded on ahead, “It’s just down the street! The barista isn’t half bad to look at too, if you don’t mind me saying!”

The boys looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“I’ve been craving brownies since we went there last,” Kirishima said with a sigh, “I think I’ll grab a few extra to share with my mom.”

Mina flung open the cafe door and whisked them inside. The aroma of heavenly spices and sugar accompanied the clatter of dishes, idle chatter made for a pleasant ambience. It was like huddling down in a fuzzy blanket. It wrapped around their hearts and any tension from the day simply melted away. Sero and Kaminari ogled at their surroundings, Bakugo’s eyes narrowed as he took in the place.

“Mina, was this place as busy last time?” Kirishima asked.

“I don’t think so?” Her golden eyes scanned over their options, “Oh, there’s still an open booth! You guys go ahead, I’ll get everyone’s orders!”

“You just want to talk to Kurusu-kun, don’t you?”

“Hush, Kirishima!”

Mina skipped to the front counter as the boys filed in the booth, Bakugo shoved Kaminari aside so he could take the seat, he spread his arms over the back of the booth and crossed his legs. Sero, Kirishima, and Kaminari squished themselves into the opposite side.

Kurusu blinked at her with those startling silver and gold eyes, the smile brightened the whole cafe. It made her heart flutter.

“Hey, Kurusu-kun!” Mina leaned over the counter and grinned, “How’s it hanging?”

“Ashido-san,” He pushed up his glasses, his eyes crinkled as his smile grew, “It’s been good. What can I get you and your friends?”

“You can just call me Mina! As for the order-” Her eyes were drawn to a chalkboard sign, “Ooh, what’s this?”

“A new item, the Leblanc Special.” A tiny smirk bloomed, “It’s actually one of my homemade recipes, with a new type of coffee. As you can see, it’s a top seller.”

Mina looked out across the cafe, where a majority of people had a plate of glistening curry. Blissful scents of sugar and spice intermingled, and she watched as a few customers savored the curry as if it would be their last meal. Desserts of a scone or a cinnamon roll dotted a few of the tables. Nobody would argue over the power of a freshly made donut, either. No wonder her mouth was watering. The other patrons' eyes seemed to light up as they dined, and she turned to look back at him with a grin.

“I’ll take five orders of that, please!”

Kurusu chuckled, “Coming right up.”

She playfully winked at him, then went to sit with the boys. Bakugo growled at her as she plopped down next to him, her extra weight bounced the seat. Kirishima looked up and down at her, frowning.

“What about my brownies?”

“I ordered something new! We can get brownies afterward.”

Sero nudged Kirishima, “You really like these brownies, huh?”

“Yeah, bro! They’re amazing, and paired with Kurusu’s coffee-” He clapped his hands in prayer and squeezed his eyes shut, “It’s too good for words!”

Bakugo rolled his eyes, “I doubt the coffee is that great.”

“No, it’s not just great, it’s like it was made by an angel.” Mina placed her hand over her heart and leaned back in the booth, “Liquid heaven. His hot chocolate isn’t bad either, from what Ochako said!”

“Oh please,” Bakugo scoffed, “Anybody can make it that good if it’s their quirk.”

“/s that his quirk?” Kaminari glanced back towards the counter, “If so, then no wonder this place is filled out.”

Mina looked at Kirishima, who stiffened.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Mina leaned over the table and whispered, “Kurusu-kun is quirkless.”

“No way!” Sero said.

Kaminari scrunched his brow, but didn’t say anything.

“Who the hell would hire someone so useless?”

The words tumbled out of Bakugo’s mouth before he could stop it. Mina was about to slap Bakugo’s shoulder and scold him, but every hair on the back of her neck stood straight up, goosebumps broke out across their bodies as a thick miasma smothered the cafe. Bakugo bristled as a great shadow loomed over the table. It sucked the life from the cafe.

No, this killing intent didn't reach the other patrons, who chatted and laughed as if all was well in the world. An endless black void devoured their tiny piece of the cosmos. This shadow lifted its head, sharp eyes of steel and gold stabbed straight into Bakugo, whose skin prickled like pins and needles. Kaminari and Sero shirked back into their seats, like rabbits cornered by the fox. Kirishima's jaw was practically on the floor.

Mina, despite the rampant fear, had to hold back her awe as Bakugo shivered, actually *shivered*. Bakugo longed for the familiar snaps and pops of his quirk, but shards of icy dread crawled up his body. After a few seconds stretched into an eternity, the aura vanished as if it were never there, the massive shadow retreated back to whatever hellish domain it emerged from. Silence rang too loud in their ears as the world returned to normal, and in the shadow's place stood Kurusu.

Kurusu had that angelic smile as he set out their plates.

"You're lucky." His silky voice made Kaminari and Sero jump out of their skin, "This is the last of today's curry. I'm glad we made more than usual. Enjoy."

Kurusu tucked the platter under his arm and left. It was like the Grim Reaper had his scythe at their necks, ready to claim their souls, only to be alive because of a sliver of mercy. They all stared at their delectable steaming plates for several seconds, catching the breath that was stolen from their lungs.

"Dude!" Kaminari wheezed as he stared at Bakugo, "Why did you say that!? I thought we were gonna die!"

"A-are you sure he's quirkless?" Sero clutched his chest, "That was really scary! I would rather experience the USJ attack again before going through *that*!"

"I was going to tell you that he's quirkless-"

“But totally badass and manly!” Kirishima shouted, “He did this awesome speech about it when we were here last time too, and it really pumped us up! Isn’t Kurusu-kun so cool!?”

“Scary cool.” Kaminari whispered in awe.

“So Bakugo,” Mina smiled, showing one too many teeth, “What was that you said about Kurusu being useless?”

“Shut up! I didn’t say a damn thing!”

Whatever these extras heard, his voice *didn’t* crack. It didn’t! He ignored the idiots as they all snickered, he grabbed his spoon and shoved a mound of curry in his mouth. He almost sputtered as the blend of delicate flavors caressed his palette, it was just the perfect mix of spices, a precarious balance that was just....

He had no words for it.

Mina noticed the sudden change in her explosive friend, and was the second one to try it. She nearly squealed as the flavor danced around in harmony, she took an experimental sip of coffee and pounded her fist on the table.

“Is it really that good?” Sero asked, grinning.

“It’s so good that it shut Bakugo up!” Kaminari slipped his phone out to take a picture, “And Mina!”

A couple looked over to their table.

“First time trying the Leblanc Special?” The woman asked.

Neither Mina nor Bakugo could form words, so Mina just nodded frantically. Kirishima dove in next as the couple laughed, tears formed in his eyes and he gobbled down a few more spoonfuls, accompanied by sips of coffee.

Sero and Kaminari looked at each other and shrugged, then dug in.

Their table joined others in silent bliss, and it didn't take long for the curry to be inhaled. Their cups were emptied, their plates cleaned. Mina nearly cried when hers was gone, Kirishima scraped his plate for any last remnants of luscious sauce.

"Can I just..." Kirishima sighed as he waved his hand, "Take a whole bucket of this curry home?"

"What about the brownies?" Kaminari asked as he patted his stomach.

"Oh yeah. I kinda forgot about them."

"I'll go see if Kurusu-kun can fix us up." Mina said as she slipped out of the booth, "We all need dessert!"

Sero looked at Bakugo, "Dude, I think you should apologize-"

"Don't even." Bakugo scowled as he crossed his arms.

"Don't be like that, man!" Kaminari said with a smirk, "At least admit that you were wrong!"

"I don't have to do shit!" He stood from the booth and glared at them, "The least of all apologize to some quirkless loser."

Bakugo ripped through his pockets and slammed his part of the payment on the table. Mina's grin fell as she returned with a plate of brownies, Bakugo swiped one and then stormed off.

"Bakugo!"

"Let him go, Mina." Kirishima said.

"But-!"

"Maybe he just needs time to cool off," Sero shrugged as Mina sank into the booth, "It's not every day that Bakugo has to admit he's wrong. It's a one in a billion chance."

“But you know,” Kaminari snatched one of the brownies as he looked at his phone, “We are so going to tell everyone how *awesome* this guy is.”

Mina waggled her fingers at him, “The scary handsome barista.”

“Mina!” Kirishima cried.

“What!? If Ochako won’t take him, then I at least have to try!”

Sero facepalmed and Kaminari chuckled. Kirishima turned as red as his hair.

Meanwhile, Bakugo stomped down the street, glaring at the brownie in his hand as if it had personally insulted him. His thoughts whirled at a thousand miles an hour. Raccoon eyes said that the barista was *quirkless*, but there was unimaginable power within him. Nobody projects that kind of lethal instinct without having gone through some heavy shit in life.

That kid wasn’t like Deku in middle school, meek and worthless, a stupid little pebble in the road. No, he was a real threat. A challenger. A malicious grin crept onto Bakugo’s face as he devoured half of the brownie.

Maybe a real challenger is just what he needs.

Tsukauchi Naomasa was the epitome of exhaustion.

His keys were thrown into a jingling mess on the side table, his foggy brain almost forgot to take off his shoes at the door. He dragged himself down the hallway and collapsed like a sack of potatoes on the couch. The cushion in which he squished his face into was dusty.

His whole apartment was dirty.

The pile of dishes grew, the mountain of laundry could come alive and eat him at any moment, his shelves and counter spaces gained a healthy layer of grime. Did he have the time or energy to clean? No. Did he care? Also no.

His brain nearly drifted off then and there, but of course it couldn't be that easy. He groaned as his phone rang, a few rare colorful curses left his lips as he dug through his pockets, his arms were like thousand pound weights being dragged underwater. He squinted at the screen, then hauled himself up.

"Hello?"

"Detective," Eraser's voice filtered through, *"I was just calling to update you on last night's patrol."*

"Let me guess," Tsukauchi blinked, "No sign of Joker?"

"None. Midnight and I scoured Kamino with the help of Edgeshot, but no luck. Nezu already swept through the cameras and he hasn't been able to find anything either. That signal was just a diversion, so we're having doubts that he was ever in Kamino at all. We'll have to look elsewhere."

Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes, "Should we really be surprised at this point?"

"Guess not. The kid's good, I'll give him that." Aizawa chuckled dryly, *"What about the investigation on your end?"*

"Investigation?" Tsukauchi chuckled, but it wasn't a happy sound, "What investigation? Any trail to Joker's current whereabouts or to the identity of this mysterious 'T-san' have all gone cold before they even begin. We're just barely beating back the media sharks as it is."

Aizawa hummed, *"Nezu seems to think that this will be a pattern."*

"What? Disrupting society and then vanishing without a trace?"

"You know the saying. Once is chance, twice is coincidence, third time is-"

"A pattern." Dread roiled in Tsukauchi's heart, "I don't think the Hero Commission will take this laying down anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I just got back from a meeting with Chief Tsuragamae and the Hero Commission's board."

"And?"

Tsukauchi bit his lip.

"Detective, what happened?"

"They," Tsukauchi cleared his throat and sighed, "They're putting a bounty on Joker."

Silence. Muted rage boiled over the other end of the line.

"You're kidding me."

"I wish I was."

"How much?"

Tsukauchi was hesitant to say the amount. It was outrageous, *ludicrous*, both he and the Chief heavily objected to it, but the Hero Commission was bordering on savage desperation at this point.

"Tsukauchi, how much are they putting on the kid's head?"

"Twenty five million yen, given to any with information that'll lead to his recapture."

"Twenty-" Tsukauchi has never heard Aizawa sputter before, *"Twenty five million yen?"*

“Yeah.”

“He’s a kid! Yeah, he’s a vigilante and a pain in the ass, but he’s not a triple S rank villain!”

“I know.”

“What the hell are they thinking!?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nezu will fight tooth and nail against that.”

“I know, but it’s already in the works. There’s nothing we can do.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t they see that this will end in disaster?”

“Eraser, I know .” Tsukauchi leaned forward and placed his head in his other hand, “Public opinion of Joker is at an all time high and raising each day, while their reputation is getting dragged through the mud. The Hero Commission is convinced that he’s a menace, the only way they feel like they’ll have any success is to appeal to people’s sense of greed.”

“When are they going to announce it?”

Tsukauchi looked at his calendar, “Friday afternoon at the latest.”

The detective held the phone away from his ear as Aizawa cursed worse than a sailor who stubbed his toe. Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes as it continued for several long moments. A heavy sigh came through the line when he was done.

“I don’t see this going well for anybody involved, for the kid especially.”

“Yeah. Both Tsuragamae and I fought against it, but the majority of the board voted for it regardless. We would’ve had better luck shouting at a brick wall for four hours.”

“How are you holding up? I know this hasn’t been easy on any of us.”

“I’ve been.... okay?”

“Really. And when was the last time you slept?”

Tsukauchi narrowed his eyes, “I got about an hour nap before those press conferences, I think? But I had to do *another* press conference after, then go through a mountain of paperwork before meeting with the chief. I’ve been too busy to get any sleep.”

“Wait, weren’t those press conferences on Monday?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Tsukauchi.”

“What?”

“Today is Wednesday.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh’.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I’m still finding glitter in my apartment, at my office. It’s even in my car. I think it might be here to stay.”

“Don’t remind me. I’m still finding the cursed stuff all over U.A., my house, I washed and rewashed my sleeping bag too, but some of it is still in there. Midnight’s not better off either, but she actually seems happy about it. Nezu keeps that damn stuffed fish in his office. I think he might actually name it.”

"I thought that was locked away in evidence?"

"Did you think that would stop him from claiming it? He grins at that thing all the time, it's creeping me out."

"I can only imagine." Tsukauchi suppressed a yawn, but that didn't fool Aizawa.

"Look, I'll have Nezu pull some strings so nobody disturbs you. Get some sleep."

"What about you? Weren't you and Midnight patrolling all last night?"

"We have classes to teach and haven't been awake for three days straight. We'll manage."

"If you say so."

"I'm serious. You're running yourself down too much, the last thing I want to see is you falling apart at the seams. The kid will need us in tip top shape if we want to help him, after we bring him in. Whenever that would be." Tsukauchi felt Aizawa's bone-deep sigh right in his soul, "But we could all use a break, so how about this. There's a small cafe near U.A. that my brats won't shut up about."

"I think I know what place you're talking about. One of my officers goes there all the time, says the coffee is out of this world."

"Right. Let's go there next time we have a day off."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Alright, now I know you're so sleep deprived that you can't even think properly." Aizawa scoffed, "Not even in your dreams, detective. Now, get some sleep or else I'll sic Midnight on you. Don't think I won't."

Aizawa hung up. Tsukauchi laughed as he set his phone on the coffee table, then collapsed back into the couch and closed his eyes.

He was out within seconds. His soft snores were only heard by the lingering dust bunnies.

But, as they would learn the hard way, setting a price on Joker was the worst mistake they made yet.

Oh don't worry, dear readers. Hitoshi and Akira will get their talk, but now is not the right time ;)

A storm is brewing.

Star Forneus

Chapter 27: Star Forneus

Something about his snowy white hair and gray eyes seemed familiar, for some reason.

The votes are in! Admiral Feesh is the name of Nezu's new friend :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[Admiral Feesh](#) fanart!

“Izuku! The tea is ready!”

“Coming!”

Izuku burst out of his room, his bag over his shoulder. His U.A. uniform was a little wrinkled, and his tie disobeyed every sorry attempt to get it right, simply hanging loosely on his neck. His mother smiled at him as she set out the two cups on the coffee table. It was a little ritual they did every morning after breakfast, before he went to school. Just sitting with her, drinking tea and talking, or watching the news, made their mornings better.

He sat next to her and reached for his cup, the TV droning in the background.

“Izuku,” She said with a warm smile, “Did you get any sleep last night? Don’t think I didn’t hear you were up late, young man.”

“I-it’s nothing!” Izuku chuckled, “I was just doing homework! And researching heroes, you know how I get sometimes. I just lost track of time?”

She hummed and gave him a knowing look, “If you say so, Izuku. Just remember that getting enough sleep is important too, alright? I don’t want my baby getting too exhausted or sick enough to not go to school.”

“I won’t, I promise!”

“Speaking of school, when will I get to meet your friends? You’ve told me so much about them!”

“Maybe we could have them over for dinner sometime?” Izuku said, but he frowned when he thought of somebody else, “Oh, I made a friend outside of school too!”

“Really?” His mother gasped, and a playful grin brightened her eyes, “Is it a girl?”

“Wh-what!?” Izuku’s face turned beet red, “N-no, it’s not like that! I-I made some friends that are g-girls in class, but-”

“My baby is growing up!” She cried, her hands folded together over her chest, “Is she the one that gave you that lovely bento!? When will you have your first date? When can I meet her? Oh, I’ll have to dig out my old photo books and show her your baby pictures!”

“Mom!!”

She took one look at his cherry-red face, steam could come out of his ears at any second, and bit her lip. It was no use, she couldn’t hold back. Her airy laughter brought a smile to his face, despite the volcanic burn of his cheeks. She reached over and ruffled his hair.

“You know I’m only teasing, sweetie. Just let me know what foods they like and when they can come over. I can make their favorites!”

Izuku frantically nodded and downed the rest of his tea, then he stood.

"I-I better start heading to school! I don't want to be late!"

"Alright, honey. Don't worry about the dishes, I'll get them before going to work."

"Right!"

He was about to set his empty cup on the table, when the TV suddenly flashed red, a 'BREAKING NEWS' trailed across the bottom of the screen. Izuku recognized Demizu Mika, who was slowly getting renown for announcing any news related to Joker.

"This just in,"

Her voice was strained, and though she kept a neutral face, there was the telltale dip of a frown. The heat from his face finally drained away, though his gut churned. It didn't have anything to do with his mother's cooking, either.

"The Hero Public Safety Commission has announced today that they will be setting a bounty on the vigilante known as Joker. " Her brow creased, "The sum of twenty five million yen will be given to anybody who has information leading to his arrest-"

The cup shattered on the floor.

"I-Izuku!?"

Izuku jolted as she rushed to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, s-sorry!" He knelt down and began picking up the shards.

"I'll go get the dustbin!" She fled into the kitchen and returned a moment later, "Are you alright, sweetheart? You're awfully pale all of a sudden."

“Y-yeah!” He gently grabbed the dustbin from his mother’s hands, “It’s just...”

His eyes lingered over to the television. His mother blinked, then followed his gaze as a hotline came onto the screen.

“Oh, dear.” She folded her hands together as Izuku swept up the broken cup, “That is quite upsetting.”

Izuku stilled his hands, “Mom, what do you think of Joker?”

“I...” She knelt beside him, “If it’s true, what they’re saying about him on the news, then he would be labeled as nothing more than a criminal.”

Izuku bit his lip as her expression softened.

“That’s what I would think too, had I not known any better.” The classic Midoriya tears flooded her eyes, “B-but, as a mother, I have nothing to give that boy except my gratitude. He saved my baby during the USJ, and it’s not hard to figure out what you went through in Hosu. Given what I know through his live interview. I might not be as smart as some people but I can put the pieces together, Izuku.”

Izuku sucked in a breath, his heart pounding.

“H-he was there to help you through everything. How can I vilify somebody like that?” She wrapped her arms around him in a side hug, “Maybe he’s a little lost or misguided, but I think Joker is good at heart.”

Izuku put down the dustbin and hugged her back.

“H-he was really cool, mom.” He said after a moment in silence, “And his quirk is amazing too!”

“Oh?” She pulled back with a watery grin, “So have you been staying up researching heroes, or trying to find out more about Joker?”

“I-it’s-!” He sputtered and waved his hands, “I... you guessed it right.”

She snorted, then picked up the remains of the shattered ceramic.

“This bounty is scary,” She said as she looked at the TV, “I hope that poor boy will be alright.”

Izuku bit his lip as his phone vibrated. He reached into his bag and glanced down at the chat room between himself, Todoroki, and Iida. Neither of them were happy about the news.

“I... I better leave for school. I don’t want to be late.”

“Alright, sweetheart. Have a good day!” She shut off the TV and sighed, “You know I love you, right?”

“Of course!” He picked up his things and made for the door, “I love you too!”

Izuku raced out of the apartment with a heavy heart, one of many scattered across the country.

Akira merged with the flow of people, he was nothing but a faceless mask in the crowd.

His current destination? The mall, a bright beacon of modern architecture and trendy storefronts. He was on his own, aside from Yatagarasu’s constant shadow, fresh off from his shift in the Blue Lotus Cafe. Morgana might get mad about Akira going without him, but he’d get over it.

Aiba sent him a text the moment he stepped out of the cafe, telling him to go to the nearest mall as soon as possible. He simply sighed, but his natural curiosity got the better of him.

The dazzling arrays of Musutafu’s largest mall were just around the corner now.

"Why do you think the Aiba girl sent us here?" Yatagarasu flew over the mall roof and perched atop the skylights, "Traversing this palace seems impossible all in one day."

Akira held back a snort, "A palace?"

"Is it not? There are several floors and more shops than I could hope to count. The humans on the first floor look like ants from up here. If this isn't the size of a decent palace, then I don't know what is."

"Well, you're not wrong." Akira peered up as he followed the crowd inside, "We'll just explore and see why she wants us here. She said it would be pretty obvious."

Yatagarasu hummed, but said nothing more.

The mall opened up into a vast array of sights and sounds, pops of colorful glass decorations hung around the various floors, the sunshine streaming in from the skylights made them sparkle, reflecting blobs of color all across the mall. Escalators connected the various floors together, alongside a few elevators. Quite a shame, really. They weren't as fun as a grappling hook, but not everything could be traversed in such a stylish fashion.

He passed the bustling food court and wandered aimlessly around the first floor.

"Do humans really need all of this garbage?" Seth asked as Akira passed a few more stores, "Seems like a waste to me."

"Oh Seth," Titania said with a sigh, "I don't expect you to understand the intricacies of fashion."

"And you do?"

"Well, not the human sense of fashion, but I had an entire wardrobe crafted by the finest druids and faeries from across the realm."

"Really? I bet you looked pretty in all of them!"

“Yes, my dear Alice, I did. Oh, if only I had that wardrobe now. I could have my fae servants make clothes for you, and we could spend hours dressing you up.” She sighed, such a sad sound that wilted flowers, as she patted Alice’s head, *“I think it would’ve been fun.”*

Alice giggled, *“Maybe we could do that one day!”*

“Maybe...”

“If you call those sickening green rags ‘fashion’, then keep me out of it.”

“Shut up, you harlot!” Titania sneered at Ishtar, *“You’re one to talk, with hardly any clothes yourself!”*

“Oh please, my clothes are made of the finest silks in the land. A goddess of love has to look tempting, no?”

Akira kept from rolling his eyes as he ascended up to the second floor, he could feel Arsene facepalming.

“Hush now, both of you.” The low, raspy voice was accompanied by the soft whisper of sickly scales, *“If thine must dispute over fashion, then thine must agree that the Trickster is the most stylish of all.”*

“Well,” Titania crossed her arms, *“You’re not wrong there.”*

“Indeed.”

“... ”

“... ”

“Did we just agree to something, Ishtar?”

The goddess of love scoffed, *“Don’t get used to it.”*

“Harlot.”

"Fae Witch."

"That didn't last long." Byakko muttered.

By then Akira had scoured the second floor and meandered around the third, utterly ignoring two of his most ferocious personas. He scratched the back of his head with a sigh. He hadn't really seen anything other than regular boutiques and enough stores for hero merch to make his head spin. Akira leaned on the railing and looked down across the mall, he took a moment to survey his surroundings. A smile crept on his face. If only Yusuke could see the variety of otherworldly people wandering around, he would get inspiration in waves.

After a few minutes, he dug out his phone.

"Hey! You're at the mall!"

"Yeah, but I don't see anything interesting," He said with a frown, "Why did you want me to come here?"

"Did you at least look around the whole place?"

"No, not yet."

"You-" Akira could feel her pinched expression, *"You're hopeless! Let me help you, then you'll understand!"*

"Okay..?"

"Has he found-"

"Shh! Don't spoil the surprise, Gentle!"

"Oh, right. Of course." Tobita chuckled, *"I cannot wait to hear his reaction."*

"Right!? Anyway, go to the fourth floor and head towards the back."

Akira snorted, but followed her directions to the letter.

“Aaand now! Take a left and it should be right in front of you!”

He stopped, then looked up. If he had a drink he would’ve spat it all over the place.

“You’re kidding me.”

“He found it, Gentle!”

In front of him was a store, smaller than he’d seen so far, but painted in such vibrant red and black that it stood out from the rest. Akira gaped at the poster in the display window, a flaming mask and top hat stared right back at him, the ‘Take Your Heart!’ clear for all to see. Inside was a variety of items, fake calling cards, more posters and wall hangings, and were those *figurines* ?

“No way.”

Aiba and Tobita’s laughter echoed from the other end, *“Oh! Hold on!!”*

She hung up, and he looked at his phone with furrowed brows. Not two seconds later she sent a picture. Tobita, holding up Joker’s mask to his face like one would at a masquerade ball, and Aiba, with the biggest and sunniest grin he’d ever seen on her, displayed an impressive collection of enamel pins. She had another mask sitting on the top of her head. One of the posters was on the wall, too.

[Curry God]

When did this happen?

[Haxxor]

A couple of days ago! The heroes have already tried to put a stop to it, but the demand was too high. There was merch for Stain too, but people stopped buying it as soon as they came out with this.

[Curry God]

Is it bad to want to buy your own merch?

Wait, I feel like I should be getting royalties for this.

[Haxxor]

Nope! Gentle and I are totally going to buy everything too!!

Don't feel bad, these companies wouldn't be trustworthy for something like that. Especially after they announced the bounty.

[Curry God]

Don't remind me.

[Haxxor]

Hey, it's not all that bad! Your reputation is through the roof right now!

[Curry God]

That's not always a good thing, though.

Hence the 25 million bounty?

Actually, I'm surprised it's so low.

[Haxxor]

I was expecting at least 50 million, give or take.

[Curry God]

Really? I raise you to 75 million for this handsome face of mine :)

[Haxxor]

Please don't let it go to your head.

[Curry God]

I'm not! How much chaos do you think it'll take to raise it that high?

What happens if I turn myself in? Do I get the bounty??

[Haxxor]

PLEASE tell me you aren't serious!

[Curry God]

Why not? We could get the cash and then you and Morgana could break me out. I could split it between all of us!!

Aiba?

Hello??

You wouldn't leave me in jail, right?

[Haxxor]

Morgana's not with you, is he?

[Curry God]

No, why?

[Haxxor]

That figures. He would smack you for being an idiot with such a stupid plan.

I might just leave you in jail to teach you a lesson.

[Curry God]

Wow. I was going to say I love you too, but...

[Haxxor]

PFFFT

Stop worrying about the bounty for now and go buy some merch!

The both of us demand pictures afterward!!

Akira chuckled as he dumped his phone in his pocket, and stepped inside.

Phantom Thief merchandise appeared in their version of Japan, but the stock here blew all of that out of the water. The sheer amount was startling. There was no way to make figurines for Arsene and Seth in his world, nor was it possible to see what his mask or other parts of his costumes looked like. The fake calling cards and posters were familiar, though.

He stepped up to a display with his masks.

Akira picked one up and felt the smooth plastic. It was smaller than his real mask and the material was wrong of course, but they got the simple design right. It was a strange thing to be holding it, without being in the metaverse or without his actual costume. There was no power in it, it was a dead thing.

"Hmph, a poor copy of the original!" Arsene announced, *"I wouldn't give this rubbish the time of day."*

"Oh? I can feel your pride coming off in waves, Arsene. I think you're happy that you have a figurine."

"Lies, Titania!"

Alice clapped her hands together, *"Bird Dad is happy!"*

"I am not!"

"At least your figurine is perfect, Arsene," Seth growled, *"They put the wrong number of horns on my head and my wings are too small."*

"You can tell from just a glance?" Ishtar asked.

"Of course! I take pride in them."

"Wait," Alice gasped, *"Does this mean we can all have figurines made of us!? We have to get the whole collection!"*

"Maybe," Byakko said as he swished his tail, *"If we can get in the spotlight like Arsene and Seth did."*

"Does it count if we already have statues made in our image?" The Dancer asked.

"Not in this context, no." Titania said, *"But I don't see a figurine of me here. And I worked so hard to put the Hosu fires out! How shameful of them."*

“Hey, do you think we can dress up as Joker and claim the twenty five million?”

Voices dragged Akira back into reality. Two teenagers were sifting through the masks and pairs of red gloves. Boy, they really went overboard, didn't they? At least they didn't have his tailcoat here, or at least not yet. He shivered at the thought.

“No, dude!” The other elbowed his friend, “I think they would be smart enough to figure it out!”

“But they don't know his real identity, right? That's why they put the bounty out, because they're too useless to catch him by themselves. Just think about it! What would you do with twenty five million yen?”

“Move away from your stupidity.”

“Hey!”

“Let's be real though, Joker's a true hero. Who would turn him in?”

“For that much money? I think everybody and their dog would.” He snatched up a poster and grinned, “You're telling me that you wouldn't call it in if Joker were in this room right now?”

“Of course not. He helped so many people get away from Silver Falcon and took down Stain.” The boy sighed as he held a box of pins, “Now just shut up and help me pick something. My sister would kill me if I didn't get anything for her. I think she's crazier over this vigilante than I am.”

“Sure, whatever you say, dude.”

Akira looked at the mirror set atop the mask display. His eyes caught the blinking red camera in the corner. As tempting as it would be to try on a cheap version of his mask, it would be a stupid move, he couldn't risk the cameras catching Joker's exact likeness. Still, he held onto it as he searched the rest of the store. He swiped a 'Hee

ho!' magnet and a vibrant red coffee mug for Kaito. Perhaps a wall hanging could spice up his cubicle at the Raven's Nest.

He stopped in front of the row of Arsene figurines. It was impressive what they picked up from that grainy video with Eraserhead, they got every detail from the top hat and facial markings, to his dangerously heeled boots and crimson jacket. The dark wings reflected vague iridescent colors like oil would in water. Little gold chains hung from his jacket.

It was a perfect representation.

A slow grin sprouted over his face.

"Don't you dare, Trickster."

"Oh, I am daring."

"I will disown you."

"Whatever you say."

"Don't make me ground you."

"You can ground me all you want, Bird Dad. I'm still getting the figurine no matter what you say."

His other self flinched as if struck. Arsene hid his face in both hands and released a long, fiery sigh, his wings sagged at his sides. The others roared with laughter as Akira grabbed it and went to the front, where the clerk poked her head around a veritable mountain of merch.

She had auburn hair swept up into a high ponytail, thick glasses were perched on her nose. On the other side of the counter was a boy, a few years older by his looks, with spiky white hair.

"Really, Natsuo?" She said with a sigh, "I think you went a little bit overboard."

“Nonsense!” Natsuo placed his hands on the counter and grinned, “Any excuse to drain that bastard’s credit card is enough for me, I’m adding insult to injury with Joker merch, too!”

“I take it you really like Joker?”

Natsuo whirled around to look at him. Something about his snowy white hair and gray eyes seemed familiar, for some reason.

“Who doesn’t!? Anybody who can give Endeavor a run for his money is good in my book.”

“I like him!” Alice beamed.

Akira smirked, “I agree on that.”

Natsuo’s face brightened up so much Akira thought he would go blind.

“Did you see those videos of Endeavor reacting to people saying Flameo, Hotman?” Natsuo asked, “I think I’ll make a top ten list and post it.”

“I’ve watched them about twenty times. Endeavor’s reactions are too funny, the best one is with that old woman, where Endeavor couldn’t say or do anything about it in front of a crowd.”

“Yeah! That’s my favorite one too!”

Natsuo held up his hand, Akira blinked at it before giving him a high five. The clerk sighed and put a hand to her forehead.

“Great. Now there are two of them.”

“Relax, Hina!” Natsuo slung an arm over Akira, “Just chatting with my new friend here.”

She heaved another great sigh, and ignored them as she scanned the items.

“Say, why don’t you let me pay for your stuff?”

Akira flinched, “That’s alright, I can get it.”

“Please?” Natsuo’s grin widened, “My old man *hates* Joker and he’s loaded, I’m buying all of this stuff to get back at him. It’s the least I can do for a fellow Joker fan, hee ho!”

Akira had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smirking.

“If... if you’re sure, hee ho?”

“Oh, I’m more than sure!” Natsuo gently took the items and placed them on the counter.

Hina rolled her eyes, but she had a tiny smile on her face as she finished up and Natsuo paid. Akira took his bag as Natsuo lugged three or four on each arm, that triumphant grin had never left his face. They stepped out of the store together.

“Hey, so I hate to bounce this soon, but I have to get home and rub it in his face.” Natsuo said, “What’s your name?”

He pushed up his glasses, “Kurusu Akira.”

“Cool name! It was nice to meet you, Kurusu!” Natsuo turned and waved at him, “My name is Todoroki Natsuo, I hope I’ll see you around!”

Akira stood rooted to the spot as Natsuo disappeared into the crowd. Todoroki Natsuo, Todoroki Shoto. No wonder he seemed so familiar. He took out his phone and snapped a picture of the red shopping bag to send to Aiba.

[Haxxor]

Nice, you actually got some merch!!

[Curry God]

Would you believe one of Endeavor's kids paid for them?

[Haxxor]

EXPLAIN

Akira smirked as he retold the story.

The irony of the whole situation was not lost to them.

The aroma of tea wafted from the kitchen.

Fuyumi knew it was Shoto's favorite, it worked like magic to draw him out of his room whenever he wasn't training. Her baby brother walked in right on cue. She poured a steaming cup and put it on the table as he sat down. His expression was always a blank mask, but she caught how his eyes lit up ever so slightly after the first sip.

"So, how was your day?"

She was always the first to attempt conversation, an art in which Shoto still needed to work on. He blinked slowly, gazing into his tea.

"It was interesting, I guess." He said, "A few of my classmates got detention today."

"Oh?" She tilted her head to the side, "What did they do?"

Shoto took a long sip, and looked up at her with the most stoic expression.

"They said hee ho in class. Shouted it, more like. You should have seen the look on Aizawa-sensei's face."

“They-” She bit her lip to stop herself from chuckling, “Why did they get detention for that?”

“Aizawa-sensei was there when they tried to arrest Joker during the live interview. He’s in the photo where those heroes and officers were covered in glitter. He hates anything to do with glitter or the double H words.”

“No way!” She whipped out her phone and pulled up the viral picture, “Is this him?”

Shoto blinked at it. Aizawa-sensei, Nezu, Midnight, Detective Tsukauchi, and a group of police officers gaped up at the camera, covered head to toe in red and gold glitter.

“Yup, that’s him.”

“I am so showing my students tomorrow! You should see some of the pictures they’ve drawn lately, Shoto. Almost all of them are Joker. I wanted to take them home and hang them on the fridge, but with father...” She shook her head at the thought, “Oh, Natsuo should be home any minute, he says he’s bringing a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“He didn’t say.” She shrugged as a tired smile perked her lips, “I guess that would ruin the surprise, right?”

Shoto hummed, and the kitchen went quiet. They sipped their tea together in companionable silence, until they heard the front door open. Shoto instinctively stiffened, his knuckles turned white and his teacup creaked ominously. Fuyumi’s shoulders were lined with tension. Her gray eyes turned into frightened pinpricks.

“Yo!” Natsuo called, “Anybody home?”

The strain was dispelled, she and Shoto breathed a sigh of relief.

“We’re in here!”

Natsuo bounded into the kitchen with a wide grin and multiple shopping bags on his arms. Fuyumi gaped at him as he set them all on the table with a grunt.

“What are all of these?”

“Get this!” Natsuo glanced through the bags and dug out an item, holding it up proudly, “It’s Joker merch!”

“Natsuo! What about father-”

“Who gives a damn about what he thinks? I bought all of this stuff on his credit card.” Natsuo pushed Joker’s mask in Shoto’s hands, “If he wants to throw a tantrum about it then I can throw it right back in his face.”

Fuyumi sighed in defeat.

“So, what did you get, then? We might as well enjoy it before father burns it all to ash.”

“Oh, hell no! I’m not letting him touch this stuff. It’s going to decorate my dorm room.” Natsuo emptied the bags one by one, slowly covering the table with a mass of red and black, “Do you think the bastard would freak out if I left a fake calling card in his desk?”

“Natsuo, that’s a terrible idea!”

He snickered, “That’s the point, sis.”

“I think it would be funny.” Shoto said, deadpanned.

They looked at Shoto. Fuyumi’s hands flew to her mouth and her eyes went wide, she barely stopped herself laughing. Natsuo, on the other hand, pounded the table and held his stomach as he bowled over in laughter. Shoto had donned Joker’s mask.

“What?” Shoto tilted his head and blinked slowly, “Is there something on my face?”

“Shoto! I didn’t know you had a sense of humor!”

It was a tiny thing, the way Shoto smiled, just a twitch of his lips. There and gone again before they could blink, but Fuyumi and Natsuo saw it.

“Here!”

Natsuo unrolled a blood-red shirt and held it out to his little brother. ‘Take Your Heart!’ was on it, underneath the flaming top hat and mask, it was the first item Natsuo grabbed from the shelves. Shoto held it against his chest, it seemed to be the perfect fit. Natsuo scanned over his little brother with a grin.

“I think you look good, Shoto! Very stylish if I do say so myself.”

“Flameo, Hotman.”

This time, Fuyumi couldn’t hold back. She and Natsuo burst with laughter, all the while Shoto wore Joker’s mask and held the shirt on his chest, his expression as impassive as it always had been, though softer around the edges. It was a rare moment of mirth in the Todoroki house. His siblings calmed down after a few moments, wiping at their eyes.

All laughter and happiness turned to icy cold dread as they heard the front door open.

Fuyumi went as pale as a ghost, her shaky hands moved to hide the evidence. Natsuo reached out and gently grabbed her wrists, their eyes met, and Natsuo shook his head.

“But, Natsuo-!” She whispered, “He wasn’t supposed to be home this early!”

Shoto went as stiff as a statue, eyes locked on the kitchen entryway. He didn’t remove Joker’s mask or the shirt, even as powerful footsteps thundered closer.

“Natsuo, please.” Fuyumi frantically pulled away, “We have to hide it before-”

“What is going on here?”

The hair raised on the back of Fuyumi’s neck, her arms broke out in goosebumps. She slowly turned to see their father, looming in the doorway, sharp turquoise eyes skimmed the room. He was still in his hero costume, yet his flames were extinguished. Dead silence descended upon the kitchen as their father’s eyes narrowed at the items on the table, then he looked at Shoto with piercing eyes. The world froze over. It was always a question of whether or not hell was made of ice or fire, but she always wondered if it wasn’t both.

Fuyumi’s heart lurched. She was prepared for Shoto to be dragged away and punished with ‘training’, to spend an entire night by Shoto’s side and tend to his wounds. She expected flames to go off and shouting to start at any moment. Her hands wove together in anxiety.

Natsuo glowered and put his hands on his hips, his chin raised in a challenge.

Shoto simply stood there, like a deer in the headlights.

“Well?” Natsuo spat, “You going to say something or not?”

Endeavor looked at his children, faces all lit up in fear or anger. Shoto in particular, though defiance was sparked in his eyes as he donned that vigilante’s merchandise. A false mask of confidence. Another few seconds of ear ringing silence pass, before Endeavor deflated.

“No.” He cleared his throat and sighed, “I’ll be in my office. Do *not* disturb me.”

With that, he walked away.

No flames.

No shouting.

No.... *anything* .

The three of them gaped at the empty doorway, their father's footsteps trailed down the hallway. Endeavor's office door didn't even slam shut. The quiet *click* of the lock was as loud as a bomb going off. Fuyumi put her hands on the table to stabilize herself.

"Okay." Natsuo rubbed at his temples, "*What* was that? Who is he and what did he do to the raging bastard?"

"I... I don't know." Fuyumi whispered, still shaken.

Shoto set the shirt on the table and removed the mask. He held it in both hands as he looked into the empty eyes and black markings, frowning.

"I think Hosu had a bigger effect on him than we realize." Shoto said.

Natsuo raised a brow, "Really?"

"Well, he does seem different since he fought Stain and-"

Fuyumi cut herself off as he looked at Joker's mask.

"And Joker. I don't know the exact details," Shoto said slowly, "But I heard he used a lot of fire power against Joker, and the vigilante came out completely unscathed from the flames. He wasn't even touched."

"He what!?" Natsuo's jaw dropped, "I know Joker said he fought the bastard in his interview, but where did you hear that?"

Shoto looked up at his brother, "When I was in the hospital with my classmates, after Hosu. A hero told us."

Natsuo whirled around to the doorway, "Okay, I'm going back to the mall to buy out the entire store."

"Natsuo!"

"What?" Natsuo's grin returned in full force, "If Joker somehow one upped the flaming asshole, then we have to support him with everything we have!"

"I doubt Joker gets any of the money, though." Fuyumi said, "The heroes would shut that down in no time."

"Well, there has to be something we can do?"

Fuyumi adjusted her glasses, "Maybe something online?"

"Perfect! Maybe I'll ask one of my classmates to help us out, I think she's been wanting to start a blog or something."

Shoto looked down at Joker's mask, and couldn't help the rush of appreciation.

"Why don't we take it further than a blog?"

Natsuo blinked, "What do you mean, Shoto?"

"There are plenty of articles and forums about Joker already. We need something more to set it apart from the rest." Shoto looked his brother in the eyes, "A lot of people are upset that the Hero Commission put that bounty on Joker."

Natsuo and Fuyumi looked at each other, then stared at Shoto with wide eyes.

"What exactly are you getting at?" Fuyumi asked softly.

"A petition," Shoto said, "To have the Hero Commission rescind the bounty."

“That’s....” Natsuo furrowed his brow as he paced the kitchen, “That’s not a bad idea, but what would make you think that the Hero Commission would even listen? It’s not like they’ll actually do it, even if we get a few signatures.”

“Maybe.” Shoto tightened his grip on Joker’s mask, “But a lot of people owe Joker. Look at the long list of Silver Falcon’s victims that are testifying as witnesses, or the heroes who can get back to their lives, not limited anymore after Stain’s maiming. One of my classmate’s brother is Ingenium, so if I ask him to pass the word around...”

Natsuo’s eyes lit up, “That agency has over 60 sidekicks! If they can help get enough signatures, especially from other *heroes* -”

“And if it started with the number two hero’s children-” Shoto added.

“-Then they won’t be able to ignore it. They’ll have to at least consider it to save face!” Natsuo clapped his hands together, “Shoto, you’re a genius!”

“Father won’t like this,” Fuyumi said with a frown.

“I don’t give a damn what he thinks of it! And you, Shoto?”

Shoto couldn’t forgive his father, not now or any time soon. But the man was starting to change. They saw it in his eyes after Hosu, doubly so after Joker’s interview and the resulting interactions with his fans. Shoto’s training sessions weren’t as harsh, and he found himself with an inkling of free time every day. It didn’t unfurl the tangled ball of emotions within their hearts, but they loosened ever so slightly.

“No. I owe Joker a lot, too.”

“Good.” Natsuo dug out his phone, “It might take a while to set up, if she even agrees. I’ll keep you two updated and then we can go from there.”

“I’ll send a text to Iida and Midoriya about it. It’s the least we can do to repay him for Hosu.”

Fuyumi squared her shoulders. Her eyes were still uncertain, but there was a glimmer of resolve in them

“I’ll try to keep father from finding out about it.” She said, “I’m not going to sit here and do nothing, either.”

“If the bastard does find out, then I’ll take all the blame. That said,” Natsuo looked up from the screen, eyes full of warmth, “We have our work cut out for us!”

Shoto nodded, and made a mental note to personally thank Joker the next time they met.

Would it be too much to ask for an autograph, too?

The ring of a bell startled Morgana out of his nap.

“About time you come back!” He said as Akira approached the front desk, “We were getting worried!”

“We thought that you were in trouble.” Kaito didn’t look up from his computer, “I was just about to start looking through media websites or police scanners, but it looks like you’re still in one piece.”

“Well, I did have a little adventure of my own.”

Akira set the shopping bag on the desk, and they peered into it curiously. Kaito stood from his chair and dug out the plastic version of his mask.

“You bought your own merchandise? Really?”

“Hey, I got you something too!”

Akira handed Kaito the mug with a grin.

“Huh. Nice.” He snorted at the ‘Take Your Heart!’ and set it on his desk, “I’m only allowing your coffee to go in it, though. Anything else is unworthy. How did you find this stuff?”

“Aiba told me about it right after I got off from work,” Akira pushed up his glasses with a smirk, “How could I say no?”

“Woah.” Morgana flicked his ear, “This stuff is higher quality than before. They even have a figure of Arsene! That wasn’t possible last time.”

Kaito scrunched his brow, but he knew better than to ask questions he would get no answers to.

“And Seth, too.” Akira said as he dug out the mini Arsene, “But he wasn’t happy about it. Too few horns for his liking.”

Morgana chuckled as he inspected all of the items, nose sniffing curiously. He eyed Kaito’s mug, his paws twitching. His feline instincts wanted him to push it off the desk, but he held himself back.

“Question.” Kaito said as he inspected Miniature Arsene, “Will I ever get to meet any of your friends? I’ve read so much about them online, but I have yet to see one in person.”

Morgana and Akira exchanged glances.

“You might regret saying that later.” Morgana said with a sigh, “Only a few of them would actually fit in this room.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what the biggest one is.”

Akira scratched the back of his head, “He could probably wrap his body around the entire building, several times.”

“That’s.... impressive. And frightening.” Kaito looked between Akira and Morgana, “I feel sorry for the next person to piss you two off. Forget I ever asked.”

“Actually, I’m sure a few of them wouldn’t mind meeting you in person. Probably not any time soon, though. We’ll be busy.”

Morgana immediately stood, his eyes wide, “You don’t mean going out as Joker, right?”

“What else?”

Kaito bit his lip as his eyes flicked to Morgana.

“I think you should wait.” Kaito said.

“Why?”

“It’s been a bit since Hosu and the live interview.” Morgana shook his head, “But I agree with Kaito. We should lay low a little bit longer before going out.”

“Now you’re ganging up on me.” Akira smirked as he put a hand to his chest, “Morgana, I’m so disappointed in you. How will my heart ever recover?”

Morgana rolled his eyes, “Get over it.”

“Wow. I feel so loved today.”

The not-cat ignored him as he washed his face.

“As much as I hate interrupting,” Kaito held up the mask, his electric blue eyes stared into Akira’s through it, “The only reason I think you should wait is because of the bounty. Twenty five million is no small number, and people are still freaking out over it.”

“Aiba and I both agree that it should be more than that. Twenty five million is chump change.” Morgana shook his head as Kaito stiffened, “I’m not going to let something like a bounty stop us from doing our work.”

“Kid, do you have a death wish?”

“Uh, no-”

“Then *listen* to me.” Kaito’s face hardened, a mix of several emotions filtered through his eyes, “I don’t want anything to happen to you or Morgana. Give it a few more days for the hype to die down. That’s all I’m asking.”

Akira frowned as he looked towards the door.

It was supposed to be easy, the waiting. The *hiding* . Laying low and recovering from their most recent adventure was nice, for the first few nights. But running along the rooftops in Hosu, scouring the city for danger. Protecting the innocent people from Stain and the Nomu. It was....

It was amazing.

Different in the ways of exploring the Metaverse or fighting Shadows. As the silence and inaction dragged on within the Raven’s Nest, the more Akira hated it. Something about the quiet nights made his teeth itch, his nerves jittery. His mind wandered back to Yaldabaoth’s battle, the screams of his friends echoed in his ears when he left with his thoughts. It didn’t help that Morgana cast him worried glances when he thought Akira wasn’t looking.

He itched to get back out there, he might lose his mind if he was caged for much longer.

“I know you want to help people as soon as possible, Akira. I do too.” Morgana said softly, “But it’s simply too dangerous for us right now.”

“I...” Akira pinched the bridge of his nose, “I don’t want that to stop us forever, but you’re right. We’ll stay hidden for a few more days. Why are you always right?”

“I’ve already told you how great I am.” Morgana hopped to his usual perch and rubbed against Akira’s hair, “Of course I’m always right!”

“Fantastic.” Kaito said dryly, “Now that that’s settled, let’s discuss dinner.”

Akira gaped at him, “You did *not* eat all of that curry already!”

“He did.” Morgana shivered and closed his eyes, “It was impressive to watch. We should be keeping a record.”

“Shamelessly, of course.” A tiny hint of a relieved smile appeared on Kaito’s face, “What can I say? I haven’t had any home cooked meals in over a decade. Sue me.”

“I can probably teach you how to make it, if you want.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try,” Kaito put the mask back into the bag, “But I have to warn you that I’m a terrible cook. There’s a reason why the bottom of most of my pots and pans are... *blackened* . Why else would I keep so much microwavable food here?”

“Nothing we can’t fix.” Akira grabbed the merch and walked towards the lounge door, “Coming?”

Kaito huffed, but he closed the Raven’s Nest and followed them into the kitchen.

The man set the fire alarm off twice, despite Akira’s best efforts. Morgana offered no help, his laughter filled the lounge like the fading puffs of smoke and charred vegetables. Kaito wasn’t even sorry, giving them a blank look as if to say ‘I told you so.’.

If their dinner was a little scorched, Akira didn’t say anything about it.

Well....

Everybody better prepare themselves.

High Pressure

Chapter 28: High Pressure

“Quirks are overrated.”

This night was perfect for thieves.

The moon lay hidden behind a veil of clouds, casting a shroud of darkness over the city of Musutafu. Skulking shadows would cloak them from wary eyes. Warmth lingered on the breeze, an everlasting sigh between spring and the rising hints of summer, not yet bloomed. They couldn't ask for better conditions.

Two figures lingered down the alleyway, their avian companion following on whispering winds.

“I think this should be far enough from the Nest.” Mona whispered.

Akira looked up from his phone, “Really? I can still feel Kaito's nerves from here.”

“We'll be fine!” Mona said with a smirk, “I think the only worried one is Kaito, but don't think I haven't noticed you looking at your phone more often than not. Is something bothering you?”

“It's nothing,” Akira pocketed his phone with a sigh, “It's just Hitoshi. He's been avoiding me and hasn't answered any of my texts. At first, I thought those bullies have gotten to him again, but Yatagarasu hasn't seen hide or hair of them.”

“Hmm, maybe something happened while we were gone?” Mona hopped from his shoulder and onto a garbage bin, “Maybe just give him some space and he'll talk to you when he feels ready.”

"I guess." Akira frowned when he felt his burner phone go off, digging into his other pocket, "You've got to be kidding me."

"What's up?"

Akira showed Mona the message.

[???

Hey kid, It's Giran. Got this number from a friend.

I have an opportunity that you'd be interested in. Just call and set up a meeting when you're ready.

"I don't trust him."

"You think?" Akira shoved it back into his pocket, "He's not getting any more items if that's what he's after, that's for sure."

"Yeah, he's got another thing coming." Mona eyed him, "Hey, we can't worry about him right now! We have our patrol ahead of us, you should get psyched up!"

Akira pushed up his glasses as a terrifying smirk crept onto his face.

"You're right." A brilliant flash of blue donned his costume, "Let's go!"

"That's more like it!"

Mona hopped to Joker's shoulder as he shot out the grapple, the silver wire spiraled towards the rooftops. They left behind the dirty alleyway in a rush of wind, tossed through the air in a fantastic flair of Joker's tailcoat, his boots lightly crunched against the gravel. He stopped on the corner of the building. The city stretched out for miles all around them, a display of twinkling lights and dark alleys ripe for the picking.

“We have an entire sandbox to explore.” Joker swiveled his head around, “Where to even start?”

“Well, there’s one place we shouldn’t approach. That much is obvious.”

Joker snorted as they stared up at the shadow of U.A. far off into the distance.

“Trickster,” Yatagarasu glided over them, *“We know which district has the fewest hero patrols, it would be the perfect place to lay low and scout things out. Get a feel for things. Shall we start there?”*

“Perfect! Maybe we can practice our bonds, too. Lead the way.”

“Understood.”

Joker turned on his heel and followed. Mona blinked as they jumped from one rooftop and onto the next.

“Where are we going?”

“You know where I like to practice with my personas?”

“Around all of those abandoned warehouses?” Akira nodded as they hopped over another building, “That’s a good place to start! It’s on the opposite side of the city from that hero school, too.”

Joker slinked through the rooftops, running silent and graceful like an alley cat. They passed a small portion of the city before Mona suddenly snickered, Joker slowed to a stop and raised a brow at him.

“What?”

“I have an idea.”

“Don’t just keep me hanging.”

Mona grinned as a mischievous gleam entered his eyes.

“We both know where those warehouses are.” He said, “Why don’t we make it more interesting? You want to have a race?”

“Oh?” Joker matched Mona’s grin, “And what do I get if I win?”

“Pure satisfaction.”

“Really? That’s it?” Joker put his hands on his hips and leaned onto one leg, “And what do you want, if you win. I don’t think you stand a chance though.”

“Hey!” Mona batted Joker’s forehead, “Don’t you dare underestimate me!”

“Oh no, you booped me with your tiny paw.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice, “What ever shall I do?”

Mona stiffened. He grinned like the Cheshire Cat, and the next thing Joker felt was a blast of wind right to his face. Mona launched off his shoulder as Joker swung his arms to balance himself.

“H-hey!”

“Last one there’s a rotten egg!” Mona called from the next rooftop.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Joker shot off after him. For such a tiny thing, Mona was as fast as a bullet. His little form darted over the rooftops quicker than lightning, Joker’s footsteps pounded over rough gravel, but he was rapidly falling behind. Suddenly, his whole body was illuminated with green light as Yatagarasu’s shadow sped over. Joker laughed as he zoomed past Mona.

“Hey! No using your persona’s powers to cheat!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Joker said as he jumped across the rooftops, “You never said I couldn’t!”

“Fine! Two can play at that game!”

There was another spark of emerald light. The wind picked up and Mona jumped, Joker gaped as Mona used eddies and green whirlwinds to slingshot himself into the lead. Mona cackled as he pounced over several buildings at a time. Joker couldn’t help his own laughter as he chased after him, his personas cheering him on in a myriad of voices. The biggest grin sprouted on his face as he threw himself down the next alleyway, Mona’s startled squawk was lost to him as the wind whistled in his ears.

The ground flew up to meet him, and at the last possible second he shot out his grapple. His stomach lurched as he swung in an arc and emerged back onto the rooftops. In the lead, he might add. He pushed off from his landing and broke out into a sprint, his tailcoat flailing. Yatagarasu wasted no time healing his sore shoulder.

“Are you crazy!?” Mona shouted behind him, “You could’ve gotten hurt!”

“Do you always have to throw my sanity into question?”

“With you?” Mona shot past him with a well timed wind blast, “It’s *a/ways* a question!”

“Get back here!”

It continued on like this for several minutes. Just him and Mona, bantering and racing across the rooftops without a care in the world. They were neck and neck as they neared the shadier part of town, nobody so much as gazed to the rooftops as they passed over.

It was so *liberating* .

This freedom was intoxicating. It breathed new life into him, every strained pant, how he pushed his legs until they burned. The way his heart pounded in his ears as he jumped across a perilous alley. It was as if he was *born* for this kind of life, with nothing but his feline partner and the night sky to watch over him. Entire neighborhoods bled away under the guise of their race, restaurants and uppity apartments were replaced by more humble abodes, until even those clean walls were stained by more and more graffiti.

The stink was easier to pick up this far away from the glamour of U.A. Every city had a darker part to it. Trash heaps plagued the endless alleyways, and you were more likely to find yourself staring at the point of a knife if you weren't careful. There was no great, shining beacon of a hero school this far away. No prestige. Most heroes abandoned such places with no limelight.

Joker would make themselves more familiar with this district in time, but their true target of the night was more or less abandoned.

It was the perfect place to practice with his personas, with the metallic scent of rusty warehouses and sickly sweet refuse mixed with salty air. They were close to their destination, with Joker just a hair's breadth ahead of Mona. Of course, their little race couldn't last until the finish line. Reality interrupted their fun like a popped bubble.

He skid to a stop as a shriek and clatter of metal came from below.

Mona's blurred form slowed and he hovered at Joker's side. All playfulness fell at the drop of a hat as they peeked over the side of the building, Yatagarasu was an invisible dot against the cloudy sky. Four men had surrounded a young woman. Despite the towering thugs cornering her against the wall, she had her shoulders squared and chin raised, her eyes set in a seething glare.

Joker was reminded of Wolf and his lackeys, but these men were different. They were not puffed up high schoolers looking to bully their classmate, these were the real deal. Thieves and muggers to

their core. Judging by the knives in the grasp, they were not opposed to drawing a little blood, or perhaps worse.

The leader's hands hovered over the girl, sparking with electricity.

He unsheathed his dagger as he looked at Mona, "You have my back?"

"Naturally. I'll cover the girl too, in case they try anything."

Joker snorted as Yatagarasu vanished and a new power took his place. He dropped from the rooftop, his landing as hushed as a passing shadow, though not even the brightly colorful ripples drew their attention. Joker ran a hand through his hair and and laughed. The sound bounced around the alley, drenched in a cold sort of retribution.

They startled and whirled around to him.

"Now gentlemen," His eyes pulsed with gilded light, "Is that any way to treat a lady?"

Sparky sneered as his cronies and the girl turned white, recognition flowed through their eyes.

"If you know what's good for you," Sparky grinned as electricity snapped across his body, lighting the alleyway, "You would just look the other way, kid."

Joker eerily tilted his head, "I don't think I will, thank you very much."

"B-Boss," Crony One said, "D-don't you know who that is?"

"I don't care who he is!" Sparky looked in between his comrades, "What are you waiting for!? He's outnumbered, surround him!"

A slow smirk grew on Joker's face as he allowed the idiots to shuffle around him. They were practically shaking in their boots, faces bone white with a sheen of sweat, the one to his left even recoiled when

Joker looked at him. A stilted silence overtook the alley. The only clueless one was Sparky, who glowered at the others.

“Well!?”

“M-Maybe...” Crony Two held up his weapon, the point of the knife shook like a leaf, “Maybe we should just leave them alone-”

“Since when were you three cowards!?” He huffed when nobody moved, “I have to do everything myself!”

The girl cried out as the alley lit up with blue electricity, snapping arcs slithered across the alley in the blink of an eye. Confidence returned to Sparky’s lackeys as the winding volts trailed up his body, it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, but he heard his persona’s hissing cackles as the light died down. He dusted off his coat and stared into Sparky’s eyes.

“Wow. Did you really think that would work?” Joker waved a finger at him, “I’m almost disappointed in you, Sparky.”

Sparky suddenly lunged for the girl, who pressed herself back against the wall, but his hand was sliced with a biting wind. Small red beads trickled down his arm as he cried out.

“Or that. You know, a leader should listen to his teammates.” Joker said as Sparky clutched his hand, skillfully twirling his dagger, “You should’ve turned tail and run while you had the chance.”

Sparky opened his mouth to say something, but Joker chose that moment to pull his persona into reality. A veil of heated blue light flashed in the alleyway, their cries of shock were buried by the hiss of flames and glimmer of creeping purple scales. A long sinuous body curled protectively around the Trickster as the scales rustled together, like the creeping whisper of death, a true promise of pain to any who opposed them. A human like face smiled down at the gaping thugs, six arms dancing in deceptively peaceful motions.

“Vasuki, you want to do the honors?”

“Thine who dares wish harm upon the Trickster,” Vasuki’s quiet, raspy voice made them freeze in fear, “Shall flounder in thine own filth.”

Vasuki raised his arms, the telltale spark of magic tinged the air. It wasn’t the elemental snap of ice or crackle of lightning, or a scalding burn of nuclear fire, this one a different incantation altogether. It was a trill of dizzying tunes that jacked the brain. Joker chuckled as the thugs collapsed, gurgling like newborns, their eyes blank and staring at nothing.

“Well, I did warn them.” Vasuki moved his body so Joker could pass, he knelt down next to Sparky, “I’ll have to add zip ties or something to the list. Keep an eye on them for a second, Vasuki? We don’t want them pulling anything else.”

The serpent bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“Wh-what...” The girl cleared her throat and approached warily, “What did you do to them?”

“Brainwashed them for a bit,” Joker stood and poked Sparky with his boot, “It’ll wear off in a few hours, long after they’re safely behind bars.”

Hopefully.

Joker looked over the girl as he sheathed his dagger. Short strawberry hair framed her face in elegant waves, her eyes were a brilliant orange, tainted by fading fear. Her clothes were rumpled, but she didn’t look injured. He relaxed back as an easy smile softened his face.

“What’s your name?”

His voice startled her, “Shirogane K-Kaori.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“I.. I was...” Her eyes shifted around the alleyway, amidst the thugs’ inane babbles, “I was just taking a walk.”

“A walk.” He slowly tilted his head, “This late at night, in *this* part of town? Are there any other lies you want to tell me, or...?”

Her cheeks turned red as she took a sudden interest in her shoes. Her hands clenched and unclenched several times. She was having some sort of internal argument with herself. Still, Joker waited. After a minute or two she sighed, her shoulders slumped over and she still wouldn’t look at him.

“Look, Joker. I...” She reached into her jacket pocket for a crumpled piece of paper, “I’m looking for somebody. Maybe you can help? Have you seen him?”

Joker scrunched his brow as he gently took the paper and unfolded it. The giant ‘MISSING’ at the top was an eye catcher, alongside the teenaged boy that looked right back at him. He had the same strawberry hair and orange eyes like the girl.

“I haven’t.” Joker looked up, “Tell me what happened.”

“My brother went missing about two weeks ago,” She said slowly, her hands wrung together, “A-Around this area. I’ve been trying to look for him.”

She blinked rapidly, but Joker looked away as she quickly dabbed her eyes with her sleeves.

“So, did the system fail you too?”

“How did you know?” She finally looked him in the eye.

“You wouldn’t be out here all by yourself otherwise.”

“They... I tried, you know? I *begged* them to keep looking, I know he’s still out there somewhere!” She hugged herself and shivered, “But they only gave up after one night. *One night!* They haven’t looked again since he disappeared, said that he probably just ran away and that I shouldn’t bother them anymore! My brother wouldn’t just... just run away!”

Vasuki hissed at the spark of anger within Joker’s heart.

“Why would they do that?” He kept his tone neutral, as not to scare her.

“Because he’s quirkless.” She furiously scrubbed at her eyes, “They don’t think he’s worth the time or resources! Can you believe that?”

The paper crinkled under his grasp. He’s lived with just a fraction of the discrimination during his time here, seen those horrifying numbers about this generation’s quirkless victims. The person in the missing poster was still a teenager, a *kid* . A kid that was missing.

And nobody cared, except for the crying girl in front of him.

“Joker, you...” Her eyes flicked in between him and Vasuki, “You wouldn’t give up on somebody just because of that, right...?”

He carefully folded the poster and placed it in one of his hidden breast pockets.

“Quirks are overrated.” He said, “Why should anybody be put down over something they can’t control? Why be seen as a lesser person because they can’t blow bubbles out of their ears or grow their fingernails at an accelerated rate? It makes no sense to me.”

“S-so.. you mean...”

“I’ll poke around and see what I can find,” He gave her his debonair smile, “I won’t abandon him like the police did, that I promise.”

That was all it took. She whimpered as tears flooded her eyes. Kaori hid her face in her hands as she finally broke down, the pained sobs overtook the brainwashed goons at their feet. Joker stayed silent, both of his hands stabilizing the girl's trembling shoulders. He got the distinct feeling he should give her a handkerchief if he had one, not that he really blames Arsene for feeling as such. Another item to add to the list.

She pulled herself together after a few minutes, shaking her head wildly.

"S-sorry, I just..." She sniffled and clasped her hands over her heart, "I'm so worried about him."

"You have every right to be." He said as his hands dropped.

"... Thanks. For saving me, and helping to find my brother. I..." She dug around in her pockets and jotted something down, "Here. In case you find any clues."

"I usually ask a girl out on a date after getting her number."

Kaori turned beet red, waving her hands frantically, "Th-that's not-!"

Joker threw his head back and laughed, and she punched him on the shoulder for it. He totally deserved it. At least it made her smile.

"I probably shouldn't stick around here much longer," He said as he pocketed the sticky note.

"Right." Kaori glared down at Sparky, "I'll wait a few minutes after you leave, and then call the police. Electricity quirks are hard to control, you know? I can't believe he fried his own friends by accident."

"I knew I liked you," Joker said with a wink, "I'll let you know if I find anything about your brother."

He barely heard her sputter between Vasuki vanishing and his short ride up to the rooftops. Mona's familiar weight settled on his shoulders and they crossed to the next building.

"I heard everything." Mona said, voice sour, "I can't believe they'd ignore a missing kid."

"I know. Unfortunately, we've seen worse than that before," Joker hovered at the edge of the roof as sirens echoed somewhere in the streets, "But we'll do what we can. Do you think La Brava is sick of doing us favors, yet?"

Mona snorted, "Not if we bribe her with curry. You're building up quite a debt, Joker."

"Well, at least our first night isn't boring, right? What do you say we continue exploring after we call her?"

"You mean, continue *after* we finish our race. I'll win of course, and then you'll have to buy me more tuna! I expect extra fatty tuna, this time."

"Hey, I still haven't said what I would get when I win?"

"What do you expect me to do?" Mona grinned as he stuck his nose in the air, "I can't get you anything with these tiny paws, you'll just have to live with pure satisfaction. Or don't, because I'll win."

Joker scoffed as he dug out his phone and dialed.

Iguchi Shuichi stared down on his creaky old table.

On it were two items. A pair of masks, as different as night and day. One, nothing more than a simple strap of cloth, the other made with cheap plastic and black paint. A simple choice. It shouldn't be so hard to choose in between them, yet it had taken days to sit down and look at them.

Two ideologies.

Two heroes.

He sighed as he leaned on his elbows and rested his forehead on his knuckles. His apartment wasn't much, barely three rooms. The walls were paper thin, the lights flickered, the air conditioning was broken, this building's washing machine didn't work right and was more likely to rob you of your money.

He shook his head and glared at the masks on the table. Why was this choice so hard to make? It was supposed to be simple. Heads or tails, black or white. But that was the kicker, wasn't it? Neither was black and white, purely good or evil. His mind was opened to so many shades of gray, and all it took to change his whole world were two individuals with strong willpower.

Another long sigh escaped him as he reached for his glass of water.

It took another hour, but he finally made his choice.

He hoped it was the right one.

Manami hummed happily to herself.

"I take it it's going well?" Tobita asked as he set down a cup of tea.

"Yup! I should be finished editing by tomorrow, and then we can upload our first video together! Oh, I can't wait to see how people react to my debut!"

He chuckled, a warm sound that filled her heart with joy, as he took the seat opposite of her.

"I simply cannot wait," He said, "It'll be a video like no other!"

She nodded as she reached for her tea. Just then, her phone began to ring, a familiar number lit up the screen. Her tea was forgotten as

she beamed.

“Oh, it’s Akira!” Tobita blinked curiously as she swiped it up, “Hey! What’s up?”

“Greetings, La Brava.”

Manami blinked, then had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. It didn’t work. Her playful snorts escaped and Akira’s chuckles added to her own.

“Darn, I was hoping that would work.”

“You really thought that your ‘intimidating’ voice would work on me?” She rolled her eyes, “Please. I was there when you called Taneo, both times I might add.”

“Eh, it was worth a shot. Does it still sound scary?”

“As scary as a giant fluffy cloud.” Morgana’s voice trickled through.

“Hush, I wasn’t asking for your opinion.”

“You weren’t, but I said my piece anyway.”

Manami smiled. She missed this.

“Yes, you were still intimidating,” She said, “Anybody else would be shaking in their boots right about now. So, did you call me just to say hi?”

“Well, that too I suppose. How are you holding up?”

“Good! More than good, Gentle and I filmed our first video together! We’ll be releasing it soon, so you better watch it when it comes out!”

He whistled, *“We’ll be sure to catch it. Is he treating you well?”*

“Of course, why wouldn’t he?”

"No reason, I just want to be sure. Fellow gentleman thief or not, I won't pull any punches to anybody who hurts my friends."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm tiny but mighty, remember?"

"I never forgot." He said with a chuckle, "Anyway, can you look something up for me?"

Manami tucked the phone in between her ear and shoulder, fingers hovering over her keyboard. Tobita took a slow sip of tea, carefully watching on in interest.

"Sure, what do you need?"

"I want to get information on a boy named Shirogane Kaien. He's been missing for about two weeks."

"I can try." Manami furrowed her brow, "Why did you take a sudden interest in a missing person?"

"We met his sister, saved her from a bunch of thugs. Turns out the police gave up looking for him just because he's quirkless. She's been out looking for him ever since."

"Wait." Her brows furrowed and her stomach sank like a rock, "You didn't start patrolling already, did you?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why!?" She shot an apologetic look to Tobita, who flinched at her tone, "You should know why! I'm not the one with the 25 million bounty, and even I know you shouldn't be out this soon!"

"We can't let something like that stop us forever. What do you think would've happened to this girl if we weren't there? There aren't many heroes in this part of town, if any."

"That's true, but still..." She pinched the bridge of her nose, "Why do my boys have the preservation instinct of a suicidal dodo bird?"

She heard Morgana's laughter as Akira sputtered. Tobita disguised his laughter with a cough, then poured himself another cup of tea to mask his smile. Akira gathered himself and cleared his throat.

"Relax, we'll be fine. We're patrolling around one of the outer districts where there isn't much action, just to get to lay of the land. We're not looking to cause a big scene like Hosu."

"I've heard that before." Manami couldn't help the sudden swell of protective instincts, "You promised you would be careful, and yet you were plastered all over the news the next morning!"

"If it makes you feel better, we'll just patrol around for a few blocks and call it there."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Me too!" Morgana said, *"I'll make sure he doesn't show off more than usual, at least."*

"Hey, I don't show off that much! Right?"

She and Morgana stayed silent, a mutual agreement shared over a great distance. He sighed in defeat after a few moments of silence.

"I'll hold you to that. I'm expecting a mountain of curry when we see each other again."

"I thought as much. I'll make both you and Gentle a whole heaping pot, maybe two or three at this rate. He hasn't tasted it yet, has he?"

"Nope."

"Good, we'll have to get his reaction on video. Savor it for years on end, maybe tease him with it a little bit."

“Yeah! Just make sure to come visit sometime soon? Or maybe we can come over there?”

“We’ll have to work something out. I know I’m not the only one who misses you.”

“Yeah, I miss you guys too.” She glanced over to her screen, blinking away her tears, “I’ll... I’ll get that information soon. I’m also working on a present for you, but you’ll just have to wait until it’s finished!”

“Ooh, mysterious . Can’t even give us a tiny hint?”

“None.”

“Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

“Nope. You’ll get nothing from me.”

“Darn, I tried. Well, I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Wait!” The nails of her free hand dug into her palm, “Just...”

“We know.” Was that fondness in his voice? *“We’ll stay safe. We promise.”*

“I’ll believe you this time. Don’t you dare disappoint me.”

“We won’t. We’ll call you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay...”

“Oh, did you happen to give Giran one of my burner numbers?”

“Yeah, why? Was... was that not okay?”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

With one last goodbye, they hung up. She placed her phone on the table and took a sip of her lukewarm tea. Tobita reached over the

table and gently placed his hand over hers.

“It’ll be okay.” He said with a smile, “They’ve gotten out of every situation thrown at them so far. Besides, I have faith in a fellow gentlemen thief. They’ll be fine.”

“You’re right.” She said as he withdrew his warm hand, “I know you’re right. They can take care of themselves, but I just can’t help but worry, you know?”

“I know how much you care about them.” Tobita gained an odd warmth to his eyes, “Spoken like a true big sister, eh?”

Her face burned, and she hid herself behind her computer. His chuckles lightened the heaviness weighing her heart. They would be fine. She was just worrying too much. Manami shook her head and threw herself into her work. Her fingers flew over the keys, familiar code bent to her will, her flawless virus was already worming its way into the system. After all, they were counting on her to get information for their mission!

She should’ve known that they would break their promise.

Hotaru Hiro lay in the filth of an abandoned alleyway.

Trash surrounded him in piles, the buzz of flies grated on his ears. He should’ve cared that his life had taken a turn for the worse, but that bet was supposed to be his ticket out of this dump! The dealer must’ve cheated somehow, maybe they pushed too much sake in his direction. He groaned as a headache pounded at his temples, he reached for the bottle hidden in a paper bag.

The burn of alcohol would wash away his woes. For a few hours at least. He was about to take another swig of the stuff, when he heard voices nearby.

"I told you I would win!" A boyish voice said, "I expect an entire plate of fatty tuna tomorrow."

"Really?" A voice of buttery smooth silk said, "Why don't you try something else? How about mackerel or salmon? Prawn? You might even enjoy the taste of sea urchin. Expand your horizons, Mona!"

Mona hummed, "Nah, I'll stick with the fatty tuna."

"You're hopeless."

"I should be the one saying that to you! What about your promise?"

"I'm not breaking it. We said we'd patrol around the block. I know we didn't patrol that long, but I've been wanting to get out and practice for ages. This one has wanted to come out for a while, I don't really blame him."

Mona sighed, "Fine. We're almost to the warehouse anyway."

Hiro hunkered down in his trash pile as the figures traipsed past the opening. His mouth dropped open when he saw that flawless tailcoat and iconic mask. Colors popped from his footsteps. There was a cat on his shoulder, but the feline blocked him from Joker's field of view.

He froze until he heard Joker's footsteps fade away, a slow grin split his face in half. A frenzied laugh burst from his throat. It was his lucky day after all! The world spun as he pulled himself from the garbage, shaky fingers reached for his phone. It was an easy thing to look up the information hotline, though he had to squint and wait for the world to stop wobbling. Giddiness bubbled up as he hobbled out of the alleyway, the phone trilled in his ear.

That 25 million would be *his* .

He took a deep calming breath, ebbing the sudden urge to crush his phone with a gloved hand. The sprawling scenery was beautiful this

high up, a breeze ruffled his hair from the highest point in the city. His vibrant red wings twitched as he longed to take flight. He reached to his ear and silenced his communicator.

“You know,” Takami Keigo muttered to nobody, “Just getting off from a 14 hour shift is exhausting. Too tired to listen in on any more calls, too tired to properly secure my phone so it wouldn’t fall out of my costume.”

He held the device out, precariously shuffling his fingers until it slipped from his grasp.

Hawks watched with vague interest. The phone grew smaller and smaller, until it was nothing more than a dot, then he lost visual of it altogether. It would crash and break on the pavement, shatter into nothing more than bits of plastic and metal. He could say he never saw that cursed text, lost his phone during his last rescue of the night. It wouldn’t be the first time it happened. Dozens of phones had suffered the same fate, though this was the first one he deliberately threw off a roof. They would have to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Right?

That or punish him, but he’s wiggled himself out of worse situations.

He knew the gravity of it. The Hero Commission would pull no punches to get what they want. He should know, he was *bought* because of his quirk. Sold like livestock, forced to train until his muscles almost gave out, molded to become the ‘perfect hero’. A puppet for the Hero Commission. He hasn’t seen his parents since. Did they ask after his well being? Were they even *allowed* to come and see him? He was doubtful.

He doesn’t know what they would do to get Joker under their thumb. With that sort of power? They could do *anything* . A shiver crept up his spine at the mere thought.

Hawks wouldn't wish that fate on his worst enemy.

That message was still burned into his mind, long after he spread his wings and dove from the building, not even the wind under his wings could lift his heavy heart. It haunted him after he had landed on the balcony of the top floor of his agency, it still persisted when he dragged himself through the apartment and collapsed on his oversized bed. If anything would ever be burned into the back of his eyelids, it would be that message.

'Joker has been spotted. Report to the meeting location ASAP.'

"Good luck, kid." He muttered before sleep took him, "You'll need it."

Price

Chapter 29: Price

~From Chapter 24~

“And that’s what worries me.” Tsukauchi said, “What would he do if he were backed in a corner?”

'A grin split Joker's face.'

I *highly* suggest this ost when you guys get to this line :D

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=HJAWAobzc5s>

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Their hearts were as heavy as boulders. Aizawa’s fists shook in a silent rage, but he hid them by crossing his arms and glowering.

“I don’t like this one bit. This is way overkill.”

“I know,” Tsukauchi said, glancing at Aizawa with a grave expression, “But we don’t have a choice.”

They looked out amidst the organized chaos.

Lesser pro heroes had poured in at the drop of a hat, sprinkled in with police officers donning riot gear and gas masks. Aizawa noticed the way the small time heroes gave each other glares and wary eyes, they didn’t care for capturing Joker as much as the prestige and fame that would follow his arrest. Perhaps they would get a

small percentage of the bounty, too. First come, first serve straight into the spotlight.

But it was not all small time heroes.

Endeavor stood like a shining beacon, directing his sidekicks via a heavily encrypted radio channel as they secured the perimeter and helped close the net around Joker. Yagi Toshinori awaited in a small black car in the distance, ready to emerge as All Might at any moment, should he be needed. Aizawa wasn't the only one who hoped he wouldn't be. Other U.A. staff were peppered in the crowd.

The most recent ETA of Pro Hero Ryukyu was fifteen minutes, but other heroes such as Ingenium's Agency have officially pulled out of the manhunt. Team Idate had convinced others in the top 10, including Crust and Miruko, to pull out from the hunt. A few others followed their example. It culled their numbers, but the call of fame and money still attracted the others like moths to a flame.

The informant said Joker went in one of the warehouses before he started demanding the reward money. He was going to be brushed off as a drunken maniac, until he got a photo of Joker's back as he walked between some rusty warehouses. He was lucky that Joker didn't spot him, but they still didn't know which warehouse he was in. They kept the man behind the lines at the other end of the district, just in case he tried anything. He wouldn't get a cent until Joker was taken in.

Nezu, who was perched on Tsukauchi's shoulder, took in everything with an unnatural calm. The principal had showed no emotion, though the tip of his tail gave away his nerves. He had been silent this entire time. Anybody who knew the mouse better count their lucky stars that they would never face a silent Nezu alone.

"Cheer up, Eraser." Midnight gently elbowed him, her smile strained, "We have this in the bag."

Aizawa rolled his eyes as he watched the various teams, frowning at their excessive weapons.

"I hope so, for the kid's sake."

Something moved in the corner of his eye. He stiffened as he looked up towards the nearby rooftops, eyes narrowed.

"What's wrong?" Tsukauchi asked, tension lined his body.

"I thought I saw something."

Midnight and Nezu gazed up to the rooftops.

"There's nothing there?" Midnight said, "Are you sure you're not just hallucinating?"

"I'm going to check anyways," Aizawa slipped on his goggles and looked back at them, "The last time I thought I was 'hallucinating' was when Joker's cat broke the both of them out of the station. I'm not making that mistake again. Midnight, don't do anything stupid."

"I wouldn't-"

"I *mean* it!"

He didn't see her flinch as he made his way up.

"Hey, don't take it personally." Tsukauchi said.

"I know." She crossed her arms and frowned, "He's on edge, we all are. I'm going to go see if Hound Dog's group has picked up a scent or not."

Midnight walked away. Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes and sighed. Nezu let a tiny smile slip while he was distracted. Was this the ultimate checkmate, an end to a glorious vigilante? Or was it just a check and they were playing into Joker's hand? Were they about to make a cataclysmic mistake? How would the *public* react to such a

strong show of force against a vigilante who's gained the support of the people?

Nezu smirked as he waited for the events to unfold.

Mona sighed as he stretched out, mind a little bit clearer after his catnap.

The barest hints of morning seeped over the horizon. Mona yawned once more and shook his head to clear away the remnants of sleep. He explored around Joker's warehouse for the first few hours, *incredibly* bored. He complained to Joker about going home soon, but Joker didn't seem to hear him every time he checked in, too focused on mastering a powerful bond. Mona didn't blame him, given which persona Joker was practicing with they could be out here for days.

"Even the Trickster would have trouble controlling such power."
Mercurius whispered, *"That bond will take time."*

Mona wrinkled his nose. He didn't get why Mercurius insisted on calling Akira the Trickster, but he gave up trying to change his persona's mind.

"Well, he's been practicing for long enough." He said as he turned around, "I didn't realize how late it was! Now I'm going to have to fix his sleeping schedule. Do you know how long that's going to take? I hope he doesn't complain to Kaito about my nagging."

Mercurius chuckled, the sound akin to an enchanting musical note.

Mona closed his eyes as he kneaded the metallic rooftop under his paws, letting the first rays warm his fur. He didn't like the coppery scent that invaded his nose or the shady alleyways, but he would deal with them if his partner got stronger from it. His brow furrowed as the surrounding area flooded into his mind, drawn by the easy breeze swelling in from the sea. To the endless boxes and crates,

rats eating trash, to holes and loose creaky doors from other warehouses. There were various groups of people that marched through the place.

Wait.

Mona's eyes flew open as he crept across the rooftops. His claws were sheathed, his little footfalls padding silently.

"Perhaps it is sailors going to the harbor?"

"Maybe," Mona whispered, "We've never been here this early. We better check it out, just in case."

He inched closer to the swarm, then peeked over the rim of the building. A mob of officers and heroes milled about, police cars and vans were in the distance. Mona's stomach turned.

"That's a lot of people," He said, eyes narrowed, "What are they doing here?"

His heart pounded as he willed the wind to expand with a long exhale, a knot of dread stabbed into him as his fur stood on end. These numbers.... it could've been a small army.

"No..." He gasped as he pulled back, "There's no way. How did they find us?"

"We waste time. Hurry!"

"R-right!" He bolted, his magic just within reach, "Hold on, Joker-!"

Mona slid to a stop and pressed himself onto the rooftop, eyeing the people below. He would have to time this carefully. Just blasting his way to Joker's warehouse would give them both away, so he waited for a blind spot. Mona held his breath as the pros passed and prepared to jump... now!

His tiny form flew through the air and he landed on the next warehouse. He kept his body low as he crossed the next few buildings, but the last jump had been too hasty, if he had just waited a few more seconds...

Mona's muscles tensed as he was about to leap, but the flow of magic within his soul suddenly vanished. Stopped dead like a frozen river. He froze as a shiver wracked his body. He frantically searched inside himself, but the whisper of magic was just *gone*. Mercurius' voice ceased. The absence of part of his soul made his whole body tremble more, as if a pit of darkness sucked away at his life force.

"Stop right there."

Mona flinched and whirled around to Eraserhead. A crimson glimmer radiated from his goggles, his hair and loose scarf floating as if he were underwater, he went into a battle stance and grasped his scarf. Mona hissed and arched his back.

"That's cute," The man said, almost bored, "We know Joker is here somewhere, and we know that you can talk. So just give up and come in quietly, and I promise that you won't come to any harm."

Mona pressed his ears flat to his head and growled, eyes scanned around for an escape. He inched closer to the edge of the rooftop, all it would take was a drop, perhaps he could run through the heroes' feet before this man shouted a warning? No, there were way too many people for that. He'd be caught for sure.

The man held his hands up, eyes still crimson, and knelt down.

"Look," Eraserhead sighed, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I don't want to do this the hard way. I don't want to hurt Joker. I want to help him."

Mona snorted as he bared his tiny fangs.

“Funny.” The man stiffened as Mona finally spoke, “If you really want to help, then you’ll call off all of those heroes. But you won’t, will you?”

“It’s out of my hands. There’s nothing I can do, you and Joker brought this on yourselves.”

Mona scoffed, “So you pretend to care, but you’re just like the rest!”

“Like the rest? You mean the ones who used him? Who hurt him?” Eraserhead’s frown deepened, “Who hurt you? I want to be on your side.”

“Yeah, right.” Mona took a step closer to the edge, “People like you always lie. I’ve seen your type before, you’d trade us in the first chance you get.”

“That’s not true.” His eyes hardened, “Joker is still a kid. He has a chance to really make something of himself, the legal way.”

“Right. Because your higher ups aren’t eager to dig their claws into him. Why else would they go to such great lengths to gather so many people in such a short time? Are you really that blind?” Mona shook his head as a feral smirk peeked through, “You tell me, without a shadow of a doubt, that they won’t experiment on him or lock him in some underground cell and throw away the key. Joker’s too powerful to simply let him walk away. Isn’t that right?”

Eraserhead inhaled sharply. The hero said nothing, Mona could feel the gears cranking behind those bright goggles.

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Yeah? How? Are you ready to go against your own government?”

The silence stretched, counted by the thrum of their heartbeats. The not-cat laughed coldly.

“Figures.” Mona’s eyes burned into Eraserhead, “But I wasn’t expecting much from *you*, Aizawa Shouta.”

The hero flinched back, “How did you-”

Behind them, the warehouses *exploded* .

~ 20 minutes earlier...

Sweat trickled down Joker’s brow as he concentrated.

He tried to grasp the scale of the Sacred Shimenawa large enough to wrap around an entire mountain. The power was *immense*, an impossibly large pool of cosmic force flowed into him at a simple touch, to control the ocean crashing into his head brought on a stabbing migraine. He had to take it wave by wave, but it still drowned him. Joker gasped as he opened his eyes and leaned on his knees, panting as he let the bond go free. The sea of polished scales around him shifted.

“Keep trying, little one.” A voice of rumbling earth said, “We’ll get through this, but you must not give in to weakness.”

Joker wiped his brow and stood, straight staring into the liquid ruby eyes of Kohryu.

They were in the largest warehouse in the district, the great dragon had contorted himself in impossible ways to fit inside, his head flush on the floor in front of Joker, limbs and body splayed over boxes or grasping crates. The entire warehouse was covered with gold scales. Any sudden movement and his massive horns would gouge out the ceiling. Joker felt tiny in front of him, he was as tall as one of the spikes lining the dragon’s jaw.

“We’ve been trying for hours,” Joker leaned back on Kohryu’s body, “But I haven’t even come close to controlling it yet. It’s too much for

me to bare.”

Kohryu snorted, blowing back Joker’s hair and clothes.

“Perhaps my bond shall be the toughest of the whole stock, perhaps not. If I am not the most powerful bond, then let me serve as a stepping stone for something greater.” Kohryu playfully flicked his long whiskers, “You have the might and determination to control this unimaginable power, Trickster. I would not have given you my eternal vow if I thought you couldn’t handle it. Do not let this little bump tarry you.”

“You still talk too much, grandpa.” Alice said.

Joker snickered as Kohryu growled like a roll of thunder, “I do not.”

“Oh please, you oversized danger noodle.” The bubbly one giggled, *“You would spew an entire encyclopedia if none of us stopped you.”*

“Oversized danger noodle?” His whiskers sagged to the ground, “I do not understand what noodles have to do with imparting wisdom upon the Trickster. I am also not aware of any noodles that could potentially cause bodily harm, either. Am I misinformed?”

Joker burst out laughing. The dragon genuinely looked confused, a knot formed in his grand brow. He tried to pull himself together as he stepped up beside Kohryu’s head, patting the dragon’s snout through his chuckles.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Joker said, grinning, “They’re just teasing you.”

“I... see. Well, shall we continue or take a respite? The night has gone while we were training.”

“Let’s stop.” Joker sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets, “I’m surprised Mona hasn’t come back in yet. I’m sure he’s mad about the missed sleep.”

“Very well, let’s-”

Kohryu’s nostrils flared. His ears swiveled to and fro as his lips lifted to bare teeth sharper and longer than the finest katana. Joker lurched back at the overwhelming sense of hostility. It twisted their bond in a painful knot.

“Kohryu, what’s-”

“Shh!”

Joker snapped his jaw shut with an audible *click* . The dragon lifted his head an inch from the ground, the middle of his three horns grated against the high ceiling, the screech of metal made Joker cringe. Alarm shot through Kohryu.

“Trickster, quickly!” He whispered, “Climb to the rafters! Hurry!”

Joker blinked, the time it took for Kohryu to vanish as if he were never there. He shook his head and grappled up to the highest beam, balancing upon it as if he were a master tightrope walker. Just then, the door to the warehouse opened. Midnight, Hound Dog, and an entire squad of armored police flooded in. A few had *riot shields* . All of them wore gas masks.

“I thought I heard a noise.” One of the officers said, “It came from in here.”

“This scent....” Hound Dog growled, “It’s the strongest scent so far, but there’s something else to it. Almost... familiar?”

“Search the place for clues.” Midnight commanded, “Joker might still be close.”

Joker felt his blood turn to ice. They were here for *him* ? When?
How?

He bit his lip as they spread out. Joker glanced in between the group on the ground and the grimy window ten feet from him. He shifted his

body, praying that the metal was stable enough not to creak, he toed one foot in front of the other. He moved at a sloth's pace. His heart pounded in his ears as he reached the window, jaw dropping.

Entire squadrons of police and groups of heroes milled about, searching the surrounding warehouses. They ducked into alleyways, overturned garbage bins and crates alike, combing through the entire district by the looks of it. The scene changed, doused in flashy lights and the clink of gambling chips. He shook his head as a ball of ice sank into his stomach.

'Enemies, here!?' Oracle's voice was a ghost in his mind, 'It can't be!'

'An ambush!?'

'Joker, can you handle this!?'

It was just like the finale of Sae's Palace, only so much worse. He was blindsided. This wasn't some part of a plan, he couldn't just hog the spotlight like last time. His friends-

Mona!

Joker balled his hands into fists at the startling realization. Was Mona okay? Was he captured? Joker's heart rate spiked at the thought of these people throwing his partner in a cage.

"Stay calm, Trickster." Arsene soothed his mind, "An enemy who knows how to turn your emotions against you will be your downfall."

He nodded, and took a breath to slow his rabbiting heart.

"I'm sorry," Kohryu growled, "We were so focused on mastering the bond that I did not look outward for danger."

"Don't blame yourself Old Boy," Arsene said, "It could've happened to any one of us. Let's focus on our escape and discuss this later!"

Joker gently pressed his hands against the window. It was old and grimy, dust and dirt muddled the glass. If he could just open it and get to the rooftops, then they would have a chance at escape. The ancient thing came loose without a sound, and relief swelled when it started to open. Then, the inevitable.

Creeeeeak.

Movement stilled below. Joker swore under his breath, the next moment the world was nothing but a blur as something wrapped around his ankle and yanked. He plummeted with grace and rolled into his landing, tailcoat flaring as he slid back. He followed the whip to Midnight.

“Freeze!”

‘Capture him!’

The police pointed their guns at him, the ones with riot shields closed in with predatory instinct. Joker stood and whipped out his weapons, alarms screamed through his nerves as he pointed his gun at Midnight, the barrel shaking.

*Rough hands grabbing at him, forcing him into the cold concrete.
Footsteps approached as countless hands held him down.*

‘Hmph, didn’t expect some kid.’ A man roughly grabbed his hair and forced him to look up, ‘You have your teammate to thank for all of this. You were sold out.’

Panic made his mind blank.

“Drop your weapon!” The nearest officer shouted, “Drop it or we’ll shoot!”

‘Suspect confirmed. Cuff him!’

“No, stand down!”

Midnight retracted her whip and walked closer, her footsteps the only sound over the strained breathing. Her eyes were so soft and warm as she came closer, her smile almost motherly. Hound Dog's eyes bore into Joker, but he almost looked sad.

"I'm sorry, kiddo." She said as she ripped her sleeve, "I'll make this quick."

Purple vapor poured from her skin, snaking across the ground towards him. The scent was sweet, like flowers in a summer wind. He grunted as dizziness came over him, dragging him down to one knee. He clutched his head as the police closed in.

"Trickster-!"

Arsene's shout was drowned out as another slammed against his mind, bringing with it the fury of destruction and creation.

"Summon me! Let me swallow this poison and return it a hundredfold! Hurry, lest we be undone!!"

Joker wrenched this persona into existence. A chorus of startled cries echoed as a towering being, with blue skin and four arms, was brought into the world bathed in a cerulean blaze. His shuffling dance constant and eternal, within his four hands a different divine object. A spear, a metal ring, a horn, and a drum.

Joker chuckled, the manic sound was warped by panic.

The haziness drained away into crystal clarity, and he stood to his full height with Shiva at his back, still dancing. Azure flames turned Joker's grin into a hellish image, his eyes a molten gold and alight with pure glee. Midnight's eyes were wide, pupils mere pinpricks against the blinding light that silhouetted him, it splashed the walls with their dancing shadows. Shiva moved before anyone else recovered.

He leaned forward and opened his mouth, an unknowable wind pulled at the mist. Shiva swallowed the sweet fog, his throat gained a purple hue as he devoured the last tiny wisps, until there was nothing left. Then, with a benevolent smile, he exhaled. The sweet smelling mist flowed freely from Shiva's mouth, turned into a thick violet smoke that choked the entire warehouse. Officers dropped their weapons, the gas cut straight through their masks and left them gasping for clean air.

They collapsed like a house of cards, one by one.

"Midnight, get back!" Hound Dog snarled, "You-!"

Hound Dog leapt for Joker, claws splayed. Shiva chuckled and stepped in front of Joker, throwing his divine instruments into the air with a flair of his hands. Hound Dog's eyes widened as he was plucked from the air, three of Shiva's hands holding him up by his wrists and neck. The hero snarled and floundered in his grasp, but Shiva breathed the last of the fumes in his face, until the hero slowly went limp.

Hound Dog was dropped with an undignified *thud*, Shiva caught his instruments and resumed his dance.

"No! I-it can't be-!" Midnight fell to her knees, coughing, "Even my own quirk...?"

"Sorry." Joker pulled at his gloves as the last officer collapsed, "You people really should've known better."

He turned his back on her as she reached out to him.

"Wait, kid... !"

She finally fell, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. The warehouse was silent. Joker looked to the unmoving officers through the dark smog. His chest was still constricted, hands shaking as he sheathed his gun and shoved them in his pockets.

“Are they...?”

“Of course not, Trickster.” Shiva said, still locked in his eternal dance, “They’re not dead, but they will not be waking up anytime soon.”

“Thanks. I would’ve been toast without you.”

Shiva bowed his head, and then disappeared into nothingness.

“We need to fly!” Seth snarled, *“Leave this net behind or burn it to cinders!!”*

“Patience.” Kohryu’s eyes blazed crimson, *“Allow me to carry you to safety, Trickster.”*

“Hmph, your nonexistent wings will have better luck against such odds! I’ll let you have this one, grandpa.”

Joker smirked as his nerves finally settled.

This would not be like Sae’s Palace. This wasn’t the metaverse, this was a world where his other selves held *real* power.

All of his personas had his back. Alice’s smile promised a painful death, Byakko and Cerberus bared their fangs and, for once, stood together. Ishtar’s wrath, that of a goddess of love scorned, intermingled with Arsene’s fury. Vasuki hissed next to the crackle of Titania’s ice and nuclear magic. Seth and Yatagarasu readied their wings. They were prepared to fight to the death for the Trickster’s freedom, a seeping bloodlust emanated from each and every one of them.

A grin split Joker’s face.

“Let’s give them the show of a lifetime, Kohryu.”

“Come, little one. Let us fly together.”

Purple smog masked the sheen of his golden scales as the great dragon slithered around the warehouse, careful not to crush any of the bodies beneath him. Joker hopped on, running up Kohryu's spine until he reached the base of his neck, his horns were large enough to shield Joker's entire body. Joker wrapped the silvery grapple wire around the middle horn, then tied it to his belt.

"Let's go!"

"Hold on!" Kohryu cried.

A small burst of Kohryu's power was all it took to cleanly blow the roof from the warehouse. The metal *crunched* as it flew through the air, twirling around until it crashed somewhere in the harbor with a giant splash. Kohryu's eyes glowed like red hot coals through the cloud of dust and remains of purple smoke, the ensemble of shrieks and strangled cries echoed around them. The golden dragon raised himself from the wreckage, beautiful and elegant, deadly and awe inspiring. His scales glinting in the bloody sunrise. Everything was locked within a single moment of silence and terror.

Then, Kohryu opened his great maw and roared.

It was like the sky split open, or the earth shifting on an unimaginable scale. The sound traveled across the city, shaking entire buildings and jolting even the heaviest sleepers from their beds. Water sloshed unnaturally, as if pushed back by the strength of it. Kohryu lunged through the air before anybody could recover, all crouched down with their hands clamped over their ears. A good few had passed out, bleeding from the ears.

"I sense the Magician nearby!"

Kohryu weaved through the sky like a ribbon in the wind. Joker dug around in his pockets as they neared another warehouse. Mona was puffed up, facing Eraserhead dead on. The hero shielded his face from the wind as they approached.

“Mona!!”

He shouted so loud his voice nearly gave out. Joker threw a flash grenade at Eraserhead as he tried to look up at them, the spark of blinding light made the man cry out in pain. Joker wasn't in a forgiving mood to feel bad. Mona jumped when Kohryu flew over, aided by wind spells. He crashed into Joker's open arms with a whimper, his eyes watery as Joker held him protectively to his chest. Dread was washed away by relief.

“I-I'm sorry! I let my guard down!” Mona trembled, “This is my fault!”

“Don't blame yourself for this,” Joker said with a frantic shake of his head, “I led us here. I was the one who wanted to patrol too early and then practice with my personas. We should've gone home when we had the chance!”

“Joker!!”

They looked down to see Tsukauchi run after them. It was futile, and the giant rat on his shoulder gazed up at Kohryu with childish wonder, his mouth wide open and eyes practically sparkling with insane mirth. Tsukauchi's face was ashen as he finally slowed to a stop, hopeless. They left them in the dust, but they were far from safe.

A pillar of flame cut off Kohryu, red and gold swirling up into the sky. Only one person was capable of pulling it off. The number two hero stood tall as the pillar died out, the flames around his body flaring in a challenge. Joker held Mona closer and huddled behind Kohryu's horns.

Kohryu snarled as Alice's power flickered deep within Joker.

“Kohryu,” Alice whispered sweetly, grinning from ear to ear, “*Show him no mercy.*”

Other heroes scrambled for cover as the massive dragon dove for the ground, deadly teeth bared. It was like a train derailing, ripping up concrete and sending choking clouds into the atmosphere. Mona screamed and Joker nearly lost his footing, but thankfully the grapple around Kohryu's horn held.

Heat and bright light smothered them as Endeavor shot a stream of fire. Kohryu's scales reflected the light, dotting entire streets in glorious speckled light. Endeavor sneered as the dragon was untouched, but he continued the onslaught even as chunks of concrete rained down without remorse. The flames tinged blue the moment before they collided, the flame hero was snatched up in the massive dragon's jaws, grunting in pain when a fang pierced through his arm.

Kohryu wildly thrashed his head as Endeavor held the jaws open, his muscles strained under the pressure. The dragon finally reared up, soaring through the air as a trickle of blood dripped from his jaw. With one last wrenching movement, the hero was thrown. Joker only saw a burst of red fire in the distance as he lost visual of the hero altogether.

"Urrrp," Mona gagged as Kohryu floated in the air, "Are we off this crazy roller coaster yet?"

Joker laughed, but other heroes were clambering after them.

"Lacquered Chain Prison!"

The branches wrapped around Kohryu's body, but they snapped like dry twigs when Kohryu thrashed his way to freedom. Joker looked just in time to see Kamui Woods being sprinkled with his own sawdust. Eyes glazed over in pain as his arms were reduced to splinters.

"You'll pay for that!!"

Mount Lady rose in front of them, her hands reaching for Kohryu. Joker whipped out his gun and fired between Kohryu's horns, missing her face but sacrificing a few strands of her hair. She shrieked and lost balance, tipping her massive body over a few of the warehouses. Kohryu took his chance. Joker huddled down with Mona as the dragon turned a quick circle, the end of his tail catching her face like a whip. The miniature army below scattered like rats as she fell, crushing the abandoned bits of metal.

"Is there no end to these pests!?" Arsene yelled.

Other forms clambered up to the rooftops and followed them. Snipe and several of Ectoplasm's clones, a few of Endeavor's sidekicks seeking revenge, others in ridiculous costumes they didn't recognize, to name a few. Bullets and quirks whizzed around them in brilliant colors. Kohryu snarled as he bobbed and weaved through them all.

"Take my magic, Trickster!" Kohryu howled, *"Show them the unified might of our bond!!"*

"Mona, use your wind magic at my signal!"

"Got it!!"

Joker reached into his pockets and the sky rained with Smoke Screens and Hypno Mists, peppering the air. Green winds mixed the two and the district was enveloped in the lethargic fog, it seeped from the rooftops and into the deeper reaches of the alleyways, any who were caught unawares felt drowsy.

Joker then grasped onto the Sacred Shimenawa, allowing its power to flow through him, he grinned despite the mounting migraine. The taste of magic tinged the air until it warped reality, twisting into spirals of black and white, static buzzed in the heroes' heads as psychedelic eyes appeared. Their minds were attacked when the eyes peered into their souls, those who were drowsy were rendered unconscious by the unbearable pain.

Joker released his hold over the bond as the attack ended, the world returned to normal and the hypnotic eyes faded. Joker shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. Mona wasted no time casting Mediarahan, and the headache faded.

“This is our chance!” Mona yelled, “We need to go faster or they’ll recover!!”

Kohryu snarled as he picked up speed, lingering smoke streaming over his scales. If Seth’s wings brought thunderstorms, then Kohryu’s body generated winds with the power of a hurricane. Rusty walls crumpled under the force and police and heroes alike were bowled over, the staggered ones on the rooftops stood no chance.

“Go higher, Kohryu!” Joker shouted, “We don’t want any actual fatalities!”

Kohryu growled his affirmation and they flew closer to the gathering clouds.

“That’s admirable, young man!”

Joker’s heart lurched and he whirled around towards All Might, who followed close behind. The wind batted at his ridiculous bangs as he jumped between buildings with ease, as if the chaotic gales had no effect. He was so close that they could see his pearly smile.

“What took you so long, number one hero!?” Joker waved his arm, “I didn’t take you as one who’s fashionably late to the party!”

“Give it up, young man! I will have to ask you to surrender!” All Might’s voice boomed over the buffeting winds, “This will be your one and only warning, Joker! Don’t make me use force against you!”

“No thanks, *All Might!* ” Joker hid his fear with a shaky smirk as he brought out a small container of red ointment, “Don’t you know that children should never be alone with a full-grown man in spandex!?”

The hero choked and almost crashed into the next building.

“D-don’t say I didn’t warn you, young man!”

Joker smeared a small dab of ointment on Kohryu. The cream melded with his scales and a red glimmer trailed across Kohryu’s serpentine body. All Might jumped, the concrete cracking under the force of the hero’s power. All Might’s shadow fell over them as he raised his fist, Kohryu didn’t bother dodging.

“CALIFORNIA SMAAASH!!”

All Might’s fist clashed against a transparent red barrier, inches from Joker’s face.

“Hey, have you ever gotten a taste of your own medicine?” Their eyes glowed like contrasting pyres, vibrant cerulean versus blazing gold, “I hope you can take what you dish out, hero.”

All Might opened his mouth, but he was batted away by an invisible force. A spew of crimson beads were lost to the raging sky as All Might plummeted back to the earth. The ground shook as another warehouse fell underneath the meteoric impact, the debris and new cloud of dust masked the deep crater. All Might didn’t emerge.

Joker snorted as they finally left the district and floundering heroes behind.

“That was close.” Mona whispered, “Did you use Physical Ointment?”

“Yup.” Joker tucked the container away, “It seems not even the number one hero can overpower a Tetrakarn. We’re not out of the woods yet, though!”

“Gruuuuaaagh...”

The heavens quivered at Kohryu’s growl. Warm sunlight was drained from the sky by a blanket of swirling black clouds. Kohryu shifted

course into the heart of the city, where citizens froze in the streets and gaped up at the ginormous gold dragon, whose radiant scales contrasted the dark sky, a bright sun banishing the darkness. Some fell on their behinds, mouths wide open. A few were locked in place by overwhelming fear, limbs shaking. One soul kneeled down with her hands grasped in frantic prayer, ignorant of the shouts around her. Traffic came to a terrifying stop as people scrambled out of their cars to watch. Several phones recorded this cosmic event.

The dragon slowed a stop, hovering over an apartment building.

"Get to safety, little one." Kohryu said as he lowered his head to the rooftop.

"What about you?"

Kohryu's power surged through their bond. Four orbs, each a different color and burning bright like stars, appeared in Kohryu's claws.

"I shall be a distraction! Go, while the remainder of their forces are concentrated on me!"

Joker unlatched the grapple and jumped from Kohryu's back with Mona in his arms, but he looked up at the dragon with a troubled expression.

"Be careful, okay?"

One of Kohryu's whiskers gently brushed his arm.

"Hah! We have the might to move all of creation!!" Kohryu raised his head and soared back into the sky, *"These humans are the one who should be careful, they shall tremble before my true power!!"*

"J-Joker, let's go!" Mona said, "We don't want to stick around here!"

Joker shifted his weight, he stared up at Kohryu for a few more seconds before breaking out in a sprint.

“Gruuuuaaaagghhhh!”

A burst of light accompanied Kohryu’s roar, like a flash of lightning without thunder. An unimaginable well of magic cascaded through their bond as Concentrate sparked across Kohryu’s body, the storm gained overwhelming strength. Sheets of rain stung their faces as the world was drenched with a sudden deluge. The blackened clouds were as dark as the night sky, weaving together a typhoon that grew over the city.

Kohryu’s unrivaled eyes shown through the blackness, the quick flashes of lightning silhouetted his body floating serenely within the tumultuous clouds. Meanwhile, Joker threw himself down a fire escape. Sopping wet, he jumped down to the alleyway below, his colorful footsteps painting the growing puddles of water.

“J-Joker...”

Mona huddled into the crook of his neck.

“We’ll be fine!” Water sprayed around them as he slid into another alley, “We’re almost home free!”

Rain tapped against his coat and his hair stuck to his forehead like glue. The strength of Kohryu’s growls hounded the city and reverberated within his own chest, his heart pounding with fresh adrenaline. Screams echoed across the city as people bolted for cover, but he had no time to worry about the stabs of guilt.

Kohryu flew in circles inside the eye of the storm, it was as if he was churning it himself. Another dragon flew up, her body outlined by blue lightning and the crackle of thunder, valiant wings splayed and fangs at the ready. Kohryu never saw her passenger as he batted her away with the back of his hand, but she folded her wings and dove under the attack, splashed with the orbs’ light. Kohryu shifted his attention on her, another battle cry shook the city.

Joker felt an odd pressure in the back of his skull, but he brushed the feeling aside and pounded down another barren alleyway. He slid to a stop and peeked around a flooding street. Mona took a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

"It's clear!" Mona whispered.

Nodding, he burst out of the darkness and into the roadway. He paid no mind to the ankle deep water as they crossed the street and dove into another alley. Where should they go? Back to the Nest? They weren't too far away, though Kaito would no doubt be in a sour mood when they got back.

The pressure in his head travelled down his spine and into his chest, the raw strength flowing between he and Kohryu began to wane. It wasn't until they were in the next alleyway that Joker knew something was off. Kohryu's power was being erased, broken off into slivers and vanishing like an iceberg into the sea.

"Kohryu, you've done enough!" Mona gave him an odd look as he slowed into a jog, face pale, *"You should come back now!"*

"No, Trickster. You've not yet gotten to safety!"

Their bond, this Sacred Shimenawa that tied them together, was being frayed, straw by straw. Unbeknownst to either as Kohryu's mighty roars sang through the city streets. Kohryu forced more magic into the storm, the cutting winds and whipping rain blinded any who dare approach on foot, but the pest dragon was sticking close to the sunbeams bleeding in through the eye. Darting around like an impudent fly.

"I shall not stop until-"

The pest dragon ducked her head as she approached. Liquid ruby clashed with glowing crimson, the gaze of a man with silver scarves and the burning eyes of a dragon god met dead in the center. A heartbeat, then-

Snap.

Joker cried out in pain as Kohryu's harrowing wail trembled the entire city, then went dead silent.

"H-hey!" Mona was flung from Joker's shoulder as he lurched to a stop, "What's wrong!?"

Others screamed within Joker's psyche as Kohryu plummeted into the mindscape like a falling star. The thunderous crash overwhelmed their cries as the dragon's body settled, unmoving. Unnaturally still like a river of gold.

"*Kohryu!!*" Arsene howled, but his voice was oddly muffled.

His costume was ripped away and Akira felt a warm wetness trailing down his face, the excruciating pain spread across his body and burrowed into his soul like a parasite, he clutched his heart as if there were a knife through it. Something inside of him was fractured. Broken and *wrong*. He gasped as he clutched his pounding head, colors drained away from his blurred vision and the blindsiding dizziness brought him to his knees.

"Akira, talk to me!"

Mona's smudged form paced in front of him, going dead still as Akira finally looked up at his partner. Akira couldn't hold against the pain any longer, and he collapsed face first into the damp concrete.

"Hey! This is no time to be sleeping!"

Mona rounded on him, eyes flooding with tears as he saw the blood raining from Akira's eyes, nose, and mouth. He recoiled as the horror of Okumura's death sprang to his mind. Mona shook his head and headbutted Akira's damp hair.

"Akira, please! Wake up!!"

The not-cat turned a small, nervous circle when Akira didn't move.

“O-Oh! Uh, Mediarahan!”

A gentle green glimmer did nothing, only slowed the bleeding.

“S-Samarecarm!?”

Light spilled into the alley as the flowering vines curled around Akira’s body, but they and the butterfly shattered like glass. He still didn’t move. True fear gutted him like an ice cold blade. Mona shook Akira’s shoulder with his paws.

“Magician, you waste time!” Mercurius shouted, *“Go get help!”*

“Yes, help! Hold on, Akira!”

Mona sniffled as he forced himself to turn and run, leaving his partner in the rain. Nobody witnessed the tiny black shape flying through the streets aided by bursts of wind, but whether it was seconds or several minutes that had passed, he didn’t know. It was all a blur through the tears. Finally, the Raven’s Nest came into view.

Kaito fell out of his chair as the door nearly bent inwards by a gust of wind. Frantic scratching and mewls came from the other side. Kaito fixed his glasses and rushed to the entrance. He cursed as a small figure darted inside and he shoved the door shut with a heaving sigh, papers and knick knacks from his desk were blown over. His floor was soaked.

“Morgana?” He eyed the sopping wet cat, “What the *hell* is going on? The whole city is on lockdown and freaking out over that dragon! It’s already all over the news-”

“It’s Akira! He.... he....!”

Kaito froze as he looked Mona in the eyes and relived his most recent memories.

“What happened!? What did you two *do* ?”

“He’s hurt! Please, you have to help!”

Kaito stiffened, then nodded as he reached for the door, “Let’s go, we don’t have time for chit chat.”

“R-right!”

Mona turned and ran back out into the wall of rain. Kaito stilled his shaking hands as he hovered before the open door, he threw on his jacket and braved the downpour. He was soaked in seconds, the cold wind cut through his clothes. Kaito couldn’t see much as water built up on his glasses, but he was locked on Mona’s blurry trail. They passed several streets, Kaito would need to buy new shoes if not new lungs first, which burned just as bad as his legs.

“W-wait up!” He called as the cat rushed into the alley.

Kaito leaned on the icy cold wall, panting.

“W-well?” Kaito asked as he stared at a scarily stiff Morgana, “Where to next?”

“He...” The cat turned to him, tears freely flowing, “He was right here....”

Kaito inhaled sharply, eyes blown wide. He dragged himself from the wall and knelt next to Morgana, petting his head in soothing motions.

“We’ll find him,” He picked up the trembling cat and forced himself to his feet, “Either he or whoever found him can’t have gone too far in this crazy weather.”

Morgana sniffled and held back a sob. Kaito scanned around the alleyway for clues, his stomach churned at the small puddle of blood being washed away by the rain. He shook his head and compelled himself to stay calm, if not for himself, then for the frightened feline huddled to his chest. He had to focus.

After all, he had his injured kid to find.

Well....

I was being quite literal when I said there would be a storm :D

Regret

Chapter 30: Regret

Hoo Boy

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Cracked, like a broken mirror, voices spoke in hushed murmurs.

“Is he...?”

“No, he can’t be!”

“This is impossible!”

“Why did this happen?”

“What about the Trickster? He’s hurt, too!”

“Grandpa!!”

“Alice, wait!” Arsene reached out for her, but she ducked under his hand, “It might not be safe!”

Alice skipped over the shattered remains and hovered beside Kohryu’s head.

“Grandpa!” She said as she put her tiny hands on his snout, “Hey, wake up!”

Arsene rushed to her side, his smoldering eyes scanned over the dragon. Kohryu lay dead still, the ground around him was fractured, raised and fragmented like a canyon. The gleam of his once golden scales were muted, a sickly yellow. Darkness permeated the

mindscape once more, the twilight was snuffed out like a candle. Something dark swirled around in Arsene's chest as he stared down at Kohryu. It was a wicked blade of wrath, scalding hot as it sank into his heart and set his blood ablaze.

"Ishtar! Titania!" He called, "Can you do something?"

The two approached, each floating on either side of Kohryu's head. Ishtar paled as she ran her hands down the dragon's neck, Titania's brow was pinched.

"I'll use Mediarahan-"

"No! I should use Salvation!"

"Why? He doesn't have any ailments as far as I can tell!"

"Better to be extra safe, no? This isn't some tiny wound that can be cured with your weak magic!"

"You harlot, you just want to-"

"Enough!"

The mindscape shook under the pressure of Arsene's fury, sprouting a fantastic geyser behind him. Blue flames mixed with black and red tendrils, weaving around Arsene in a cursed dance, spreading its unholy light across the mindscape. Smoke fumed from his mask as his facial markings burned with red-hot lava. The other personas jumped back to avoid the smothering aura, Ishtar and Titania froze, wide-eyed. Alice whimpered as real tears flooded her eyes.

At this moment, he wasn't just Arsene.

His power was entangled with theirs as the true sovereign, the Trickster's genuine other self. The other personas lowered their heads in fidelity, too frightened or astonished to meet his eyes. After a moment the light died down, though his fury thrummed in a steady beat.

“We will not argue over petty little things during this crisis!” He said, wings splayed like a stretch of midnight sky, “The Trickster and Kohryu are injured beyond measure. We must be united, otherwise the Trickster could sustain permanent damage to his soul. Now, Ishtar, Titania, what do you-”

There was a sudden spike of energy. Kohryu’s crimson eyes shot open, but madness clouded them.

Arsene lunged to grab Alice under his arm, his wings wrapped around Titania and Ishtar. He jumped back as Kohryu’s snarls shook the mindscape like a mighty earthquake. The dragon reared up and howled a war cry, the swipe of his claw was lightning fast, Arsene was not swift enough to dodge it amongst the others’ screams.

Titania cried out as Kohryu’s claws ripped through Arsene’s wing, a spray of colors accompanied Arsene’s hiss.

“Kohryu, calm yourself!” Arsene shouted through the pain, “It is I, Arsene! You are safe!!”

“A-Arsene...?” Kohryu staggered and lost balance, crashing back onto the floor, “How did I...?”

“Arsene, your wing!” Ishtar paled when she saw the damage.

Magnificent feathers fell from the twitching limb as blood dripped like fresh rainfall. It wasn’t the blood of a human, this ichor was as multicolored and vivid as the Trickster’s footsteps. Titania and Ishtar moved as Arsene fell to one knee, gently setting Alice on the ground.

“Y-you...” Alice stared at the shredded wing in horror, “You protected us. You’re hurt!”

“I’ll be fine,” He said as Ishtar and Titania’s magic soothed the pain, “Kohryu, what happened to you?”

Kohryu laid his head down, exhausted. Guilt struck him and he looked away from Arsene, his blood-stained claws knotting into a fist.

“My deepest apologies. I... I lost myself.” Kohryu took a breath, it swept through the mindscape in a hot wind, “I was almost done with the storm, the Trickster was so close to getting away from those treacherous wretches. There was this other dragon, nothing more than a pest, but...”

“But what?” Arsene asked.

“There was another upon it’s back, and my power was erased as I gazed into his eyes. The pain was too great to bare.”

Kohryu growled, and there was a shift in the mindscape. A Shimenawa, his soul bond to the Trickster, appeared in front of Kohryu. The other personas gasped at the damage. A single strand held the two pieces together, frayed and so close to snapping.

“The man you’re talking about, was it Eraserhead? Was it his power that did this to you?”

“Indeed. If I were a mere moment later in throwing myself into the Trickster’s mind,” Kohryu muttered, “Then the bond would have been broken, and I.... I believe I would’ve perished.”

Silence. Arsene slowly stood as his wing was finally mended, though some of his feathers were missing or frayed. Titania hugged a crying Alice, Ishtar backed away to give them space. Alarm shot through Kohryu as he sensed Arsene’s mounting wrath.

“The Trickster!” He said, “What of the Trickster!?”

“He is unconscious.” Arsene growled, “And I dare not force a manifestation right now, not when his soul is in such a fragile state. Get some rest, Kohryu.”

“But-”

“No,” Arsene held a clawed hand up, “This is not up for debate, Old Boy. You need to recover, both for your own health and the Trickster’s.”

Kohryu blinked, then nodded. He laid his head down and closed his crimson eyes, the exhaustion put him to sleep on the spot. The others surrounded the sleeping dragon, their bonds alight with various emotions. Arsene curled his hands into fists as his fury peaked once more, dousing the entire mindscape with his power. Growls and snarls and shouts followed in a song of rage, they stared up at Arsene with no small amount of vengeance in their eyes.

“That man almost *killed* Kohryu, shattered the Trickster’s very soul,” Arsene’s voice reached all as he spread his arms and sore wings, “Such an act is *unforgivable* ! Is this understood?”

“He hurt master!” Cerberus bellowed, “He cannot be forgiven!”

“Hee ho!” Black Frost grinned and bounced on his heels, “Let me- hee bury him in a glacier, ho!”

“I shall drown him in a sea of filth,” Vasuki hissed, “That I promise.”

“I’m not opposed to pecking out his eyes,” Yatagarasu said with a graceful nod.

Seth growled and snapped his jaws together, “Or let me feast on his flesh! Break his bones like twigs!”

“No,” Alice wiped away her tears, her eyes glowing with malice, “Let us revel in his slow death. It’s nothing more than he deserves for hurting Big Brother like this.”

“But we cannot,” Titania let go of Alice and floated to Arsene’s side, putting her hand on his arm, “We cannot kill this wretched human, even if my hand also wants to strike. It would put the Trickster in even more danger.”

Alice pouted.

Arsene took a moment to think through the haze of rage.

“... Very well.” Smoke billowed from Arsene as he took a deep breath, “His death is forbidden by our hands, but it doesn’t mean that his trespass upon the Trickster will be forgotten!”

They howled their agreement. It was as clear as day.

If Eraserhead ever approached the Trickster again, they would make him wish he were never born.

[Haxxor]

You’re in trouble mister!!

YOU HAD ANOTHER DRAGON AND YOU DIDN’T TELL ME??

Don’t think that your newest little stunt isn’t all over the news! And you broke your promise again, you liar! People are going nuts over all of the heroes involved and the damage across the city!

~1 missed call

...

...

[Haxxor]

Answer me or I swear to all that is holy, I’ll have you make so much curry that it’ll take you years to recover from it!!

...

...

~ 3 missed calls

[Haxxor]

Hey, this isn't funny anymore! Pick up your darn phone!!

There's weird interference all over Musutafu because of that freak storm! Please tell me that you're not responsible for it?

Akira???

...

...

~ 6 missed calls.

Aizawa sighed in relief when his feet finally landed on solid ground.

Ryukyu shifted back into her human form, shaking her head as if to clear it.

Rain pelted them and the sky was still pitch black, the raging typhoon barreled on without the dragon's cries. The eye of the storm was above them, ironic how the sunlight hit U.A. Ryukyu hissed in pain and rubbed at her temple.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, just a headache.” Ryukyu muttered, “I felt weird. It’s just, this whole thing feels strange.”

Aizawa raised a brow, “You felt it too?”

An immense pain stabbed into his head when he erased that dragon’s power, the pain had ebbed a little, but now a strange static prickled across his scalp and down his spine, swam around his heart like a lurking shark. This was the first major drawback he’d experienced with erasing a quirk, not including his dry eyes. It threw him off. He felt as if he had done something... terrible.

“When you erased that dragon...” She looked him straight in the eye, her expression unreadable, “I felt nothing but pain in it’s final moments. That scream was... it was horrible, wasn’t it? I don’t know if it was some mental connection with me since I was in my dragon form. Just thinking about that sound makes me shiver.”

Aizawa hummed, “It was weird.”

“Not just that.” She turned to look up at the sky, where the massive dragon was, “When we were up there, every instinct I had told me to flee. Like I was just an ant against a god, but that’s the funny thing. I think I recognize that dragon.”

“What?”

“It had to be none other than the yellow dragon, Huanglong. Or, as he’s known in Japan, Kohryu.”

Aizawa furrowed his brow, she turned back to him, face fallen in shock.

“But that’s impossible. No quirk should be able to control an *actual* god from mythology.” Her brow pinched together, “I thought the other

reports about Joker's creatures were exaggerated, now I'm having doubts."

He opened his mouth to respond when his phone went off. Eraserhead scowled, but he answered when he saw the familiar number.

"Tsukauchi, please tell me you have the kid in custody."

"... No, but I have other news." Tsukauchi sighed, "Reports are flooding in across the city. Whatever is left of the police force and heroes are being redirected to help civilians and get a total on the damage caused by all of this, but they are delayed by the storm. Most of them are being sent to the hospital for their injuries."

"I knew this would be a disaster." Eraserhead swore under his breath, "Anything else?"

"Well, few small teams are searching the city for Joker, but I doubt they'll be successful. Nezu is at the station, he wanted to look through the cameras but any footage has been corrupted or lost altogether."

"That's not good news, detective."

"Right now, there is no good news. We've failed."

"Yeah, no shit we failed! I told Midnight not to do anything stupid, and she goes right in without me! We would've had him if I were there!" He took a breath as Ryukyu furrowed her brows, "Sorry. I shouldn't have shouted like that."

"It's fine." Tsukauchi sighed, "Though you might not be able to stay mad at her. She, Hound Dog, and the squad that went in the warehouse are in the hospital, all of them unconscious. We won't know what exactly went down until one of them wakes up."

"I... see."

"Look, we need to regroup. You want to meet up at the station?"

"Fine."

"Are you alright?"

"Just peachy. You heard it, right? I'm sure over half the city heard that dragon's final cry. Ryukyu said that she felt like it was in pain during its last moments. I felt something weird with my quirk too." There was a moment of silence, "I can't shake this feeling that something's wrong with the kid."

"If.... If Joker is injured or if something did go wrong, then we'll find him. It's only a matter of time now that we know he's been staying in Musutafu."

"I know. I'll go ahead and meet you at the station."

He hung up, shoving his phone in his pocket with a sigh. Aizawa glanced over at Ryukyu, who was talking softly on her communicator, after a few moments she hung up.

"I'll make a full report on Kohryu later. Right now I'll be joining my intern on the search for Joker," She said as she turned towards him, "Figured they could use a few eyes in the sky. You want a ride to the station?"

Aizawa turned green, "No, I'll walk. I wanted to patrol around for him on the way, just in case the other team misses something. You sure you should fly in this weather?"

"Don't worry, I've flown in worse conditions. Not one for flying, eh?" She said with a sharp grin, "Suit yourself, Eraser."

He shielded his eyes as she transformed, her wings beating down on him as she rose off into the sky. Aizawa watched her soar into the drizzling rain for a few moments, frowning. A shiver went down his spine when he was finally alone, scratching at his stubble.

Deep down, he knew something was wrong.

He's never gotten such sharp pain when using his quirk before, and staring into the dragon's eyes was surreal. It was an ancient power, something that transcended humans. A being that no simple quirk should ever control. He was sure of it. He shook off another shiver and buried his face in his scarf, turning towards the dark, drenched city.

If anything bad happened to the kid, he knew it would be his fault.

Shoto and Fuyumi were paralyzed, eyes unbelievably wide as they scrolled through their phones.

Videos, discussions, theories, and outrage poured out from across the country. They had heard everything in the safety of their own house, Shoto was startled awake by the great dragon's cries, at first he thought it was an earthquake or a villain attack. The storm continued, howling winds and rain tapped incessantly at the windows. Shoto's knuckles were bone white as he clutched his phone, he strained to keep his breathing stable. It was no wonder why father suddenly rushed out late in the night without so much as a word.

Shoto glanced towards the kitchen, where Natsuo paced while he whispered into the phone.

"Joker will be okay. He probably got away." Fuyumi said, "They would've announced it if he had been arrested. You know how the media can be."

He simply nodded, not trusting his voice. His heart thundered in his ears and a swell of anger swirled around in his chest. Just the damage to the abandoned part of town was enough evidence of the Hero Commission's foolishness. Musutafu was trying to calculate the estimated damage, but it was near impossible with the *literal*

hurricane outside. It still raged on, despite the dragon's sudden disappearance.

"Hey!" Natsuo burst into the room, "So Hina just got back to me, she says that the petition is now live! Just in time too, huh?"

Shoto nodded and stared at his phone, "Send it to me, I'll share it with Iida."

"Got it!"

"I'll do what I can," Fuyumi said, "I have a few people who can spread it around, too."

Shoto scrolled back through the chat room between himself, Midoriya, and Iida.

[Ingenium]

I'm sure you're already heard, and I've also taken the liberty to share it with the 1-A chat room, but today's classes have been canceled due to the storm and the appearance of Joker's golden dragon.

It's quite possible that classes might be canceled for the rest of the week.

[Deku]

I know, I saw it in person!! The dragon hovered over our building for a minute!

I wish you guys could've seen it! It was so huge!!

[Ingenium]

What!?

Are you alright!? No damage or anything?

[Deku]

No, we're fine!

My mom was scared for a little bit, but we stayed inside!

I'm worried more about Joker though, has the news said anything?

[Ingenium]

I'm not sure. My brother is keeping an eye on things, he'll let us know if anything happened.

I do find it strange that it just vanished though.

[Deku]

I know.

Do you guys think that Aizawa-sensei was in on the raid?

If Joker's dragon vanished without a trace like this...

It's the only conclusion I can come up with.

[Ingenium]

It's likely possible.

Tensei said that All Might and Endeavor were there, Ryukyu too. As well as a bunch of smaller agencies. I feel like the U.A. staff, Aizawa-sensei especially, would be valuable for something like this.

[Deku]

Yeah...

I hope they didn't hurt him.

That last roar sounded so sad.

[Peppermint]

I won't forgive Aizawa if he intentionally caused Joker any pain.

[Ingenium]

In this situation I'm sure he had no choice, right?

If anything, I don't believe Aizawa-sensei would cause harm on purpose! That wouldn't sit well with him, and as his students, we should believe in him!

[Deku]

I don't like it either, but I agree with Iida.

What really worries me is All Might and Endeavor might have been injured?

[Ingenium]

I'm sure they are alright! They are the number one and two heroes after all!!

[Peppermint]

Endeavor is fine, he had a minor injury and will be released from the hospital later today, I'm sure it's the same for All Might.

[Deku]

Yeah...

I just can't help but worry for everyone involved, you know?

Between Joker's radio silence and the ongoing storm, then all of those heroes and civilians that got injured.

I don't know which side to be on.

[Peppermint]

The heroes dug their own grave.

I don't think Joker was intentionally trying to cause any harm, he had every right to defend himself against that ridiculous raid. They overstepped big time.

[Deku]

Well, when you put it like that...

[Ingenium]

It is a touchy subject to be sure.

There might not be a wrong or right side to this.

[Peppermint]

Maybe.

Anyway, the petition just went live.

Iida, can you send it to your brother right away?

[Ingenium]

Yes!!

We'll make sure it reaches the right people!

Shoto sent the link to both this chat room and the one for Class 1-A, all of whom were freaking out over the storm. The petition already had over 100 signatures. Shoto looked up and nodded to his brother, who grinned back. They refreshed the page a minute later, now over 150 signatures and rising.

“Now what?” Fuyumi asked.

“Now we wait,” Natsuo said, “Hina and I will manage all of the technical bits, so don’t you guys worry. I can’t wait to see how many we get!”

“I hope this works.” Shoto muttered as he stared at his phone, watching the 1-A chat go haywire.

“It will!” Natsuo walked over to the window, staring up at the rain and swirling clouds, “It has to.”

“I’ll make breakfast while we wait.” Fuyumi stood from the couch, smiling softly at Shoto, “Or should we just have some tea and cold soba?”

Shoto nodded, and they all went into the kitchen together.

They rode out the storm, eating cold soba while Natsuo made jokes, as word of the petition traveled like wildfire.

22 missed calls.

“I can’t believe he was in Musutafu this whole time,” Aizawa said as he scratched his stubble, “Right under our noses. We should’ve seen it, since Silver Falcon was his first target.”

“Hindsight is always 20/20.” Tsukauchi muttered.

“Indeed!” Nezu chirped from behind his laptop, “The boy played us all like fiddles! Even for one such as myself, to have the wool pulled over my eyes... It’s quite marvelous. Exciting, even!”

“You’re not helping, Nezu.” Aizawa glared, “And why the hell did you bring that stuffed fish here?”

Aizawa glanced at the chair next to Nezu. In it sat the giant red plush, it’s button eyes staring at nothing and everything. It creeped Aizawa out, even more so now that the rat had started bringing it *everywhere* . And he gave the fish a bow-tie.

A bow-tie.

“Why not?” Nezu peeked up from the screen, grinning, “How else is Admiral Feesh supposed to learn? The best lessons are imparted by such chaotic environments, Aizawa.”

“You... you named the fish.” Tsukauchi snorted, “Why am I not surprised?”

Aizawa rolled his eyes and decided to ignore them.

They stood over a table in the police station. People were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, another table was lined with officers, the trill of ringing phones was constant. Behind them were multiple cork boards.

One with an intricate map of Musutafu, covered in a variety of stickers. Red for obliterated structures and buildings, those were mostly in the abandoned districts. Yellow dotted most of it, showcasing minor damage to shops and apartment buildings. A swath of blue to show the flooding in the harbor and Dagobah Beach. And finally, green. Green was the eye of the storm, centered mostly around U.A. and the untouched surrounding streets.

The amalgamation of colors replicated the radar perfectly.

Aizawa didn't bother looking at any of the other boards, covered with pictures of all of the heroes and officers who were at the raid. Most of them were in the hospital. He glanced over Midnight and Hound Dog's pictures, grimacing. He shook his head and looked at Tsukauchi.

"I thought you said the chief was here," Aizawa grabbed the cup of stale coffee in front of him, "But I don't see him anywhere."

"Oh," Tsukauchi looked up from one of the reports, "He's on the phone with the board director of the Hero Commission."

Aizawa raised a brow, "And how's that going?"

"Well...." Tsukauchi waved his hand, "See for yourself."

Aizawa and Nezu looked into the window of an office. The Chief of Police was pacing back and forth, expression downright *murderous* as he spoke on the phone. It was no small miracle that the device wasn't crushed in his grip.

"I'm just glad that the room is soundproof." Tsukauchi said, "Otherwise his shouting would be louder than all of these ringing phones."

"They deserve it though."

“I know.” Tsukauchi sighed as another officer left a heaping pile of reports on the table, and was gone just as fast, “We warned them, and this is what it comes to for them to listen.”

Nezu chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, Aizawa!” Nezu said, “I’m having no luck with the cameras, so I shall be writing a letter to the Hero Commission! They deserve a proper scolding on multiple fronts. And this shall provide us with a *unique* opportunity, I would hate to miss out on such an occasion.”

Aizawa raised a brow, “What kind of opportunity?”

“You’ll find out eventually. It’ll be glorious, that I promise!”

They didn’t like the look in Nezu’s eyes, so they didn’t ask.

Tsukauchi shuffled the paperwork, “I don’t even feel sorry for them anymore.”

Aizawa scowled. He tapped his foot as Tsukauchi sorted through more paperwork, Nezu typed away on his laptop, grinning like the feral mouse he was.

Aizawa’s little patrol around the block ended up with nothing, zip, zero, *zilch*. Not a tiny inkling as to where Joker vanished to. Again. It was the same for Ryukyu’s team, who were still out there searching. The guilt swirled around his stomach, more powerful than the hurricane outside. He was about to turn and get back into the storm, when an officer rushed to their table, looking pale.

“Akane?” Tsukauchi said, brows furrowed, “What is it?”

“Did they find Joker?” Aizawa asked, straightening.

“No, but you should see this, sir.”

Aizawa and Tsukauchi exchanged a quick glance, then followed Akane to the front desk. Nezu hopped down from his chair and clambered atop Aizawa's shoulder. A few other officers and secretaries were gathered around a computer. None other than Demizu Mika was on screen.

"Turn up the volume!" Tsukauchi said as he swiped up a pen and notepad.

"-ition gained rapid notoriety after Team Idaten's announcement, a call for the Hero Public Safety Commission to rescind Joker's 25 million yen bounty. It's spread to people across Japan, gaining no less than 5,000 signatures ten minutes after the former hero, Ingenium, made his statement to the media, and that number is skyrocketing into the tens of thousands. A growing number of heroes, including Best Jeanist and Miruko, have also signed it."

Aizawa cursed under his breath and ran a hand down his face, Tsukauchi went pale as his pen hovered over his pad. Nezu shook in excitement. The others around them shifted on their feet as the screen changed, showing multiple videos of the brilliant golden dragon flying across the city.

"Many citizens, especially those currently caught up in the storm raging over Musutafu, say that such damage to the city could have been avoided if it weren't for that bounty. Reports indicate that All Might, Endeavor, several smaller agencies, and police in riot gear were part of the manhunt. A majority of public favor falls to Joker, many saying that the vigilante was simply defending himself against such staggering odds..." She trailed off, brows furrowed as she reached for her ear, *"This just in. We'll now go live to a scene in Akihabara, where a crowd has gathered, protesting the Hero Commission's-"*

Tsukauchi's phone began to ring. Aizawa followed the detective as he picked it up.

"Toshinori, you're awake!"

Aizawa breathed another sigh of relief, Nezu's ears flicked. That blonde buffoon took a nasty hit, it was no small miracle that some of the U.A. staff found him first, and secretly transported him to the hospital.

"I made it out unscathed. Eraser and Nezu are with me, too."
Tsukauchi's shoulders sank, and he rubbed at his eyes, "No, you *stay* in the hospital. You're injured! There's nothing for you to do here, anyway. None of our teams have found anything significant, and I don't want you to be out there right now. Alright, I'll update you in case anything else happens."

Tsukauchi hung up, a sudden weight sank in his shoulders.

"Recovery Girl would murder him if he were out and about already," Aizawa droned, "I don't think he could escape the hospital in that condition anyway."

"No kidding." Tsukauchi sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Nezu hopped down and whipped out his phone, that demon's grin plastered on his face. Aizawa looked over the mouse's shoulder, then stiffened.

"Nezu, don't you *dare* ."

The rat had the gall to stare them straight in the eye as he pressed enter.

"Too late! I have officially signed the petition! I'll be sure to have Admiral Feesh sign it as well!"

Aizawa and Tsukauchi exchanged glances, the former's eye twitched.

"Is there any coffee left?" Tsukauchi said, deflated, "This is going to be a *long* day."

“I don’t think anybody could function without coffee right now,” Aizawa said as they made for the break room, “It still tastes like crap, but it’ll keep us going.”

Tsukauchi snorted at that. A cackling Nezu was left behind, the haunting sound was cut off as Aizawa shut the door.

They poured cups of caffeine sludge and chugged it down. Tsukauchi wrinkled his nose in disgust, but he poured himself another cup. Aizawa’s mind drifted to a certain cafe as the horrid taste lingered on his tongue, he wondered if both his students and Akane weren’t just exaggerating about that cafe’s coffee. They should visit once this chaotic mess settles down.

Any other coffee could be better than this garbage.

Shigaraki was *livid*.

Seething anger pulsed through his veins as the announcement ended, Demizu Mika’s annoying voice faded into the background. That petition was stupid! Why was it getting so much attention!? Why were all of these people in such an outrage? What, just because Joker summoned a dragon and got away from the stupid heroes. Though he would admit that he thought the dragon was so cool...

He shook his head and glared, his anger rearing like a serpent.

Kurogiri warped his hand away as he lunged for the television.

“You can just ask to have it muted, Shigaraki Tomura.” Kurogiri said as he silenced the TV, “That would’ve been the fifth one we’ve had to replace just this month.”

“Ooh. You’re awfully mad, Shiggy!”

Himiko Toga swung her legs back and forth from her place on the bar, much to Kurogiri’s ire. She had a half-finished popsicle stick in

her hand, though not even Shigaraki's harsh glare stopped her from finishing it.

"Of course I'm mad!" He stomped back and forth, scratching at his neck, "This secret boss is stealing all of the limelight! Who even mentions the League Of Villains anymore, huh!? Nobody!! It's not fair!"

Himiko devoured the rest of the ice cream, "Just let him."

Shigaraki stilled, slowly turning towards her. Kurogiri's body flickered, ready to divert a confrontation should it come to that. Shigaraki's hands twitched as he glared at her, eyes like hot coals.

"What?"

"*Let* him take the spotlight." Himiko's cat-like eyes glowed as she grinned, holding out her bare popsicle stick, "Let him rise up and up and up."

She raised the popsicle stick towards the ceiling, her grin twisting into a nightmarish leer.

"Let him get comfortable in his newfound fame, let him bask in it. Let people follow him like lost puppies." The popsicle stick creaked, "Then when he reaches his peak..."

Crack.

She dropped the broken stick with an insane grin.

"That's when we strike. We'll take him down and have the public *know* who stole their beloved little vigilante from them, and raise the League of Villain's name with it!"

Shigaraki widened his eyes. Kurogiri was silent, staring at the manic, grinning girl in shock. Shigaraki glanced over at Dabi, who was seated at the other end of the bar, hovering over an untouched drink.

“What do you think of all this?”

Dabi looked up to the television. His eyes flashed with some invisible emotion, carefully concealed underneath a stoic mask.

“I don’t really care.” Dabi huffed, staring into his glass, “I don’t give a damn as long as the brat doesn’t get in the way of my goals.”

Toga giggled as Shigaraki rolled his eyes.

“I have to admit,” Kurogiri said, “That’s not a bad plan. Giran said he may have found someone with a suitable quirk that can capture Joker, but that it needs to be tested before we’re sure of anything. It’s possible that he’ll join us. I’m surprised Toga, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Of course!” She blushed and squealed like a schoolgirl, “Joker opposed my precious Stain and took him away from me, so I have to make him pay! Hey Kurogiri, can you get me another ice cream?”

“I am not your servant,” Kurogiri muttered, “Get it yourself. Clean your trash from the floor while you’re at it.”

“I would, but I just ate the last one! Big sis Magne is taking forever to get back from the store! Can’t you just teleport some ice cream instead?”

Kurogiri heaved a sigh, but ignored her in favor of polishing a glass.

Shigaraki sank into a bar stool. He ignored Dabi’s pointed stare and looked at the silent television, absorbing a scene where Joker’s dragon weaved through the dark storm clouds. Yes, if he could somehow turn U.A.’s gold medalist to their side *and* hurt this secret boss...

Then the League Of Villains would live forever in infamy.

Dabi raised a brow as a malicious grin split Shigaraki’s face, but he decided not to question it.

He didn't feel like turning into dust, after all.

"Nobody's here."

Kaito stepped away from the Blue Lotus Cafe. It was dark inside, and the sign on the door stated it was closed.

"But..." Morgana's ears flattened, "But we've looked everywhere! Where else could he be? It wasn't supposed to be like this! He... He was supposed to get me fatty tuna..."

Kaito sniffled and hugged his chest as they left the cafe behind and ducked into an alley. They were soaked to the bone and shivering, any attempt to keep Morgana in his jacket was futile, the cat kept wriggling out and running off on his own. His feet ached and he tried to keep the exhaustion at bay, the worry gnawing away at his heart kept him going. But everyone had limits.

"I know," Kaito shivered as rain tapped on his jacket, "Let's head back to the Nest."

"What!?" Morgana whirled around to him, "We can't stop now!"

"Look, we've been out here for hours." Kaito motioned to the empty streets behind them, "What would happen if Akira came back to the Raven's Nest and we weren't there? Do you think he would want us running ourselves down like this? Besides, the heroes know what you look like and, well, it's just not safe to be out here."

They heard it, the flap of leathery wings. Kaito cursed under his breath and huddled down next to Morgana, his dark clothes blending them into the wall. Ryukyu's massive body flew over them, kicking up the wind and splashing them with icy rain. They stayed stock still a moment longer, the dragon's thundering wing beats faded into the distance. Kaito stood with a sigh, watching the water drops fall from his clothes to the puddles at his feet.

“Ryukyu just made my point.”

It was thanks to Morgana’s abilities that they’ve managed to stay under the heroes’ radar in the first place, but Morgana was too exhausted to keep it up for much longer.

“I...” Morgana laid flat on the ground, despite the freezing puddles, “I guess you’re right. I’m just so worried. He was really hurt. I’ve *never* seen him like that before.”

“I’m worried too.” Kaito picked him up and wandered deeper into the alley, “We’ll recover at the Raven’s Nest. Some food, warmth, and a few hours of rest is better than us floundering around out here. Sound good?”

“We don’t really have a choice, do we?”

Kaito was silent, frowning. He didn’t answer, instead he focused on putting one foot in front of the other. It wouldn’t benefit Akira at all if they got sick or worse yet, were detected by a hero like Ryukyu and arrested on the spot. Still, that knot in his chest wouldn’t go away until he saw Akira again. That, and ground him for at least month. Maybe squeeze some more curry out of the kid as retribution, too.

It was the least Akira could do for worrying him so damn much.

The doctor peeked into the room as he heard his master laugh.

The room was lit up by a myriad of screens and humming medical equipment. Over half a dozen new monitors had been added to All For One’s set-up, all playing videos or news reports from Musutafu. One screen covered the current protest in Akihabara, another with multiple videos from the great golden dragon’s attack, another still with weather reports and radars on the man made typhoon.

The doctor smiled, mimicking the grin of his master, ones that stretched from ear to ear like a cheshire cat. Such power was mind

boggling! He longed to experiment on such a quirk. All For One chuckled as he leaned back in his chair, sending a chill up the doctor's spine.

The destruction, this chaos. The pure frailty of the Hero Commission and their sorry excuse for a raid. Demizu Mika and the Idate Agency spreading this petition, and people flocking to it like mindless sheep. A beloved vigilante, lost, wounded, or perhaps worse. It was the perfect storm, both literally and figuratively. He reveled in all of it, and he knew it was the same for his master.

The doctor chuckled as he pulled on his gloves, turning away from the room. He had beloved experiments to get back to. So many Nomu to create, so little time. Better yet, Giran was bringing in a shipment of fresh materials tomorrow! His eager giggles bounced down the hallway as he walked, until he reached a certain door made of thick steel and heavy duty locks. Screams and inhuman yowls came from behind it. He rubbed his hands together and went through it.

Back in the darkened room, All For One laughed at the delicious pandemonium.

This was the most fun he's had in *decades* .

[Haxxor]

Gentle and I are taking the next train to Musutafu when the lines open up again.

I swear if you're not dead by the time we get there I'll do you in myself.

~34 missed calls

...

[Haxxor]

Please be okay

The calls continued to go unanswered.

We hit some MORE big milestones!! 2100 kudos, over 60k (sixty thousand what??) hits, and nearly 450 bookmarks?? I'm still so flabbergasted and in awe of everybody's support for this story, you guys have no idea!

Confession

Chapter 31: Confession

We finally find out what happened to our boy!

Some edits made 10/24/2020

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

People cried out as they rushed for cover, they scrambled over one another to take shelter from the sheeting rain and howling winds. Multiple pairs of footsteps pounded down the alley, great splashes splattered the walls from the swollen puddles. It was then that they encountered the boy.

"Wait, there's someone here!"

Kind, shaky hands turned him over, careful of any injuries. Startled gasps and muffled screams.

"What the-!? What happened to him!?"

"C-call an ambulance!"

"I'm trying, but it's not going through!"

"He's bleeding so much..."

"Does he have a phone?"

"Yeah, but it's busted. What do we do!?"

"We can't leave him here!"

"Wait, I think I know this kid! Isn't he the barista from the Blue Lotus?"

"... You're right, do you think they'll do something? They know him better than we do."

"The Blue Lotus is a lot closer. We won't make it to a hospital in this weather."

"Risumi and Ayumu can take care of him, lets not waste any more time!"

"Holy-!! Help me with him. He weighs a ton!"

He felt weightless, whispers in the darkness, the chilly breeze and the *tap tap* of rain pattered all around him. These things were just out of his reach, like a curtain call that swept him under the sea of unconsciousness.

His body was a patchwork of pain, so he never resisted the call of painless sleep.

His mind was fuzzy when an inkling of awareness returned.

A cacophony of voices swirled around inside his mind, but his head hurt too much to make heads or tails of them. Then, a sudden howl ripped through his head, a draconic scream of rage and a hiss of pain and startled shouting, something deep within Akira cracked like a mirror, white-hot pain writhed through his body. Fresh crimson droplets fell with the pouring rain.

"Shit! He's bleeding again!"

"Hold on, kid! We're almost there."

It was *too much* . Akira escaped back into the soothing darkness.

The last time distorted awareness came was when there was the sound of a bell, oddly familiar and calming. He smiled when the scent of coffee and curry and warm cinnamon washed over him. He must've been in the cafe. He was *safe* .

"Boss...?"

His throat was so parched, it made his voice crack. The bodies around him stiffened, there were more muffled voices all directed at him, but he was too tired to answer. There was a soft hand on his head, running their fingers through his hair, he relaxed and fell into the blackness once again. He never knew how long he was here, floating in a sea of nothing. There was no pain, no feeling, no.... *anything* here.

"... *ter!*"

A faraway voice called to him.

"..*ckster!!*"

He whirled around in the dark abyss, but the voice echoed all around him.

"... *Trickster!?*"

The small voice was closer and oh so familiar. He opened his mouth to shout back, when a sudden flash of a blue butterfly wing whipped him back into the waking world. His eyes flew open as he jolted straight up, gasping and coughing against the grimy dryness of his throat. A thick blanket fell around his waist as his fit continued. Someone grabbed his hand and forced a smooth glass in it.

"Here, drink up."

Akira recognized Risumi's voice, and the cold water soothed his throat. She took the glass when he was finished and set it aside. He

rubbed at his eyes and blinked rapidly, trying and failing to shake the haziness in his vision.

“Where... am I?”

“Shh, lie back down.” She said, “You’re safe, you’re in our apartment above the cafe.”

Risumi placed her hands on his shoulders and he settled down on the cushions, a couch by the looks of it. They were in a quaint little room, with wooden floors and decorations like the ones in the cafe. There were a few more plush chairs and an entertainment stand with a TV, this room was connected to a kitchen, from which Ayumu and Hitoshi stared at him with wide eyes. Both of them were bone white.

A crack of thunder shook the silence.

Risumi, who sat on the coffee table in front of him, looked out the window, frowning. She turned back to him when the thunder died down, and it was now that he noticed the bags under her eyes. The tiredness lined in her whole body or how her hair wasn’t tied in its usual elegant braid, stray hairs weaved over her face. Worry creased her brow as she stared into his silvery eyes, her hands knotted together.

“How are you feeling?”

Akira placed his arm over his eyes. His head was cotton and static, his memory foggy and incoherent. It hurt to move his body, as if his skin was cracked glass. The world spun unnaturally. He was lucky that he had an empty stomach. There was something else, deep within. It was like there was a tiny fracture in his heart, a piece of a puzzle that didn’t quite fit anymore.

Honestly, he felt better when he was drugged and beaten.

There was a sharp intake of air.

“When you were *what* !?”

Akira lifted his arm to see Risumi gaping and pale.

“Did...” His throat was still scratchy, but he held back a cough, “Did I say that out loud...?”

Her hands were fists in her lap, the knuckles white and shaking.

“Yes, sweetheart.” She replied tersely, “Yes, you did.”

“Oh.”

Silence permeated the apartment. The Shinsou family knew what they heard. Risumi and Ayumu exchanged glances, Hitoshi’s stomach churned as his nails dug into his fists. Akira couldn’t stand the ear ringing quiet, or how uncomfortable words hung off their tongues. Another flash of lightning flooded the apartment. The roll of thunder washed through the drenched city, it allowed him to pull his thoughts together.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know what happened to you, but we can discuss that later.” Risumi shook her head, “Do you remember one of our regulars, Emiyo-san?”

Akira furrowed his brow, he vaguely remembered that red-haired woman who had called him out for 'cutting in line' a few weeks ago.

Ayumu cleared his throat, “She and her nephews were in the city when that dragon attacked and the storm hit. They found you when they were seeking shelter, alone and... well...”

The man grimaced. Hitoshi swallowed, still gaping at Akira.

“You were bleeding when they brought you in,” Risumi said softly, “A lot . Ayumu carried you upstairs and I cleaned you up, we reassured

them that we would take care of you, so they didn't stick around. You've been unconscious all day and through the night."

Akira gave her a blank stare.

Dragon? Storm? He was unconscious *all night* ? Where was Morgana!? The memories came flooding back in a relentless cascade. The heroes, their escape, *Kohryu!* He flung himself into the mindscape, but it was dark and desolate. There was *nothing* . A cracked, empty void.

"H-hey-" Risumi stood when he sat up again, wheezing, "Kurusu, you need to lay down!"

He didn't hear her through the ringing in his ears.

"Th-they're not here..."

"What?"

He clawed away at the frightening emptiness in his heart. His lungs refused to take any air. Then... they couldn't be...

"Kurusu, you need to calm down!" Risumi knelt beside him and grasped his shoulder, "Please kiddo, breathe with me."

He didn't listen, too enamored with the darkness to pay attention to the outside world.

There was an echo, a fluttering heartbeat. Akira felt a tug in the deepest reaches of his psyche. He tugged back, and relief swelled when Arsene's presence filled the void. The pure sense of alleviation was dizzying.

"*Trickster!*" Arsene clutched his chest in relief, "*Thank goodness! We didn't know what to think. It feels like our soul has been dark for ages.*"

The others flooded in.

"Big brother!"

"Master!!"

"Mask Bearer, thank the heavens you are alright-"

"Trickster-"

"We thought that you-"

"We didn't think that-"

"-If that man ever approaches-"

"Hush! We are-"

"-verwhelming him!"

"Silence!" Arsene's voice rang through the mindscape, *"Calm yourselves. We do not wish to smother him."*

The other personas quieted. The crackled pain over his heart eased as Akira basked in their presence.

"Is everyone alright? Is Kohryu...?"

"Kohryu is greatly weakened, so he's resting." Arsene sighed, *"As you should be."*

"I... I'll be fine."

Doubt emanated from the persona, he could feel the others either shaking their heads or frowning.

"We've talked about this before. You are not 'fine'." Arsene growled, *"Try telling that to the woman in front of you. She'll see through that lie as I do."*

"Kurusu?"

Akira blinked and looked up, she peered into him for a few tense seconds, searching his pale face.

“S-sorry.” Akira released the breathe he was holding, “I spaced out.”

“That’s alright.” Risumi squeezed his shoulder, then let go, “Is there anyone you want to call? Your phone was too damaged by the rain. We’ve been trying to contact the police or an ambulance for you, but-”

“No!”

“Trickster, wait-!”

He was on his feet in seconds, but his body wasn’t ready for such movements. The world tilted and he lost his balance. There was a shatter of glass and people shouting, his vision darkened, and he was on the floor when it cleared. Risumi hovered in front of him, horrified. Ayumu and Hitoshi were behind her.

“No police, no hospitals. No *heroes* .” He held up his hands as unwanted tears blurred his eyes, “Please.”

Risumi shushed him and approached slowly, as if he were an injured animal.

“It’s alright, we won’t call them.” She pulled him into a hug, “Not if you don’t want us to.”

It was the warmest embrace he’s felt in a long time. He wrapped his arms around her and trembled, gripping the back of her shirt as if he were afraid to ever let go. Her hand carded through his hair, and the sensation made him suddenly drowsy. His eyes grew heavy and his body relaxed. He tried to fight it off, but it was like he was being compelled to sleep. Was this Risumi’s quirk? He had never asked what it was.

“Sleep, Ren.” Arsene’s presence shrouded him in comfort, “You are safe here.”

He needed nothing more to fall into a dreamless slumber.

Risumi stilled when Akira let go, and she pulled back to look at him. She wiped the stray tear that fell down his cheek, brushed stray hairs away from his eyes. The boy was so pale, so *sickly*, his breathing was slightly labored. Dark circles were underneath his eyes, more apparent now after all of that blood was wiped away. What happened to him to make him like this? He was as healthy as a horse during his last shift!

“What...” Hitoshi’s voice was strained, “What are we going to do?”

“We can’t call the police anyway,” Ayumu glanced out the window, “The typhoon has the whole city on lockdown and the lines are clogged up.”

“And we won’t be calling them, either.” She said as she held Akira closer, “You both heard what he said as well as I did, and his reaction to simply contacting the police...”

“Yeah.” Ayumu’s eyes softened as he looked at Kurusu, “Hitoshi, help your mother get Kurusu situated. I’ll make us all a pot of coffee and clean up the glass. We might be in for the long haul.”

“R-right.”

Ayumu’s heart twisted in guilt after he took care of the glass and started on the coffee. This boy, who had been nothing but cocky and confident up until now, was so frightened. So raw with emotion. He had never witnessed somebody, much less a *kid*, be so afraid of heroes. He was drugged? Beaten? Why was he in that alleyway, bleeding and alone? The dragon. This storm. How Kurusu’s shifty circumstances aligned with Joker’s recent escape.

It was all too coincidental.

Ayumu looked to his wife as the coffee took its sweet time brewing. There was fear in her face as she draped the blanket over Kurusu. Hitoshi was at her side, his son stared down at Kurusu with a whirlwind of different emotions. Risumi looked up at him, a film of tears in her eyes.

Could Kurusu really be...?

Ayumu swallowed thickly as the machine beeped.

Maybe he'd been wrong about the kid from the start.

Hero Missing From Embryon Group-

Nope.

Silver Falcon's Legal Team Arrested For-

Old news.

HPSC Under Fire For Disaster Raid-

Swipe.

Mystical Typhoon Baffles Experts-

Not this one, either.

Several Heroes Hospitalized-

Next.

Multiple Protests Break Out Across Japan.

Taneo bit his lip. He shook his head and scrolled to the next one when he was finished.

Where Is Joker?! Top 10 Theories On His Whereabouts!

He rolled his eyes and shut his laptop when he read 'Abducted By Aliens'. How are people allowed to publish such garbage? His heart lurched as his phone pinged with a message, he jumped at it, tipping over the accumulation of papers all over his desk. His heart sank and he glowered. Minato and Mitsuo gave him odd glances from their desks.

"What's wrong?" Mitsuo leaned forward on her desk, "I haven't seen you so lively in days."

"Nothing. It was just Yuma asking what noodles I wanted from the store." He sighed and tossed his phone on the desk, "It's been what, three days since the storm started? I haven't heard a peep from Joker."

"But..." Minato looked out the darkened window, frowning, "Joker is Joker, he can't go down that easy! He's going to be fine, right?"

"I hope so." Taneo's knee bounced, "I just don't like this radio silence. What if he was injured? The heroes haven't found him yet, but what if he needs immediate medical attention or something?"

"Cheer up!" Mitsuo stood from her desk, grinning, "I'm sure he's fine! Hey, and we'll be able to get a killer story out of him, too! Just think of all the hits that we'll get after he comes back!"

Taneo gave her a look. Her grin fell and she plopped back into her seat.

"And of course I'm worried about him." She said with a wave of her hand.

Minato looked in between them. He pulled at the end of his sleeves as the awkward silence stretched.

"H-hey!" Minato forced a shaky smile, "Have you guys read how the principal Of U.A. roasted the Hero Commission? That's spreading around as much as the petition!"

“Yup,” Mitsuo steepled her fingers together, “Calling the Hero Commission... oh, what was it? A ‘bunch of dilettantes with half the intelligence of a steaming cow pat’? That was my favorite line.”

Minato snickered and Taneo finally smiled.

“Nezu’s name is on the petition too, but you can’t find it anymore because it’s buried by so many signatures.” Taneo said, “Supporting Joker’s side in all of this has done wonders for U.A.’s reputation.”

“That’s an understatement.” Minato said, “But ironic considering that most of the U.A. staff were present during the raid. A few of them are still in the hospital.”

Taneo’s phone went off. Once again, his heart sunk to the floor like a bag of rocks.

“Yuma with the noddles again?” Mitsuo asked with a smirk.

“Yup,” Taneo’s face darkened, “I’m going to dump those noodles on his head when he gets back. I don’t care if he had to brave a typhoon for them.”

Minato and Mitsuo exchanged glances, then burst out into laughter.

Akira awoke peacefully this time.

He blinked a couple of times as his vision cleared, he basked in the cocoon of warmth for a moment, before dread curled in his belly.

“Arsene?”

“We are here, all of us.” Arsene whispered amongst the other voices, *“Move slowly, you have been through much.”*

He breathed a sigh of relief. Kohryu was there too. Faded, but still there. He groaned as he sat up, the comforter falling around him. His

body was as stiff as a block of wood, his joints creaked like gnarled old branches as he stretched.

“Hey, you’re actually awake.”

Hitoshi came in from the kitchen, hands stuffed in his pockets. He held a hand up when Akira tried to speak, and poured a cup of water from the pitcher on the coffee table. Akira nodded his thanks and took it, the water was a godsend for his dry throat. There was a beat of silence as Akira stared into the glass, his own faint reflection stared back.

“How long was I out?”

“About three days.”

Akira sputtered on his next sip, “Th-three days!?”

Oh, Morgana was going to *murder* him.

“Yeah,” Hitoshi was oddly stiff as he crossed his arms, “Well, three and a half, I don’t think this morning counts. You woke up a few times to drink some water and use the bathroom, but you were pretty out of it. My parents and I took turns watching over you.”

“Oh,” Akira looked up at the nearby clock, frowning, “I don’t remember anything.”

“I figured you wouldn’t.”

The awkward silence stretched for several moments, Akira looked at the clock on the wall. It was past 8 in the morning.

“Shouldn’t you be in school right about now?”

“I suppose you wouldn’t know, but school has been let off for the rest of the week.” Hitoshi’s brow furrowed as he gave Akira a strange look, “On account of the typhoon, as well as other... things.”

Akira set the glass on the table and scrubbed at his eyes. He was so *tired* . Not just tired, it felt as if every part of him had been through the wringer. The floor creaked as Hitoshi shifted on his feet.

“Are you okay?”

He looked up at Hitoshi. The kid was giving him that weird look again, the same one from when he ran out of the cafe and gave him the silent treatment afterward.

“I’ll be fine.” Akira attempted a smile, but Hitoshi looked far from convinced.

“Yeah, I don’t buy that. Nobody would be ‘fine’ after all the shit you just went through.”

Akira huffed, “At least you’re finally talking to me again.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not trying to,” Akira gave him a wry smile, “I’m just wondering why you’ve been avoiding me lately. Did I offend you somehow?”

“No!”

Akira blinked rapidly as Hitoshi paled.

“I...” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked down the hall, “Sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted like that. I hope that didn’t wake up my parents...”

“It’s fine.” Akira scrubbed at his face, his glasses were on the table, but he didn’t bother with them, “Can I step out and get some fresh air?”

“Uh, sure?” Hitoshi blinked, “But can you even make it outside?”

Akira pushed himself from the couch. He stumbled as dizziness took over him, a light ringing invaded his ears and he shook his head, his

vision going spotty. Hitoshi stepped towards him, his hands reached halfway to Akira. It took a few moments for it to pass. Hitoshi was waved off, he grimaced but he went towards a door at the other end of the room. Akira followed.

There was a set of stairs past it, Akira leaned heavily on the railing as they made their way down. There was a little room at the bottom, he recognized the door that would lead into Blue Lotus' kitchen. Hitoshi opened the door opposite of it, the fresh air swept inside, filling the room with the scent of rain.

Akira furrowed his brow when they stepped into an alley behind the cafe.

The fresh air was welcoming and helped clear his head, but the pitch black sky swirled overhead and made him uneasy, the whistle of wind sang over the rooftops. The deluge had whittled down into a light drizzle. The breeze weaved through their clothes and hair, but there was no magic in it, no sign that Morgana was nearby. Akira bit back his unease as he voiced the real reason for coming outside.

"So, can I ask why you wouldn't talk to me before?"

Hitoshi jumped back as if he were stuck, eyes wide.

"I... you..." He blinked several times, "Did you want to step outside because of *that*?"

Akira rubbed the back of his neck, "Maybe."

Hitoshi sighed and turned his back to Akira. There was only the pitter-patter of rain on cement as Hitoshi curled and uncurled his hands several times. Akira took a step closer, his brows furrowed.

"You can trust me," Akira said, "No matter what it is."

The ball was in Hitoshi's court now, so they stayed that way for several moments. It didn't matter that it was chilly outside or how

their hair grew damp with rainfall, Akira waited, leaning up against the cool wall. Finally, Hitoshi spoke.

“You know,” Akira blinked at Hitoshi’s strained voice, “There aren’t many people that I look up to. My parents are a given of course, they try their hardest to raise me. Then, there are the heroes. Every kid has a dream of being a hero at one point, but all of that changes once you have a villain’s quirk. People treat you differently if your power terrifies them.”

Hitoshi took a shaky breath, Akira chose to stay silent.

“I told you before that the only hero I used to look up to was Eraserhead, but he didn’t save us like a certain somebody did. That certain somebody who, not only saved our cafe and my parents’ livelihoods but also rescued them from drowning in their own sorrows. He gave them hope.” Hitoshi’s shoulders trembled, “You asked me a while ago what I thought of Joker, but I never really gave you a straight answer.”

Akira’s heart beat out of his chest. Arsene and the others hovered at the edge of his psyche, listening.

“To put it simply, Joker is my one and only *hero* . The one who stands above the rest, including All Might.” There was admiration to his voice, “He’s just so different from everybody else, I think he’s the sort of guy who’s like me. He was dealt a bad hand in life, but instead of feeling sorry for himself or going down a dark path, he went out there and put other people above himself. People that might not do the same for him. He’s doing that right now, and honestly, that’s what I admire most about him.”

Akira’s eyes widened, “... What are you getting at?”

“You don’t get it?”

Hitoshi finally turned to face him. His eyes peered straight into Akira’s, his shoulders lined with false bravado and his head was held

high. His hands shook and he swallowed as if bracing for something. Finally, after a few seconds doused in tapping rainwater, Hitoshi spoke words that sent a chill up Akira's spine.

"I'm telling you exactly how I think of you, *Joker* ."

Well, that happened. There seem to be loads of cliffhangers lately.

Sorry not sorry? ;)

Me & Creed

Chapter 32: Me & Creed

Delicious tea.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Ann turned the page.

She had just finished a chapter of Arsene Lupin, Gentlemen Burglar, by Maurice Leblanc. Ann smiled as she closed the book and held it close to her chest. No wonder their leader was so cool, Ren's other self was a man with no equal, a suave master of stealth, and the art of thievery. Her smile vanished, in its place was a thoughtful tug of her lips as her heart twisted.

"Are you alright?"

Ann looked up at Haru, who was on the other side of the table. She held a delicate cup of tea in her hands, gracefully sipping on it as she studied her friend. In front of her was a veritable mountain of textbooks, each large enough to murder somebody should they drop on their head. Just a glance in one of Haru's books gave her a headache.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Ann leaned back in her chair and sighed, then held up her book, "Just reminiscing, you know?"

"It's been difficult," Haru's eyes softened, "But we have to hang in there. We'll see them again, hopefully someday soon. I know it."

"R-right..."

Ann bit her lip. Their little table went quiet, even as shouts echoed in the concrete gym. This world was weird, but it was the type of weird they got used to, after going into so many Palaces and fighting Shadows. Real demons existed here, and part of this school's secret curriculum was training exorcists. One of the teachers was younger than Haru!

Haru followed her gaze, watching as their 'classmates' finished up their training for the day. A figure approached them, the teenaged sensei that had a twin in his own classroom. Teal eyes hidden behind glasses and shadowed by dark hair, he had donned the iconic exorcist robes prevalent in all of the teachers here.

"I'll let you two head back to the dorms." He said, "I trust you can stay out of trouble?"

"Of course, Okumura-sensei!" Haru said.

Ann bit her lip to keep from snorting. It must be strange for Haru, to have the same last name, there was even a *Ryuji* here too. She wondered if their Ryuji would get along with him, they had the same brash attitude and a blonde streak through his hair. But from what she could tell, this world's Ryuji was a lot smarter, and his friends called him Bon.

Not that the people here knew their real names. For all that they were concerned, it was just Noir and Panther.

There was a scoff, and they turned to look at another girl in class.

"That figures."

Okumura-sensei raised a brow at the girl, "Do you have a problem, Kamiki?"

"Of course I have a problem!" Her maroon eyes glared at Ann and Haru, "These two never do *anything* ! It must be nice to sit on your

backsides all day drinking tea and reading books, while we work ourselves to the bone! Do you even want to be exorcists!?”

Ann and Haru looked at each other as their sensei sighed. Kamiki's shouts drew the others' attention, and they slowly gathered around.

“She has a point.” Bon stepped next to Kamiki, glaring, “I don't get what you two are here for. The teachers even pulled you out of the dorms when we had our test. You should just leave if you can't take this work seriously!”

“True. Although,” Shima Renzo smirked as he clutched his chin, “These ladies have a certain elegance to them. If I could just-”

“Enough.” Okumura-sensei's tone made the students flinch, “Their circumstances are unique. You've been told what you need to know and leave it at that. If you have any problems, you can take it to the principal himself.”

“Actually, can I request something, Okumura-sensei?” Haru asked.

He blinked at her, brows furrowed, “What is it, Noir?”

Haru stood. If anybody could make standing from a chair look like an enchanting art form, it would be Haru. Her movements were always as graceful as an empress. She smiled sweetly, hands placed like delicate flowers at her stomach.

“They have a point.” Haru looked over to Bon and Kamiki, their eyes narrowed, “We are enigmas in your class, practically cryptids for the rest of the school. We don't partake in normal classes nor are we in any part of your Exwire training. And yet we seem to have the favor of the principal and suspicion from the teachers, we would not be so heavily watched otherwise.”

Okumura-sensei stiffened as their faces fell in shock. Ann couldn't help but feel proud as Haru commanded the attention of the whole room, all with flawless posture and a kind smile.

“Okumura-sensei, if it pleases your students, I think a show of our abilities might be necessary.”

He frowned, “By doing what?”

“How about a friendly spar? Myself versus anybody who wants to test my abilities.”

“You can’t be serious!” Rin Okumura shouted, but his brother and Haru were locked in a staring contest.

“Your weapons are locked away in the principal’s office. You know you won’t get permission to have them for something like this.”

“They wouldn’t be needed.” Haru said coolly, “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt anybody. It’ll be over before it begins.”

“Hey!” Bon said, a vein in his forehead showing.

Kamiki crossed her arms and glared daggers at Haru.

Okumura-sensei glanced at Ann, “What do you think of this?”

“Well, it has been a bit since Noir got to show off.” She said with a smirk, “I know things between us have been.... tense, I think everybody needs a proper demonstration. They won’t be satisfied if things continue as it is, and it might get worse if we don’t show them *something* .”

“Don’t worry, Okumura-sensei.” Haru said, “I know what we can and can’t do.”

“... Alright. I’ll start the match, but I don’t want anybody going too far.”

“Yukio!!” Rin approached his brother, scowling, “You’re okay with this when she won’t have any weapons!? You can’t leave her defenseless!”

“I already said that I don’t need my weapon, Rin-chan.” Haru said, then she looked at Bon and Kamiki, “Shall we?”

“I won’t go easy on you!” Kamiki said as she followed Haru to the center of the gym.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Shima said as he put together segments of a staff with golden rings, “But I want to join in too!”

“You’re fine with how unfair this is?” Bon gave Ann a strange look, “You’re letting your friend fight three people on one.”

“You’re right, it’s not fair. I don’t think you’d have much chance even if your other friends joined in.” Ann simply chuckled, “Noir can take care of herself.”

Bon’s expression darkened, he whirled around and stomped towards his inevitable doom. Haru’s eyes burned with liquefied gold and she waved her arm in an arc. The multiple lights of a Heat Riser flashed across her body. Ann smiled as a few students gasped.

Haru’s felt her persona’s wicked smirk, making her own lips follow suit. Her eyes glanced over at Ann, who nodded. They both knew what the power of blue flames meant in this world, but she didn’t need to summon Astarte or her costume for this.

“If there are any preparations you need to make,” Haru said, eyes still lit with gold, “Then you should make them now.”

Kamiki scoffed as she got out two small pieces of paper, on them were intricate circles. She pricked her finger with a needle and dotted the paper with blood.

“I humbly appeal to the goddess of Inari.” Wind picked up around Kamiki as she tossed the papers in the air, “I entreat you not to leave my prayers unfulfilled!”

Two ghostly fox spirits burst out from the pieces of paper, fangs at the ready. Bon and Shima took a stance, though Shima had a shameless grin on his face as he ogled Haru. Okumura-sensei held his hand up, eyeing both groups warily.

“Start!”

Haru’s opponents charged, but they never stood a chance. The room darkened, and they were blinded as countless flashes of lightning crashed into the ground. Howls came from the fox spirits as they were struck directly, her three opponents cried out in shock, but they were overshadowed by the shockwave that shook the gym. Okumura-sensei’s expression turned grim as the dust finally cleared.

Haru, with an angelic smile still on her face, stood over the myriad of craters surrounding the three students. They were untouched, their feet still upon smooth floor, but the concrete around them had been obliterated, blown away without a trace. Kamiki’s jaw dropped, and she stared at Haru with no small amount of fear.

Bon had stood stock still, sweat beaded on his face.

Shima’s staff fell from his grasp, and it rolled into one of the craters.

Haru turned and walked back to the others. Okumura-sensei sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he regretted his decision. Haru stopped in front of Ann.

“Well then, shall we head back to our dorm, Panther?”

Ann beamed as she finally stood from the table and linked arms with Haru.

“Let’s go!”

They left the gym in dead silence. They took a few steps outside, then stopped as the door behind them shut, staring at each other

with wide eyes. Ann was the first to laugh, Haru's soft giggles joined in a moment later.

"Did you see the looks on their faces!?"

"Yes, it's always exciting to see them shivering in fear." Haru said with a graceful nod, "Though I'm glad we can use our abilities without summoning our personas or our costumes. Do you think the Riot Gun was too much?"

"Nah," Ann playfully nudged her, "I think it was just the right amount of drama. Ren would be proud of you."

"Heeey! Wait up!!"

They looked over their shoulders to see Shiemi and Rin chasing after them. A tiny green spirit swung from the ends of Shiemi's blonde hair.

"Th-that was so cool, Noir-chan!" Shiemi said, positively beaming, "Can you teach me how to be that cool!?"

"That's the first time I've ever seen Yukio stunned like that," Rin said with a smirk, "What was that power, anyway?"

Shiemi blinked, and curiously looked at Haru.

"W-well," Ann said, staring at the ground as they walked, "As your teachers said before, it's classified."

"You can't even share *that* ? That's lame!" Rin sulked and motioned to the sword at his back, "Everyone knows about my flames now. And we've shared the same dorm for what, two months? They still won't let you say anything?"

"It is what it is." Haru said with a sigh, "I'm sorry we can't share more."

"That's fine," He grumbled as he scratched the back of his head.

The old dorms were just around the corner. It was an older building, practically abandoned had it not been for their Chief Babysitter and his brother. Haru beamed when she saw what was waiting by the door. She let go of Ann and knelt down next to the bags of soil and packages of seeds.

“They came a day early!” Ann said.

“Bags of soil?” Rin raised a brow at them, “What for?”

Haru smiled at him, but something about it made a shiver go down his spine.

“Who was it that destroyed my rooftop garden again? I saw the remains after you went all out during your battle with Neuhausensei.” Haru said, Rin couldn’t meet her eyes, “Would you be so kind as to carry them up to the roof for me?”

“Y-yeah! I can do that!”

“Nee and I will help you, Rin!” Shiemi said, her little green spirit nodding.

“We’ll go ahead and meet you up there!”

Ann grabbed Haru’s wrist and they went inside. This dorm was older than the rest on campus, farther from the main building too. It had no proper air conditioning, but it had electricity and a decent bath. Ann and Haru’s room was near the top floor, where they’ve been staying since they were spat out into this world, not counting the dark cells where they spent their first few nights in utter terror.

Ann didn’t like to think about it.

They climbed up the stairs to the roof, but they weren’t alone. The principal of True Cross Academy was waiting for them, leaning on his brightly colored umbrella with a smug grin. He was as flamboyant as their leader, donning flashy white jester clothes and top hat, a

billowing white and purple cape hung down his back. His hair was purple and his eyes were a bright acid green, but his most remarkable features were his pointed ears and sharp canines.

“Principal,” Haru put on her sweetest smile, “What are you doing all the way up here?”

“Why else?” His cape flared as he waved his hands, “You demonstrated your power marvelously, Noir-chan! Those poor Exwires poked the sleeping dragon, I wouldn’t be surprised if they have nightmares from it.”

“O-oh,” Ann chuckled and hid her nerves behind a shaky smile, “You know about that already?”

“Of course, my dear Panther.” Mephisto grinned and ran a finger under the rim of his hat, “Nothing goes down in this school without my knowing about it! But with that said ladies, I thought we had an agreement.”

His eyes gained sharpness to them, like the blade of Haru’s bardiche. He twirled his umbrella around as he circled them with a pleasant smile, but it was the sort of smile a predator would use to lure in their prey.

“And we haven’t broken that agreement,” Haru said, her voice stable, “None of our memories from our time in the gate have resurfaced.”

“Y-yeah! We would’ve told you if we remembered something!”

Mephisto stopped and tapped his umbrella on the ground. The old demon snorted, smirking with amusement before he continued his circling.

“Really?” He purred, “You know, your powers are something to admire. You two are completely human, yet you can each summon a demon born from *blue flames* and have them perform magic with which I’ve never felt before. Imagine, you’re an unknown, even to

one like myself! Not to mention the scare you gave our entire organization when a Gehenna Gate opened in the middle of *my* school, and two unconscious girls were dropped in my courtyard. That should have been every level of *impossible*, yet here you stand, claiming to have no memories.”

Ann and Haru exchanged hasty glances. He stopped and then pointed his umbrella at them, eyes shadowed by his hat.

“But without my swift interference and Rin’s example, you both would have been tried as agents of Satan and promptly executed. I’ve taken you two under my wing and protected you from Exorcist persecution. I’ve given you the books you requested, clothes, food, a roof over your head. Provided you with a lovely garden.” He slowly lowered his umbrella and shook his head, “The least you can do in return is have the decency to be honest with me.”

He was only met with more silence.

Haru never broke her calm facade, but Ann bit the inside of her cheek. A world of Ruin, a false god pulling the strings, and worse yet, they currently had no way to return home. What proof would they have if they told the truth? None. They didn’t know if they could ever get back home and fix things anyway. Haru tried to make sense of their situation, to try and find a way back or to make contact with the others, taking it upon herself to study such confusing topics.

That stuff just flew over Ann’s head.

Ann felt useless, but she cheered Haru on and helped in any way she could.

“Ah, well.” Mephisto turned his back on them and raised his umbrella, “I hear those other two coming up, so I won’t disturb your fun much longer. If you two ever wish to tell me the truth, you know where to find me. I look forward to that conversation over tea. Ainz, Zwei, Drei!”

Mephisto's body disappeared in a cloud of pink smoke, and a small dog was in his place. He hopped onto the railing, taking one last glance at them. At that moment, the rooftop door opened. Rin carried two massive bags of soil under each arm, Shiemi was struggling just to carry one, with Nee happily bouncing on her shoulder.

"Where do you want these, Noir?" Rin blinked at their downtrodden appearances, "Hey, are you guys okay?"

Ann looked to where Mephisto was, but the demon was already gone.

"We're fine," Haru lied through her sugary sweet smile, "Just set those over there and we can get to work."

"Noir-chan, I've done plenty of gardening myself!" Shiemi said with stars in her eyes, "I can help!"

"Of course, but I'll be teaching you the proper names of these plants. I saw all of the red marks on your herbology tests."

Shiemi turned beet red but nodded frantically. Haru giggled and pat the girl's head.

"I'm just gonna go..." Rin tried to make for the door, but Ann grabbed his wrist.

"Noir's not going to let you go until everything is finished." Ann said.

"She's quite right."

Haru put her hands on her hips and gave Rin a stern look, then she waved towards all of the empty pots and planters.

"It's your fault that all of my plants have been.... expired. I'll only forgive you if you help plant new ones."

Shiemi puffed up her cheeks and nodded at Rin, her pale hair bouncing.

“Alright, alright!” His shoulders slumped and he dragged himself to the potters, “How is it that you’re a worse slave driver than Yukio?”

“What was that?”

“N-nothing!”

Ann laughed as they got to work.

“Do you think Ukobach-chan can make us a cake when we’re finished?” Haru said as she packed soil in a pot, “I think we should be rewarded for our hard work.”

“Cake!!” Ann and Rin shouted in unison.

They looked at each other and grinned, their hands working faster to sort out soil and plant the delicate seeds. Haru exchanged a glance with Shiemi, the blonde girl and her little green spirit were overjoyed to work on a garden again. They spent the rest of the evening on the rooftop, amongst the scent of earthy soil and dirt-stained hands.

Haru smiled as Ann and the others laughed together, the sky bled a warm orange and a pleasant breeze weaved through the air. It was peaceful.

Almost too peaceful.

Ann looked over at Haru as if she sensed her unease, their eyes met with the same fire. They knew this was only temporary. They were waiting for the other shoe to drop, for *something* to shatter this fragile little truce between them and True Cross Academy.

They truly didn’t need their equipment to use their full power. A little white lie to ensure that they were always underestimated. But, if the exorcists dared to try anything, if they *dared* hurt either Ann or Haru in any way....

Then all hell would break loose, they wouldn’t hold back this time, now that their full powers have returned.

They wouldn't give up on finding a way home, despite everything that's happened. Ann nodded at Haru and they got back to work. It was nightfall before they were finished, Shiemi wiped her brow as she stood.

A playful grin stretched Rin's face.

"Hey, I'll race you to the kitchen! The winner gets first dibs on that cake!"

"Oh, you're on!"

"H-hey! No cheating!!"

Haru chuckled as they scrambled over themselves to get to the door first.

"Make sure you two wash up!" Haru called, but they were already gone.

"Who do you think will win?" Shiemi asked as the door swung ominously.

"My bet is on Ann, but Rin may have a few tricks up his sleeve." Haru shook her head, "Let's go make sure they don't burn anything to the ground?"

"Right!"

Haru looked up at the sea of twinkling stars before they departed, a solemn promise forged between herself and Astarte. They would find the others and take their revenge on Yaldabaoth, no matter how long it took or what the cost would be.

But first, cake!

Nezu, Truth, Urahara, and Mephisto all walk into a bar-

universe implodes

But seriously though, the final world of Ao No Exorcist has been revealed!

I couldn't help but notice this as well.

AnE: Has a summer camp in a forest that is attacked and set ablaze with blue fire.

MHA: Has a summer camp in a forest that is attacked and set ablaze with blue fire.

HMMM

Also, let there be reddit!

https://www.reddit.com/r/Thieves_den/

Secret

Chapter 33: Secret

Akira reached out to him, but the other boy smacked his hand away.

“Save your empty platitudes! Why the hell can’t you trust me when I’ve put so much trust in you!?”

I would like to thank Lofti Lofi, Gundoru, and Mystik_Owl for helping me with this chapter. I had some real trouble putting this chapter together and they helped it evolve from a shadow of its former self.

Haha, Shadow. Get it?

....I'll walk myself out.

“I’m telling you exactly how I think of you, *Joker* .”

Akira suppressed a flinch as Hitoshi watched him like a hawk.

“How did he know? We were always careful around the Blue Lotus!”

“Hmph, this one is smarter than he looks.” Arsene grumbled, feathers bristling, *“What do you intend to do?”*

“Ah, it’s almost as if we’re back home.” Titania shook her head with a wistful sigh.

“But this world is different to ours.” Yatagarasu said, *“Many dangerous villains lurk in every dark corner. This boy, and by extension the Trickster, will be within danger’s grasp should this knowledge get out.”*

"Be at peace, Trickster." The Caped Warrior waved his arm. *"Let's see what he knows first."*

"Well, there's only one way to find out for certain." Arsene's unease drifted into Akira's own. *"Take caution and ask."*

"Right..."

Akira took a breath to calm his rabbiting heart. He raised his chin and squared his shoulders as he stared back at Hitoshi, sending a shiver down Hitoshi's spine.

"Why would you think I'm Joker?"

"Y-your bird, the one with the three legs?" Hitoshi scanned the rooftops. *"I run a Herocord server. A user from Hosu got a picture of Joker with that same bird from the time you saved me from those bullies. Don't worry, I told them not to share it."*

"I... I didn't think..." Yatagarasu ruffled his feathers and hung his head. *"My deepest apologies, Trickster."*

"It's not your fault. It's mine."

Yatagarasu flinched, but Akira spoke before any other personas could interrupt.

"What you think you know could be used against you," Akira ignored the sour twist in his heart. *"Not only against yourself, but against your parents too. You would become a target for Joker's enemies. The people you love could get hurt. Is that what you want?"*

"No! I-I... you..." Hitoshi's eyes widened, *"I know how to keep a secret! Trust me."*

"Mask Bearer, I think we can put our faith in this child."

"I..."

Were the rewards greater than the risks? This world was far more dangerous than back home, where otherworldly powers were only limited to the Metaverse. Everyone here had some sort of ability. Limited or not, there's always potential for a hero or villain to be stronger than any Palace Ruler. Joker walked a precarious line, where either side would target his allies to get the upper hand. What if someone found out his identity? What would happen to Hitoshi and his family if he messed up? What if they found a way home and had to abandon them?

"Sorry." Akira tore his eyes away from Hitoshi, "But you have the wrong guy."

Hitoshi's eyes flashed with hurt.

"Mask Bearer, please rethink this. We need allies."

"No," Akira couldn't look at Hitoshi, "We've dragged enough people into our mess. Our work is too dangerous for him! I just... I can't."

"Trickster..." Yatagarasu murmured.

"Let's just go inside," Akira whispered over the drizzling rain.

"Wait!"

Akira flinched, wide eyed, as Hitoshi snatched his wrist. His soul quivered as Arsene's growl rolled through him like thunder. Hitoshi's stomach dropped when Akira's eyes flashed gold, as foreboding as a viper readying to strike. He let go of Akira's wrist as the hairs on the back of his neck raised.

"I..." Hitoshi bowed his head. "You don't have to lie to me, Joker-"

"Shinsou." Hitoshi jolted when Akira's voice sharpened.

"No!" Akira's heart lurched when Hitoshi's voice broke, "Please listen to me!"

Arsene's anger fluctuated alongside the gold in Akira's eyes as he turned fully to Hitoshi. Akira eyed Hitoshi's trembling hands fisted so tight that he nearly drew blood. His eyes, desperate and desolate, bored into Akira.

"It would be so easy."

Akira held his breath as Arsene hovered on the edge of the mindscape.

Hitoshi swallowed thickly, "I would only have to use my quirk on you, you know. You saw what it was during the Sports Festival, right? *Brainwashing* . I could make you bring out that bird or any other creatures that have made the news. That's all it would take to get my answer."

All other personas jumped back to escape the burst of unholy light emanating from Arsene. The murderous aura crashed down on them like a tidal wave and smothered the entire mindscape. Akira's face paled. The intensity of Arsene's rage nearly swallowed him too, but he pushed it back with an indomitable willpower all of his own. Akira shook his head and focused on Hitoshi.

"Then why don't you use it?"

"Because I trust you too much damnit!"

Akira flinched. Hitoshi gripped his shirt as if to tear out his own heart.

"Don't you have any idea what life is like with a villain's quirk!?" Tears burned Hitoshi's eyes. "Do you know how many people have ever supported me outside of my parents? Nobody! Not a *single* person! That was, until *you* showed up. *Somebody* finally helped me against those bullies, and for the first time in my life-"

Hitoshi clenched his eyes shut and shook his head, a single tear blended with the rain.

“For the first time in my life I had an actual friend! A friend who not only helped me, but saved my parents.”

Akira stiffened. His heart pounded in his ears as Arsene prowled back and forth on the edge of reality. The persona was so close that he felt the whisper of feathers and his breath brushing his neck.

“So when I find out that *you* were both my hero and my best friend, I...” Hitoshi furiously wiped at his eyes, “I just need to know the truth! But If I use my quirk on you like this... then... then how am I any better than a villain!? How could I ever call myself a hero!?”

The light of his eyes faded as the last tear fell. Akira could only compare him to a raging forest fire, now burnt out and smoldering, its acrid smoke still toxic for anyone to approach.

“Hitoshi...”

Akira reached out to him, but the other boy smacked his hand away.

“Save your empty platitudes! Why the hell can’t you trust me when I’ve put so much trust in you!?”

Akira gaped at him, hand still hovering in the air. Lost for words as the drizzling rain tapped their skin like icy needles. A streak of lightning flashed overhead and the crackle of thunder rumbled their tiny alley. The personas were dead silent. Arsene’s anger intertwined with wariness as the silence stretched on, but Akira had no answer to give Hitoshi.

Hitoshi ducked his head and allowed his purple hair to obscure his eyes.

“I’m sorry, but I’m getting my answer one way or another.”

Arsene *snapped* .

“I’ve had enough of this boy’s foolishness! If he wants this so bad then I will give it to him!”

At a sudden spike of pain, Akira's eyes flooded with brilliant gold, and Hitoshi startled when Akira cried out in agony and grasped his head, the creak and groan of countless chains rattling throughout Akira's soul. With a howl, Arsene threw himself into reality.

The cry echoed in the alleyway, and Hitoshi's hands clasped over his ears. The white hot pain in Akira's head spilled down to the rest of his body and pooled over his heart. Blue flames hissed in the rain as it consumed Akira. Arsene arose from the fire like a demon clawing its way out of the gates of hell, mask ablaze with flickers of crimson. Arsene snuffed out the flames with a sweep of his midnight wings. Joker collapsed to his knees behind him, coattails flaring before they went limp on the concrete.

Hitoshi's pupils turned into pinpricks as his idol's demon loomed over him. The dying embers made his horns and claws gleam. Any puddles had sizzled away, and curls of steam wafted over Hitoshi as he backed into the wall, a bone deep chill seeped down his spine as Arsene's shadow swallowed him. A hiss froze him on the spot. There was nowhere to run. Any escape was cut off by inky black wings.

Hitoshi's breath caught when Arsene held up his clawed hands. Static hummed through the air as swirls of red and black consumed Arsene's body.

"Arsene!"

Joker's world tilted as he forced himself to his feet only for his shoulder to slam into the wall.

"Leave him alone, Arsene! He didn't mean it!"

Arsene growled. It rattled nearby trash bins and reverberated in Hitoshi's chest. Hitoshi was as pale as Joker, sweat trickling down his face.

"*Arsene!* " Joker snapped.

The tip of Arsene's claws ghosted on Hitoshi's cheek before he floated away with an angel's grace. Hitoshi slowly slid down the wall. Arsene ignored him as he hovered beside Joker, the cursed magic dwindling away. The heat died to the cold drizzle.

"You... I didn't..." Joker ran a hand down his face. "I didn't even know you could materialize like that, Arsene."

"I refused to stand by and watch this happen! I won't allow what happened with Kohryu..." Arsene's wings drooped, "I won't allow *any* of us to come to harm ever again."

Joker's eyes softened, and he reached out for Arsene's arm. A small purr thrummed from Arsene as he leaned into Joker's touch, his wing wrapping around Joker's shoulders in a pseudo embrace.

Shame sunk into Hitoshi's stomach as he witnessed the tender moment, and he froze when they turned their eyes on him. He flinched as Joker pulled himself from Arsene's wing, eyes darting between Joker and the bright colors splashing at his feet. Joker offered his hand.

"I'm sorry," Joker said softly, "I think... I think we all started off on the wrong foot."

Hitoshi stared blankly at it. After a moment he took it and was pulled to his feet. Joker smiled, but Hitoshi flinched back when Arsene inched closer, watching the purple boy for any sign of treachery.

"Well, this isn't how I wanted this to go. Now the cat is really out of the bag." Joker said with a long sigh, "Mona would be laughing at us or calling us idiots. Probably both."

"Y-you said..." Hitoshi cleared his throat, "You said before that you were quirkless, but that *costume* appeared out of thin air a-and your creature did too... How is that *not* a quirk?"

“We are not quirks!” Arsene snarled, “Treat our power with more respect!”

Hitoshi jumped back from Arsene, hands up, “S-sorry!”

“Arsene, enough.” Joker shook his head, then eyed the other boy, “Are you okay? They can be... overprotective.”

“I-I’m fine.” Hitoshi took a breath and scrubbed at his face. “This’ll give me nightmares, but I deserved that to be honest.”

“Hmph. I’m not going to apologize for your own desperate idiocy.” Arsene muttered as he crossed his arms, “Be thankful that the Trickster is merciful, *boy* . I would not have held back otherwise.”

“Arsene, you scared him in the first place! You should-”

Joker did a double take. Arsene’s other wing was tattered. Inky black feathers were frayed and missing, uneven patches already growing back. Joker winced at the mess of matted flesh, eyes jerked up to Arsene, who suddenly took interest in the brick walls.

“What happened to your wing!?”

“Nothing to worry about.” Arsene shuffled his damaged wing, “I am fine.”

“You are not *fine* .” Joker put his hands on his hips, “You only have half a wing! You called me a liar when I said I was fine, so don’t pretend you’re fine now!”

Hitoshi’s eyes darted in between them as they bickered.

“Your health is far more valuable than mine, but unlike you, my health is perfect!”

“You know that’s not even possible. *Your* health basically is *my* health!”

Arsene averted his gaze as he crossed his arms. The small dip in his wings and his raised chin made him look like a pouting child, something that didn't belong on an ethereal being. Hitoshi held in a snort.

"Fine, act innocent all you want." Joker pinched the bridge of his nose, "But we'll be talking about this later."

"Fine."

Hitoshi laughed. Arsene and Joker turned to stare at him. Arsene's low growl earned a harsh nudge from Joker.

"S-sorry," Hitoshi whispered as he scratched the back of his neck. "It's just, you two are like a father and son pair right now. It's kind of funny?"

Joker blinked and stared up at Arsene, who went rigid. A grin split his face, in contrast to the sickly pallor and dark bags under his eyes. He gestured to the persona.

"Well, the others do call him Bird Dad-"

"Trickster!"

Hitoshi chuckled at Arsene's raised pitch.

"What?" Joker continued with a shameless grin, "It's true and you know it. Would you like somebody else to come out and confirm it for you? I'm sure they would love to tell Hitoshi all of your embarrassing-"

"Alright, you've made your point!"

Arsene shook his head. The last of his evil, demonic image bled away with pure exasperation. He ran his clawed hands down his mask and sighed. Arsene scanned Joker head to toe, then stared at the other boy. Hitoshi was smirking. Although he still had awe in his eyes, there wasn't an inkling of fear left.

“Bah, kids these days...” Arsene muttered before he was gone in a whisper of cerulean ashes.

Joker looked down at his hands as he ignored Hitoshi’s blatant stare. The pain ebbed away, but his costume felt a bit... off. He still had the billowing tailcoats, his vest and sharp boots, his blood red gloves and mask. Maybe he was just imagining things. He shook his head and cast his costume away, the wind snuffing out the embers.

The full exhaustion of the past ten minutes hit him like a truck. The world spun, and Akira collapsed against the wall with a pained grunt, clutching his head.

“H-hey...” Hitoshi reached out for Akira, “Are you okay?”

“I’m just tired,” Akira blinked several times, “ I’ve never seen Arsene *that* angry before. Summoning them usually takes a lot out of you, but that was on a whole new level.”

Hitoshi ducked his head, the tips of his ears turning red.

Akira sank to the cold concrete, his energy depleted. He huffed as he leaned back on the wall, arms splayed over propped up knees.

“So, what do you plan to do now that you know?” Akira blinked up at Hitoshi, “Are you going to turn me in?”

“No way! Why would I do that?” Hitoshi sighed and collapsed against the wall next to Akira, brow pinched together, “I just told you that you were my *hero* and I didn’t run away despite Arsene scaring the ever living shit out of me. Why would I turn my hero in to the police? A lot of people are blaming the bounty for all of this chaos in the first place!”

Akira tilted his head, “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ll... fill you in later.” Hitoshi glanced at Akira, his hands knotted into fists, “I’m sorry. F-for almost using my quirk on you. It

wasn't right, but I really had to know if you were Joker or not."

"Why?" Akira narrowed his eyes, "Why would you go so far? Arsene could've killed you for one, and now you could lose my friendship. Do you really think it was worth it?"

Hitoshi whipped around to stare at him, fear glinted in his eyes, "Y-You're still my friend, right?"

"I don't know." Akira sighed, "It depends on your answer."

Hitoshi flinched as if struck, then he curled into himself. His shoulders trembled. He blinked tears from his eyes and cleared his throat.

"I... I just..."

Akira gave him a moment. The other boy opened and closed his mouth several times, but his voice died in his throat. Akira closed his eyes and listened to the rain as Hitoshi gathered his thoughts. He heard the sharp sigh and the tone of somebody who's lost all hope.

"I've always wanted to be a hero, but having a brainwashing quirk makes you a villain in most people's eyes." He said, lost to distant memories of jeers and constant pain. "There's no hope for somebody like me."

Akira opened his eyes to study Hitoshi, "I've heard there are underground heroes who do well enough. Why not try being one of those instead?"

Hitoshi scoffed, "Even so, you'd still have to get into the Hero Courses for that. I would have a better chance at winning the lottery. I failed the entrance exam and botched my *one* chance in the Sports Festival. Being a cool vigilante like you might be the only way."

"I understand where you're coming from, but are you sure this is what you want? Are you alright with breaking the law?" Akira shook

his head. "The police wouldn't be so nice to you if they discovered your secret, and I would hate to see you or your parents getting hurt."

"You're not even going to consider it?" Hitoshi's eyes hardened as he stared at Akira, pushing himself from the wall and stumbling to his feet. "I won't accept that. I'm prepared to do anything! I know how to keep a secret. I know how to lay low and not draw any attention to myself! I've had to do it my entire life!"

Akira looked into Hitoshi's eyes sparked with desperation.

No, it was stronger than desperation. Every fibre of Hitoshi's being wanted to tear down the system that had treated him like a doormat. Conviction radiated from him. Akira's eyes slowly widened. He stared into these eyes countless times back home, from the other Thieves as they ripped off their masks for the first time, to those he's encountered on the streets.

Yoshida conquering his self esteem issues. Iwai breaking away from his shady past. How Chihaya overcame her steadfast feelings over fate.

Hitoshi.... he was just like them. Alone. An outcast within society.

"I've said this before, but we are in need of allies." The Caped Warrior whispered, "I observed how resourceful he can be during the Sports Festival. He can be of use. His quirk is invaluable in a world such as this. Who are we to throw him away after he's shown such sincerity?"

"He's right," Arsene grumbled, "We should not waste an opportunity when it presents itself."

"Are you just saying that because you regret what you did to the boy?" Yatararasu asked.

"I didn't know Bird Dad could feel regret!" Alice giggled.

“...”

“Let’s leave Arsene be, for now.” Titania said, “But I agree that we should take this boy under our wing. He seems to understand the dangers of such a decision.”

“I...” Akira deflated with a long sigh. “Fine.”

Hitoshi perked up, “Really!?”

“Really. But you’re going to have to work harder than you’ve ever worked before.” Akira shook his head, “I can teach you some basics, but I don’t want to make you any promises. I’m done breaking my promises. Just be patient with me, alright?”

“I... I guess that’s fair.”

Akira furrowed his brows as a thought occurred to him. He was *terrible* at keeping secrets.

How is he going to explain all of this to Morgana?

“Let’s go back inside,” Hitoshi reached down a hint of a smile on his lips, “We’ve been out here long enough.”

“Yeah...”

Akira took his hand and was on his feet in seconds. He swayed momentarily, but he waved off Hitoshi’s concern.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Risumi poked her head out.

“Boys, there you are!” She stepped out and rounded on them, her hands on her hips, “We were worried when we couldn’t find you! And Kurusu, you shouldn’t even be out of bed right now! You were supposed to wake us up, Hitoshi!”

“Sorry, mom.” Hitoshi muttered.

“I thought getting some fresh air would help?”

Akira sheepishly grinned as the woman shook her head.

“You’re lucky it’s not raining cats and dogs anymore! Come on, both of you,” She grabbed their arms and dragged them inside. “You’ll catch colds out here. Hitoshi, please go tell your father to start on breakfast.”

“Right...”

Hitoshi’s eyes lingered on Akira for a few moments before he raced back upstairs. Risumi said nothing as she watched her son leave, her hand still locked on Akira’s arm. She turned to look at him for several moments.

“What?”

“Did something happen between you and Hitoshi? He seems better than he was before. He was really worried about you, you know.”

Akira shrugged, “We just had a talk, that’s all.”

“I see, I’m glad he’s finally opened up again.” She studied him for a few moments, “Would you like to go upstairs to rest?”

“I...” Akira glanced at the other door, “Can I sit in the cafe for a bit? I think it would make me feel better.”

“Of course,” She gently ruffled his hair. “You’ll have the best seat in the house!”

Akira snorted as she held the door open. She turned on the lights and finally let go of Akira so he could sink into the closest booth. He leaned back and closed his eyes, savoring the moment of peace.

“Would you like some coffee to start? You haven’t eaten much of anything in almost four days. You should go slow so you don’t upset your stomach.”

He smiled, "I would like that."

With a firm nod, she went behind the counter, cups clinking together as she worked. Hitoshi returned a few moments later, beelining for Akira. He slipped into the other booth, propping his chin on his hand.

"Could I borrow your phone?" Akira asked, "I should probably call somebody."

"Oh." Hitoshi blinked and dug in his pocket. "Sure."

Akira looked down at the device, "Really? You have Arsene as your background? How did you even get a clear image from that video anyway?"

"Shut up!" Hitoshi turned beet red as he lowered his voice. "I... I still think he's cool, even after what just happened in the alley. If anything, that just made him even more awesome. Absolutely *terrifying*, but awesome."

Akira huffed with laughter. Finally, he dialed the one and only number that he'd memorized from this world, but his thumb hovered over the call button. A mounting sense of dread built up as he stared at the number. Hitoshi's eyes flicked between Akira and the phone.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," He said, "I'm just wondering how long I have to live after this phone call."

Hitoshi raised a brow as Akira finally pressed the call button. The tone trilled once.

"H-hello?"

Aiba sounded so afraid, voice scratchy as if she had been crying. He could imagine her puffy red eyes, too.

"So..." Akira tried and failed to keep his voice level. "I'm alive?"

“YOU-!!”

Akira held the phone away from his ear. Hitoshi jolted back from the volume and blinked rapidly.

“YOU HAVE SOME NERVE MISTER! Ho-how could you do this!? How dare you worry Kaito and I like this!! And Morgana.... You can’t.... you.... you’re such a jerk!”

He put the phone back to his ear when she sniffled. Akira heard Tobita soothe her in the background.

“I won’t forgive you, you know!” She said, hiccuping, *“Y-you don’t pick up your phone, o-or try to call us earlier! We’ve been worried sick for days!! What the heck is wrong with you!?”*

“Sorry, I was out cold the whole time.”

She sucked in a breath, *“You were? Are you alright?”*

“I...” He bit his lip, *“It’ll take some time to recover. I’ll have to explain everything later.”*

“Well good! Maybe this whole mess will teach you to slow down! Also, Gentle and I are coming to Musutafu!”

“What? You don’t have to do that!”

“Too late! My boys need me and there’s no way you can convince me otherwise! The lines will open up now that the storm is calming down. You’re in so much trouble when we get there!”

“I guess I deserve it for worrying you.” Akira snorted, *“Could... could you call Kaito and tell him that I’m at the Blue Lotus Cafe? I don’t have his number and he deserves to know.”*

“Yeah! He and Morgana have been searching for you nonstop, I’ll let them know right away.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“You better!” She took a moment to gather herself, *“And Akira?”*

“Yeah?”

“... Nevermind. I’ll tell you when I see you in person!”

She hung up. He blinked at the phone before handing it back to Hitoshi.

“You have weird friends.” Hitoshi deadpanned.

“I don’t know what I would do without them though.”

Risumi chose that moment to approach the table, steaming cups of coffee in hand.

“I suppose I’ll have to tell Ayumu to expect more guests?” She said, “Not that he would complain. The cafe has been closed so he hasn’t been able to bake anything.”

“Maybe.” Akira winced, “Expect at least one person and a very angry cat.”

Hitoshi and Risumi exchanged glances while Akira prepared for his doom.

My Homie

Chapter 34: My Homie

Reunions are nice.

I want to thank my betas Lofti Lofi, Mystik_Owl, and Gundoru for helping with this chapter! ^^

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Akira looked at his plate. The cinnamon roll, fresh from the oven, glistened with gooey frosting and a generous amount of warm spices, but it only made his stomach turn.

“Hey,” Hitoshi said as he finished his third roll, “Are you going to eat that or not?”

“No,” Akira pushed the plate away, nose wrinkling. “My stomach feels queasy right now. The coffee is helping though.”

“Wow. Not many people can resist dad’s cinnamon rolls.” Hitoshi leaned forward. “So does that mean I can have it?”

“Go ahead.”

“Sweet.”

“Hitoshi!” Risumi cried from the counter, but it was too late.

Hitoshi swiped it and took a bite. Frosting and specs of cinnamon stained his lips, and he looked his mother in the eye as he took another bite.

“What? He said he wouldn’t eat it.”

“Boys.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed before meeting Akira’s eyes. “Please eat something, sweetheart. You need to keep your strength up to feel better. If the cinnamon roll was too much then I can make you some toast or something. What do you say?”

Akira shook his head and gently swished his lukewarm coffee. He missed how Hitoshi and his mother exchanged glances, and instead he focused on the smooth ceramic in his hands.

“She’s right.” Arsene whispered.

“Well, if he doesn’t eat then one of us could just force feed him.”

“Titania, no. Just.... no.”

“Why not, Arsene? I’m just trying to look after our Trickster!”

“I’ll eat later.” Akira said. *“Sorry for the trouble.”*

“Don’t apologize.” Arsene shook his head. *“We only want what’s best for you.”*

The cafe’s door blasted open, and the wildly ringing bell shattered the silence. Risumi and Akira startled as the cold wind and rain swept into the cafe, and a few decorations rattled and fell to the floor. Kaito stood there with his hand on the door frame, panting. The storm had soaked him to the bone. His hair was disheveled, his water stained glasses wet and askew, and on his shoulder clung a familiar black shape.

Ayumu heard the commotion and slipped into the room.

Kaito and Morgana scanned the cafe until they saw Akira. The Shinsou family cried out as the little black shape shot off like a rocket.

“Oof!”

Akira fell back into the booth when Morgana barreled into him. The force of the blast nearly sent his cup to the floor, but neither cared. Not with how they clung to one another, how Morgana's claws sunk into Akira's clothes and poked at his skin, or how Morgana nuzzled Akira's chin. It unraveled the knots in both of their hearts.

“Hey, it's alright.” Akira sat up as Morgana buried his face in Akira's neck. “It's going to be okay. I'm right here.”

Morgana looked up at him, trembling, when gentle footsteps drew their attention. Kaito was watching him, and his pupils shimmered as he relived everything. From the dread of getting cornered by heroes, to the cataclysmic *pain* of something deep inside of him shattering. All of the angry words and tangle of guilt and jumbled emotions that built up over the last few days just... dissipated. His shoulders fell as he took a long breath.

Kaito's gaze softened, but it was inevitable. Kaito's arm moved in a blur. Seth jumped into the role of Akira's mask just as Akira's teeth clattered together from the force of Kaito's karate chop, but there was no pain. Only Seth purring in amusement. Akira blinked up at the man, as innocent as a fawn.

“I guess I deserved that?”

“Yes, you do.” Kaito grumbled as he crossed his arms. “That's for worrying us half to death! Don't even get me started on how frazzled Aiba was. Do you know how freaked out we all were? We thought that you... you were...”

“I know,” Akira bit his lip as Morgana nodded furiously. “I'm sorry.”

“Just...” Kaito's soft hand landed on Akira's head, he suddenly wouldn't look him in the eye. “Just don't do it again, alright?”

“I... I won't.”

“You better not, or I might go gray before I’m 30.” Kaito ruffled Akira’s hair as he opened his mouth. “Don’t you dare make a joke about my hair color-I’ll give you another karate chop and ground you for an entire month. Don’t test me, kid.”

Akira closed his mouth when Kaito dropped his hand, but a shameless smirk took its place.

Hitoshi looked in between them, eyes narrowed. “Are you his dad?”

Kaito sputtered. It was the first time Akira had seen the man go so red. Morgana pressed his face into Akira’s chest to stifle his watery laughter. Risumi covered her mouth to hide her grin, Ayumu sprouted the same shameless grin as his son.

“N-No!” Kaito spat. “I just... he does stay with me, yes. But I am *not* his father!”

“Huh. You would’ve fooled me.”

“Hitoshi!” Risumi stepped around the counter. “Don’t tease the poor man. He’s been through a lot.”

Kaito shook his head. Although his cheeks returned to normal, his ears were still red.

“It’s alright, Miss...?”

“Shinsou Risumi,” She said as she held out her hand. “My husband Ayumu is behind the counter, and my son, Hitoshi, is the one with the smart mouth.”

Hitoshi sheepishly grinned. Ayumu nodded at Kaito.

Kaito looked into their eyes. It was odd, the way Kaito stiffened and how his eyes glimmered, there and gone again within seconds. He suddenly looked older for some reason, not in the way of wrinkles or other age lines, just the way his eyes became a little more distant. He blinked a couple of times as if clearing his thoughts.

“You can just call me Kaito,” He shook her hand. “I apologize for the trouble this kid caused. You did thank them, right?”

“I...” Akira bowed his head towards Risumi. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

“Think nothing of it.” Risumi smiled and ruffled Akira’s hair. “We would do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Easy for you to say.” Ayumu leaned on the counter. “You didn’t have to carry him upstairs. Emiyo-san had both of her nephews carry him here.”

“Are you saying you wouldn’t bother?” Risumi asked. “Don’t lie to us and say you weren’t worried.”

“Well, no,” Ayumu gave Akira a hint of a smile. “But you’re damn heavy for a kid your age. I think you need to go easy on the curry.”

Kaito snorted as Risumi and Hitoshi exchanged glances. Akira blinked at the man several times. This was the first time he had been *nice* since well, since they had first met. It was... a nice change. Strange, but nice.

“Anyway,” Kaito looked down at Akira. “Can you even make the trip back? You look like death warmed over.”

“It’s still windy outside too.” Hitoshi said as he rested his chin on his palm. “A breeze would knock you out.”

“I’m not carrying him again.” Ayumu said. “Once was bad enough.”

“I don’t think I could carry him if I tried.” Kaito mumbled.

“He could spend another night here?” Hitoshi suddenly straightened. “I could walk him home tomorrow.”

Kaito shrugged, clearly leaving the decision to Akira.

“I’d be fine with that, but what about my cat?” Akira said as he huddled Morgana to his chest. “I don’t think he wants to go back with Kaito.”

Morgana squished himself against Akira. “Mreeow!”

“I don’t know if I should be insulted,” Kaito said. “Or touched that he doesn’t want to leave your side.”

“How can we say no to that?” Risumi chuckled. “He can stay too. Does he need anything?”

“I can come back and drop off some food.”

Ayumu raised a brow at Kaito. “And the lockdown?”

“What about it? I made it here just fine.” Kaito glanced down at his damp clothes. “Well, mostly. I know the alleyways like the back of my hand. The heroes won’t notice.”

“We have room for another if you wanted to stay?” Risumi said with a smile.

“I would, but I have to go back.” He turned to Akira. “We have guests coming after the storm calms down, after all. I should be there to get them settled in.”

Akira nodded, thankful that he was spared from Aiba’s wrath for another day.

“Alright!” Risumi clapped her hands together. “Then it’s decided. Hitoshi, you have an extra futon, right? Kurusu can use that. It’s better than the couch.”

“Got it.” Hitoshi stood and looked at Akira. “I’ll show you my room.”

Kaito frowned and watched Hitoshi like a hawk. His visions painted quite the colorful picture about what happened during Kurusu’s stay.

What went down in the alley. The purple kid seemed trustworthy, but Kaito didn't like this. *Any* of this.

Akira waved at him, he and Morgana's eyes met before the door closed. He didn't like the sudden pit in his stomach when Akira disappeared behind the door.

Risumi sighed as she stacked the plates in a neat pile and went about cleaning the table. Ayumu stared at Kaito as he shuffled on his feet.

"Hey, Kaito." Kaito raised a brow at Ayumu. "Is Kurusu...."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, but he couldn't find the right words.

"Is he what?"

Ayumu shook his head. Risumi straightened one of the knick knacks that hung on the wall, then turned to Kaito with a furrowed brow.

"... Well, we don't know what happened to make him so ill." She said. "And he said something disturbing when he was really out of it. He... he implied that he was drugged and beaten before, and then after that he had a panic attack when we said we could call the police for him."

Kaito flinched back. "He said that?"

"You didn't know?" Risumi furrowed her brow.

"I... I didn't. He hasn't stayed with me for that long. Akira's been a closed book ever since I met him, but I know he doesn't trust adults that much."

"I see." Risumi grimaced. "That poor boy."

"We aren't planning to call the police anymore." Ayumu leaned against the counter with an inscrutable expression. "I think we can

pretty much put two and two together. Those bastards.”

Kaito clutched his chin in thought.

Most of Akira’s life was blacked out when his quirk first activated. The kid’s home life, his personality, his childhood, everything was barren except a few instances of ‘Palaces’ and hypnotic images of gods and mythical monsters, and of twisted human hearts and a demented subway that led deep underground. It made no sense to him. Why was his own quirk powerless when it came to those two?

Kaito scowled. He didn’t know Akira all that well, but it was no wonder the kid didn’t trust people.

“He might not want to talk about it.” Kaito said slowly. “That kid’s been through so much already, so I don’t think it’s a good idea to force anything out of him.”

“That’s an understatement.” Ayumu muttered.

“I think we should give him space so he can recover from this ordeal.” Risumi said with a nod. “But also let him know that we are trustworthy if he ever wants to talk to us.”

“Yeah.” Kaito sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I just hope he doesn’t bottle everything up.”

“Sorry for the weird questions.” Ayumu shook his head. “We’ll be sure to take good care of him.”

“... Right.” Kaito turned on his heel. “I’ll be back with a bag for him. He probably needs a change of clothes and a few other basic necessities. Morgana will want tuna for dinner, too. I’ll never hear the end of it if I forget his tuna pate.”

Risumi and Ayumu stared out the door after Kaito braved the storm.

“And he said he wasn’t the boy’s father.”

“Ayumu!”

Risumi reached over the counter and playfully hit his arm.

Meanwhile, Hitoshi opened the door and let them inside. Morgana’s eyes flicked around the homey little apartment above the cafe, climbing up Akira’s arm and perched on his shoulders for a better view. It was much larger than Leblanc’s attic.

“Okay, so please don’t be mad at me.” Hitoshi firmly shut the door behind them and reached into his pocket. “But I kept your other phone hidden. I didn’t want them to get suspicious if you had multiple phones. The people who brought you here didn’t bother checking all of your pockets, but I hid this one so that my parents couldn’t find it.”

“Good thing the broken one was just a burner.” Akira huffed as Hitoshi handed it over. “Thanks for saving it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes as Akira tapped on his phone, but the screen stayed dark. The battery must've died.

With a sigh he shoved it in his pocket and glanced at Hitoshi. “How suspicious do you think your parents are?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard *not* to be suspicious given the situation. I don’t think you need to worry about anything though. They are smart, but the situation with Silver Falcon taught us when to stay quiet about certain things.” Hitoshi waved down the hall once Akira swiped the broken burner from the coffee table. “By the way, do you even need those glasses?”

“Not really, but they are part of my disguise. I need to seem less threatening. They make my eyes look less intense, too.” Akira ran a hand through his hair and smirked, “Can’t have everyone fall in love with these gorgeous eyes, now can we?”

“Oh my god.” Hitoshi rolled his eyes with a scoff. “How did I not know you had a bad sense of humor until now?”

“Hey, it’s not that bad!”

“Yeah.” Hitoshi opened the door at the end of the hall. “Suuure.”

Hitoshi flicked on the light. It was a smaller room too similar to Futaba’s. A bed and desk top took up most of the floor space, with a decent closet taking up one entire wall. The walls were bedazzled with posters. One was of Eraserhead, but it was slowly getting pushed out by a growing sea of black and red. The ‘Take Your Heart!’ clear for anybody to see. Arsene groaned. There was a figurine sitting on the desk.

Akira grinned at Hitoshi, who suddenly took interest in the far corner of the room.

“Don’t judge me.” Hitoshi said. “Sit wherever you want while I get the extra futon.”

Akira sank onto the corner of the bed. Morgana’s eyes never left Hitoshi’s back as he opened his closet and dug around. He cursed under his breath when he stubbed his toe on a stray box. A growing sense of dread plagued Akira, so he decided it was best to get this out now. Akira looked in between the two, and then sighed.

“Might as well get this over with.” Akira said. “Morgana, Hitoshi knows I’m Joker.”

Morgana’s fur bristled.

“Uh,” Hitoshi looked over his shoulder. “Why are you talking to your cat? Do you have a head injury we don’t know about?”

Morgana jumped onto Hitoshi’s desk. The tip of his tail twitched and his eyes bore into Hitoshi.

"I am not a cat!" Morgana shouted as he glared at Akira. "And you, how did he find out!?"

"Oookay. Joker has a talking cat. That's new, but honestly not surprising." Hitoshi shrunk back and rubbed the back of his neck. "A-and it's kind of my fault for being stupid and almost using my quirk?"

"Your fault!?" Morgana arched his back and hissed. "What *happened* ? What did you do to him!?"

"Morgana!" Akira stood. "Calm down and let me explain. Hitoshi has known about me ever since we dealt with Stain. That's why he was avoiding me before."

"I-I didn't know how to bring it up at first." Hitoshi shook his head as he stared into Morgana's eyes, pleading. "I didn't tell anyone, I swear! B-but when the raid happened and he was brought *here*..."

There was a beat of silence. Morgana didn't move, eyes burning into Hitoshi as he stared at the floor. Akira gently caressed Morgana. He was ready to hold the not-cat back just in case. Hitoshi finally dragged out a sigh.

"I panicked." Hitoshi's hands curled into fists. "I handled it wrong and almost used my brainwashing quirk to force an answer out of him."

Morgana stiffened, his eyes turned to ice. "You-"

"Morgana." He glanced at Akira as he shook his head. "I already said it's okay. Arsene retaliated. We worked it out in the end."

"Retaliated' he says," Hitoshi muttered. "I don't think I've ever been more scared in my life."

"The way you make it sound," Morgana said slowly. "Did Arsene manifest by himself, *without* you actively summoning him?"

"He did." Akira put a hand to his chest. "He somehow pulled it off, but... it was painful."

“That’s...” Morgana’s iciness melted away and he sat down, ears swiveling. “You know that’s not normal, Akira. I’ve never heard of them acting of their own free will like that before.”

“Nothing has been ‘normal’ about our situation. Are you really surprised at this point?”

“I guess that’s true. We’ll have to talk about it more later.” Morgana snorted, but he turned sharply to Hitoshi. “And *you*. You’re lucky to be alive. I still believe that Akira trusts and forgives people way too easily. So if you ever think to betray us...”

A gust of wind blasted Hitoshi’s hair back. A few posters were torn from the walls and fluttered down to the floor.

“Then I promise you that I won’t hold back like Akira did.”

Akira sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll keep your secret safe.” Morgana blinked as Hitoshi squared his shoulders. “And... I’m sorry. I never wanted to go that far, but I was in the heat of the moment and didn’t think things through. Is Arsene still mad at me?”

“Fine,” Arsene huffed. *“I forgive the boy, since he’s learned his lesson.”*

“Hmph, speak for yourself.” Ishtar hissed. *“This boy cornered the Trickster when he was weakened, but I promise that something like this will never happen again. I’ll make sure of it.”*

Vasuki angrily coiled his serpentine body and hissed, and the sound was like nails raking down a chalkboard. Seth’s thunderous growl rumbled through Akira’s head alongside Byakko’s warning snarl.

“Easy, everyone.” Arsene whispered.

“Arsene forgives you, but there are others that are still angry. You’ll have to earn our trust.”

“That’s...” Hitoshi sulked. “That’s fair.”

“Well, I guess that’s as good as we’ll get for now.” Morgana nodded. “Now that that’s settled, we should discuss the current situation. Are you up for that, Akira?”

“Sure.” Akira glanced at Hitoshi. “I don’t think I can go back to sleep this early.”

“Alright.” Hitoshi shrugged. “I’ll dig out the futon later. I haven’t caught Akira up to date yet, but how much do you know about what’s going on, Morgana?”

Hitoshi took a moment to gather the stray posters from the floor.

Morgana blinked and tilted his head. “I... I was too worried about Akira to really look into things.”

Hitoshi nodded as he tossed the posters in his closet and shut it tight. Morgana climbed onto Akira’s shoulder as Hitoshi made his way to the computer and plopped himself down in the chair.

“Why don’t I catch you both up on all the craziness that’s been happening over the last few days. There’s been no shortage of excitement since the botched raid.”

“Is it really that bad?” Akira asked with a raised brow.

“It’s bad if you’re on the Hero Commission’s side.” Hitoshi turned on his screen and looked over his shoulder, smirking. “But people all over the country have been in support of Joker. Here, I’ll show you a video of the guy who started all of the protests.”

“There are *protests* ?” Morgana asked, mouth agape.

“Here, watch this.”

Hitoshi pulled up a video. Akira leaned on the desk to watch, Morgana gave the screen his utmost attention as it played. They

recognized a street from Akihabara, where dozens upon dozens of people clad in black and red marched all holding signs and enlarged calling cards. Almost all of them wore Joker's mask.

"Excuse me, sir!"

The reporter was barely audible over the shouts around her. She stuck the microphone into the face of a man standing on a podium. Well, he was a lizard more than a man. His green scales glinted dully in the light and his bright purple hair swept down over his back. Morgana gasped.

"Is he wearing your costume?"

A smirk sprouted on Akira's face. "Yup."

"A cheap knockoff." Hitoshi added.

The lizard man's tail poked out from between the flowing tailcoats. His vest and pants were the wrong colors, but Akira couldn't fault him for that. An enlarged version of Joker's mask was fitted to his reptilian face. He grinned down at the camera as the woman continued.

"Word on the street is you're the one that began these protests! Can you share your reason for doing so!?"

The lizard man hopped down from the podium and snatched the microphone.

"Because the Hero Commission is corrupt!" He cried. "The only reason they attacked Joker is because he's a true hero that beat the system! He's saved so many people while the heroes all sat on their asses or abused other people for their personal gain! Who are we to stand by on the sidelines while the HC continues to abuse their power and hurt Joker!? We're going to support Joker no matter what! Isn't that right!?"

The crowd around them roared, hoisting their signs higher. The lizard man's grin widened and he stared directly into the camera.

"Yo, Joker! My name's Spinner and I'll forever be your #1 fan!"

He tossed the microphone to the reporter before jumping back on his box. They couldn't hear what he shouted out to the crowd, but their responding cries deafened the reporter, who glanced into the camera with a shell-shocked expression. The feed suddenly cut out and the video ended.

"Wow." Morgana looked over at Akira. "It's nice to see people be so proactive."

"That's an understatement." Hitoshi clicked out of the video and opened a few more tabs. "There are protests all over the country now because of that guy. In addition to the petition-"

"There's a *petition*?" Akira gaped. "A petition for what?"

"To rescind your bounty." Hitoshi cracked his knuckles and clicked on an article about the protests. "The last time I checked it was nearing a quarter of a million signatures. It's been a few days, so it's probably more than that now."

"That's... that's insane." Akira felt warmth blossoming in his chest.

Morgana was in awe, but he pushed it down as he looked at Hitoshi.

"This is crazy. For people to have so much support for Joker in such a short time is amazing." He said, eyes wide. "Protests and petitions... is there anything else that we should know about?"

"Oh, this is just scratching the surface." Hitoshi chuckled. "It's not only everyday people, but there are heroes sticking up for you, too. Which is surprising. Not to mention how the HC got *scolded* by the principal of U.A."

Akira and Morgana stared at each other, eyes impossibly wide.

“Alright.” Akira said. “Tell us *everything* .”

They spent the next few hours absorbing the chaos that broke out across the country.

Manami shoved her clothes into a bag and wrenched the zipper shut. Or she would have, if her bag wasn't on the verge of exploding and the zipper didn't catch on one of her shirts. She tugged at it, but the fabric was ensnared.

“Oh, come on!” She muttered under her breath. “I don't have the patience for this!”

Manami yanked on it one final time, the *snap* of metal echoed in her ears and made her lose balance. She blinked rapidly when she fell on her backside, the cold little zipper dug in her hand, the swollen bag burst open and spewed her clothes over the floor. She stared at her palm, the silver piece reflected dully in the light. It was the same color as Akira's eyes.

She shook her head as her eyes burned, her hand clenched over the piece of metal. There was a knock on her door as she buried her face in her hands.

“Manami, are you...?” The door creaked open and Tobita's footsteps came close. “Oh my. Are you alright?”

“I-I just...” She looked up at him, hot tears spilled down her face. “M-my bag! The zipper broke and I... I don't know what to do!”

Tobita's eyes softened as he looked between her and the ruined bag. He knelt down and put a firm hand on her shoulder, the other dug out a red handkerchief from his pocket. His smile was so gentle as he cleaned up her face, and then enclosed her hands within both of his.

“Manami, I know you're not crying over the bag.”

“N-no, you’re right.” Her pigtails bounced as she shook her head with clenched eyes. “It’s just... I know Akira is safe. S-so why do I still feel this way? Why does it still hurt *so much* !?”

“It’s because you care for him so deeply. It’s never easy to see a loved one missing or injured as he was.” Tobita said as he squeezed her hands. “But remember that he *is* in good hands and that we’ll be seeing him first thing tomorrow. Perhaps you can use some of that ‘Tiny But Mighty’ energy to knock some sense into him. I’m quite sure that Kaito, Morgana, and I will join in, too.”

Manami chuckled, despite how fresh tears dripped down and stained Tobita’s gloves.

“You’re right.” She sniffled. “He’s going to be in so much trouble when we get there!”

Tobita beamed. He gently cleaned the rest of her tears and handed over the handkerchief.

“Now, as for your bag...” He stood and stroked his beard. “How about we have a relaxing cup of tea before heading downtown? There is a small boutique that would have everything you need.”

“A-are you sure?”

“Of course! One cannot travel when their luggage is in such a state!” He reached out to her. “Shall we go?”

Manami scrubbed away the last of her tears and reached for his hand, her smile grew until it matched his.

“Yes, let’s go!”

His hand was so warm that she forgot about the cold zipper.

Akira’s reflection stared back from the steamy mirror.

His own silver eyes were as dull as a worn knife, his milky white skin showcased the purple bruising under his eyes. Akira's hair, still damp from the shower, framed his face in drab strands. His vision flickered for a moment. Ashen white skin, blotchy bruises all across his body, the dreaded creak of fractured bones, the too loud click of a pen in a dark room-

He shook his head to clear it.

"Trickster..."

Akira looked back into the gold rimming his pupils.

"Stay in the present. You are not in that dreaded interrogation room," Arsene's presence curled around Akira like a cloak, the brush of feathers whisper soft. *"And you never shall be in one again if we have anything to say about it."*

Soft voices echoed in agreement behind Arsene.

"You're right. Sorry, I'm just tired."

"We know," Arsene murmured. *"Come, let's not worry the Magician."*

Akira huffed as he reached for his glasses and took a final glance in the mirror. Kaito was nice enough to pack a comfortable t-shirt and baggy sweatpants. Satisfied, he left the bathroom. He took a moment to listen to Risumi and Ayumu's voices down the hall, but he couldn't make out their words. His silent footsteps trailed to Hitoshi's room.

"You run this whole server by yourself?"

Morgana sat on Hitoshi's lap, staring at the screen.

"Yup. There are a whole bunch of other servers and forums centered around Joker now, so mine is pretty small in comparison. I don't mind it though."

“But you don’t tell these people anything, right?”

“Of course not.” He said as he scrolled through the chat. “It’s more fun to just let them chat and theorize about Joker’s powers. Plus, I really don’t want to piss anybody off. I learned the hard way from Arsene.”

“Arsene will be the least of your worries if you do anything to betray our trust.” Morgana chirped. “There are others that would do worse.”

“Oh joy.” Hitoshi deadpanned.

Akira smirked. “I see you two are getting along.”

“Akira!” Morgana hopped down from Hitoshi’s lap and onto Akira’s shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“A shower helped me feel a little more human.”

“You still don’t look that great, though.” Morgana’s eyes softened. “But that’s to be expected after what you’ve been through.”

“You really need to take it easy,” Hitoshi said as he leaned back in his chair. “Give yourself time to heal.”

There was a knock on the door and it opened. Risumi smiled as she stepped in. Akira’s stomach gurgled when the scent of curry overtook the room, wafting from the delectable plates she balanced on one arm.

“I figured you boys would be hungry.” She said as she handed them the plates. “Just eat it slow, alright Kurusu? I don’t want you getting sick.”

Akira nodded as he stirred it. “Is this my curry?”

“Yeah. We had some leftover from a few days ago, which is a miracle in itself.” She leaned against the door frame. “A lot of people

claim that it makes them feel healthier, so I'm hoping it'll work for you too."

Akira nodded.

"Did you and dad already eat?" Hitoshi asked as he shoved a spoonful in his mouth.

"We did. We're turning in early too. We're going to open the cafe tomorrow now that the storm is dissipating. Kurusu, don't worry about any shifts until you're feeling better." She sighed and placed her hands on her hips. "I let this go earlier, but I'm not leaving until you take a bite, Kurusu."

Morgana and Hitoshi looked at him expectantly. The traitors. He scooped up a decent amount and shoved the spoon in his mouth. As usual, it was delicious. His stomach settled with a pleasant warmth as the delicate spices still danced on his tongue. The tension drained from Risumi's shoulders and her eyes softened.

"Good. Keep eating if you can, Kurusu." She turned and reached for the doorknob. "Don't you boys stay up too late, alright?"

"We won't." Hitoshi said with curry sauce on his lips.

"Oh," Risumi blinked at Akira. "Does Morgana need anything before I turn in?"

"No," Akira nudged the small duffel bag on the futon. "He has all he needs in here."

She stepped away from the door and ruffled both of their hair.

"Good night, boys." Morgana chittered and stared up at her with sparkling eyes, to which she chuckled, "Good night to you too, Morgana."

Risumi gently scratched Morgana under the chin before she left the room, closing the door behind her. Hitoshi swiveled in his chair to

stare at Morgana.

“And you say you’re not a cat.” He deadpanned.

“Because I’m not!”

Akira sat down on the futon. He dug through the bag and got out the can of tuna. Morgana beamed as he hopped down from Akira’s shoulder and tucked in, his tail tapped away happily. Hitoshi looked unimpressed.

“Right. If you’re not a cat then what are you?” Hitoshi scooped up another spoonful of curry, “You look like a cat, act like a cat, you’re eating *tuna* . You even meowed at my mom a few times.”

Akira stifled his knowing grin, and instead took small bites of curry.

“I... I just like tuna, okay!? What’s wrong with that!?” Morgana licked his chops. “You know what? I just don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just finish eating and then get straight to bed.”

Hitoshi avoided his eyes as he set the half-eaten plate on the desk.

“Eh, I probably won’t sleep anyway.”

Akira froze, spoon in his mouth, as he stared at Morgana. The not-cat stiffened, his fur slowly standing on edge. His large blue eyes stabbed straight into Hitoshi’s soul. Akira swallowed thickly and stared at Hitoshi with wide eyes.

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh?” Hitoshi blinked as his eyes flicked in between them. “What do you mean by ‘uh oh’?”

“Morgana’s about to-”

“Don’t you know how important it is to get a good night’s rest!?”

“There it is.” Akira said.

Morgana left the tuna behind and scrambled onto the desk, tail thrashing as he was eye level with Hitoshi. “I’m not going to just sit around and watch while you stay up all night! It’s not healthy for you!”

Hitoshi gaped at Akira, who shrugged with a smirk.

“It’s better if you don’t fight it.” Akira deadpanned as his spoon scraped at the remaining curry. “Learning the hard way is not fun.”

Hitoshi had the gall to look betrayed as Morgana continued his relentless assault, sticking his nose in the air.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m here during this crisis, because now you can get a full eight hours of rest! You’re young, so you need all the sleep you can get-”

“Okay,” Hitoshi held up his hand. “I get it, but it’s not like I can *actually* go to sleep. I have insomnia.”

Morgana tilted his head. “And?”

“And I’ve tried everything. Warm milk, meditation, tea, sleep aids.” Hitoshi sighed and scratched the back of his neck. “Nothing works. I’ve even gained a resistance to my mom’s quirk. So unless you have some miracle cure, then good luck.”

“I have Dormina.” Titania whispered.

Akira choked on his curry. The two of them flashed concerned looks and Hitoshi handed him a bottle of water. Akira took several sips to calm down.

“Are you okay?” Morgana asked.

“Fine,” Akira rasped. “Titania suggested we use Dormina on him.”

Hitoshi straightened. “*Who* wants to do *what* ?”

“Oh!” Morgana grinned. “That could work!”

“Uh, hello?” Hitoshi glared at them. “You mind telling me what the hell is happening?”

Akira snorted. “Titania has a spell that can put people to sleep, it should be different from your mom’s quirk. She can try it out on you if you want.”

“Titania.” Hitoshi deadpanned.

Akira nodded.

“As in, the queen of faeries? *That* Titania?”

“Yup.”

“Huh, so the theories online are true. There are some discussions about her.”

“She put out the fires in Hosu, if that’s anything to go by.” Akira set his water bottle down and looked at Hitoshi. “You want to try it out? It’ll get Morgana off your back, at least.”

Morgana beamed as Hitoshi dragged out an epic sigh.

“Fine. Let’s just finish eating first. I’ll take care of the dishes and make sure my parents are asleep before we do anything crazy. It’s been a long enough day.”

Akira chuckled, and they spent the rest of their dinner over small talk. Morgana chipped in here and there as he finished his tuna. Hitoshi took their plates when they were finished and left the room.

“I think having some food in your belly helped,” Morgana said as he studied Akira. “You’ve regained some color in your face.”

“Yeah,” Akira fidgeted with the end of his shirt. “I wonder if it has to do with how it healed us in the metaverse?”

“Hmmm, maybe.” Morgana licked his paw and washed his face, “We still don’t know the full extent of what our powers can do in this world. Like with Arsene materializing of his own free will, or how our items seem to be more powerful. We need to keep our guard up.”

“I know.” Akira pet Morgana’s head. “We’re doing the best we can right now.”

Akira looked over his shoulder when the door opened.

“Okay. So my parents went to bed, but we shouldn’t make any loud noises or do anything too crazy.” Hitoshi closed the door and sat on the edge of his bed, fists resting on his knees. “Do you actually have to summon them to use your abilities, or...?”

Akira and Morgana exchanged glances.

“Not necessarily.” Morgana said.

Akira clutched his chin. “I wonder...”

“What is it?” Morgana asked.

“I want to try summoning Titania,” He glanced over at Hitoshi. “If that’s okay with you. I just need to test something.”

“Uh...” Hitoshi furrowed his brow. “It won’t set off the fire alarm, right? I’m surprised that Arsene didn’t scorch the alley.”

“We’ll keep it to a minimum. It’ll be fine. Hopefully.”

“Wow, what confidence you have.” Hitoshi said drily as he crossed his arms. “Fine. I don’t think anything else can surprise me at this point anyway.”

Akira pulled Titania into reality. There was a small lick of flames as he donned his costume and Titania materialized with nothing more than an azure spark. Hitoshi's jaw dropped as she fluttered in the corner of his room. Her green dress shimmered like morning dew on blades of grass. Titania's smile was gentle, but something about it sent off alarms in Hitoshi's mind. He suppressed a shiver.

Joker hissed as he felt a twinge of pain. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead as the pain flowed through his chest and up his spine, before it dug into his head.

"What's wrong?" Titania's face fell as she hovered over him, hands on his shoulders. "Are you injured?"

"I..." Joker shook his head. "I'm fine. I just felt weird for a minute, but it's going away now."

"Hmm," She tilted her head as her hands tightened. "I think that pain is caused by Kohryu."

Morgana's ears perked up. "What do you mean by that?"

"Kohryu's bond to the Trickster was almost severed because of Eraserhead." She said, face souring as she turned to Morgana. "A part of our soul was almost eradicated, so it makes sense for the Trickster not to be... completely whole at the moment. Kohryu is in a deep sleep right now, but Ishtar and I have been watching over him."

Morgana shivered and stared at Joker, eyes full of fear. Hitoshi's face was ghost white as he looked in between the graceful Titania and the vigilante he admired.

"Ishtar and Kohryu?"

"Indeed, my dear boy."

There was a rush of silk as she drifted in front of him with a flutter of her wings. She traced a dainty finger down his cheek, and he didn't

fight against the cold shudder down his spine.

“And don’t you go saying a word. Arsene was simply too nice. If we find out that you’ve betrayed the Trickster’s trust, then I can’t promise that you’ll get to keep your life. What I *can* promise is a fate far worse than death. A young human boy like yourself would be quite the prize in my court. Keep that in mind.”

Hitoshi flinched back and gaped at Morgana. “Your warning was the least life threatening of the bunch.”

“Hey!” Morgana bounced on his paws. “I could be a lot more frightening if I really tried!”

“Pfft, sure.” Morgana rolled his eyes and Hitoshi stared at Joker. “I already promised not to tell anybody, so you can all relax. You guys can *trust* me.”

Titania stared at him for several seconds. Her head slowly tilted to the side and a wicked smirk sprouted upon her face. Hitoshi leaned away from her, but stared into her eyes with a fire of his own.

“Fine, but you better tread lightly. But before we try the spell there is one thing I want to do.” Titania swayed in place. “Perhaps the Trickster can practice with my bond first? I want to see if any of our bonds were damaged alongside Kohryu’s.”

Joker raised a brow. “I don’t see why not?”

Hitoshi watched as Joker closed his eyes and concentrated. Morgana and Titania waited patiently. Titania’s bond appeared with a rustle of intertwined tree roots and blanketed by lush moss and flowering vines. An earthy scent overcame him. Joker put a hand to the vines and the flowers began to glow faintly. The light was warm and soft like a rejuvenating breeze at the start of spring.

Titania’s bond was nothing like Kohryu’s overwhelming Shimenawa. Hers was a far more docile power to tame. He opened his eyes as

his costume vanished. Titania beamed as they felt a pang of jealousy from Ishtar.

“So, your costume is part of your power too?” Hitoshi whistled. “*And* you can use your friends without giving yourself away? That’s so broken.”

“You don’t even know the half of it.” Akira muttered.

“Well, the rest of our bonds are safe for the moment. Now that that’s settled.” Titania serenely turned to Hitoshi. “Shall we try Dormina?”

Hitoshi leaned away from her sickly sweet smile. “This won’t hurt, will it?”

“Don’t worry, boy.” Titania giggled as she snapped her fingers. “It’ll be quick.”

Hitoshi shivered as the magic was cast. A cool sensation washed over his body as his mind was cleared by enchanted winds. They waited a few seconds. He stared at his hands, then looked in between them with a furrowed brow.

“Well, I don’t feel any-”

Hitoshi fell face first into his pillows, snoring softly. The three of them were silent amidst the fluttering of Titania’s wings. Morgana jumped on the bed and sniffed at Hitoshi.

“Wow, he’s out cold!” Morgana cried. “Too bad we couldn’t use that on Ryuji when he was being too loud.”

Akira huffed. “Yeah...”

He stood and draped a blanket over Hitoshi. Morgana jumped down from the bed and rubbed against his partner’s leg.

“Why don’t we get some rest? You look exhausted.”

“I agree with the Magician.” Titania curtsied and bowed her head.
“Have a good night, Trickster.”

With that, she disappeared. There were faint voices of congratulation from the other personas while Ishtar seethed in the depths of his mind. He shut off the lights then got comfortable under his blanket. Morgana snuggled right on his chest. His glasses were placed beside his charging phone and the inevitable pull of sleep made his eyelids feel heavy.

“Good night, Akira.”

“Night, Morgana.”

Arsene’s calming presence guided him to sleep.

A sudden knock on the door startled him awake. He blinked and rubbed his eyes, careful not to disturb Morgana, who’s head was right beneath his chin, little legs outstretched on either of his shoulders. Morgana’s claws poked into his shirt as if he were afraid Akira would disappear. Akira moved slowly as he checked his phone, which was now fully charged.

7:53 A.M.

... And 57 missed calls from Aiba and an entire novel’s worth of texts. Yikes. There was another soft knock. Hitoshi shot straight up with a gasp. He frantically looked around the room before gaping at Akira in shocked silence. Akira hid the phone underneath the pillow just as the door opened.

“Boys?” Risumi poked her head in. “Ah, so you two are awake.”

“Is it morning already?” Hitoshi said as he rubbed his eyes.

Morgana’s eyes fluttered open and he blinked several times as Akira shifted.

“Yup!” Risumi smirked. “Your father thought it was a good idea to do something different for breakfast since Kurusu stayed over.”

“Oh?” Akira fought against a yawn. “What are we having?”

“An American favorite,” Risumi beamed. “Pancakes!”

She ducked out of the room, and her soft footsteps ghosted down the hall. Hitoshi threw off his covers and stretched. He rolled his shoulders and rubbed the sleep in his eyes. That was the first full night’s rest he’s had in *ages* . He smiled as he looked at Akira.

“Wow, that spell really worked wonders-”

He froze as he saw Akira and Morgana’s horrified faces.

Hitoshi didn’t ask.

So, I leave you guys there for the rest of the holidays! Please take care of yourselves during these hard times, okay? Eat some good food. Take a nap. Listen to your favorite music. Perhaps reread a favorite story? ;)

Break It Down

Chapter 35: Break It Down

Morgana turned and locked eyes with Akira.

“Maybe I should try summoning him to see what happens.”

“Please don’t break anything.” Kaito deadpanned. “Or I’ll have Akira pay for it.”

Enji sighed like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He leaned back in his chair and glanced around his home office. Compared to the one at his hero agency, this was small with hardwood floors instead of polished marble. Although both desks were crafted from mahogany, the size of this one was modest in comparison.

Ping .

Enji turned to glower at his computer screen. Yet another tabloid had sent him an email. Always snooping around for comments or an interview. He scoffed and sent it straight to the trash folder.

Another one took its place, and he was lucky that the happy little *ping* didn’t drive him mad by now. He hesitated before sending this one to the trash.

‘Todoroki Children Defying Endeavor?’

He narrowed his eyes and hovered the cursor over the email. It was from Juzo News. He’s gotten countless reporters on his tail ever since he was discharged from the hospital, and the most prominent question being why *his children* began the petition to rescind the vigilante’s bounty, he was confident that his one was no different.

The petition set off all the protests and chaos across the country, and it was only getting worse the longer Joker stayed out of the public eye.

He glared at his screen as he sent this one to the trash, too.

Ping.

Growling, he jabbed a finger at his monitor, crunching the little power button. The screen went dark, and he was left alone in the silence and with his own reflection. He stared back until he couldn't look himself in the eye anymore. Instead, his eyes caught on the star shaped scar on his right forearm.

He still remembered it clearly.

Screaming trilled over the comms.

Endeavor's hand flew to his earpiece.

"What's going on!?"

Nobody answered. Instead, one of the warehouses exploded into scrap metal, and a golden dragon arose from the debris. Its cry locked the district in pandemonium, leaving the others helplessly frozen in place. It was Endeavor who acted, launching his flames as the dragon flew over him.

The dragon barreled towards him, and adrenaline coursed through his body. Then the dragon opened its great jaws. Its fangs were taller than him. He forced all of his power into the flames until they turned white, but the dragon's scales deflected the attack.

Searing pain exploded in his arm as two fangs pierced through his flesh, before he was thrown away as if he were nothing more than a pest. He remembered flying, falling, and he reacted with a blast of fire to slow himself down, but it was futile.

There was a crash and then...

Nothing.

He woke up in the hospital several hours later, and the vigilante was long gone.

He traced over his skin from the base of his wrist all the way to the elbow, feeling every bump and blotch, and the stitches over the two puncture wounds.

Enji snorted at the irony.

Now he was scarred, just like his Shoto.

No, it was more than just Shoto. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Natsuo's animosity, or Fuyumi's quiet anxiety. Her refusal to look her father in the eyes? Why has he never noticed before? Was it that he was so blinded by the need to mold his *masterpiece*, that he glossed over *everything* else?

Like Shoto's... unnatural stoicism and pure hatred for him.

"For that one moment, I forgot about you."

That's when it began. Shoto's brutally honest words cast a tiny flash of light into the darkness of Enji's hardened heart. Then, Hosu. Joker's insane laughter echoing from the flames. The acrid scent of melted concrete and those glowing eyes peering straight into his soul like the gaze of the Devil himself.

The hellish eyes of Judgement had been upon him.

Enji experienced real fear for the first time in years, that fear which kindled an ember into an inferno, giving life to a beast that roared and thrashed about without mercy, demanding vengeance. A beast that fed on his internal misery throughout the live interview, licking its jaws through the bold disapproval of his fans in the aftermath, and growing fat on the current outrage from the raid.

But the worst blow was the retaliation from his children.

The keys jingled as he tossed them on the side table and stepped into his home for the first time in days. The creak of his footsteps were like war drums. There was a clatter of dishes and panicked whispers from the kitchen. Enji's stomach felt like a boulder as he hovered in front of the door frame.

The whispers stopped as he opened the door.

Enji's children gaped at him. Natsuo was the first to react. His eyes pooled with such frigid anger that he lost control over his quirk. Ice crept over his fists and he stomped towards his father, leaving behind frosty footprints until he was less than a foot away.

"You. What the hell did you do!?"

"Natsuo!" Fuyumi grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Let me go, Fuyumi!" He wrenched himself from her grasp. "Was it worth it!? Joker was only trying to help people, and now, nobody knows what happened to him because of that stupid raid! What if he's injured or worse!? He's given hope to so many people and you just tear him down, a-and for what!? Because of your stupid pride!? Because Joker is a better hero than you'll ever be!?"

"N-Natsuo!"

Fuyumi's shaky hands hovered towards him and settled on his shoulders. He didn't shake her off this time. Behind them, Shoto sat stock still at the table, though his eyes were wide and painted with the same rage.

Enji said nothing.

Natsuo wildly shook his head.

"You know what?" He mirthlessly laughed. "I can't even stand to look at you right now!"

Natsuo marched from the kitchen. His shoulder jarred Enji's as he ran down to the entryway and threw open the door. Fuyumi chased after him, her eyes refusing to meet her father's.

"Natsuo, wait! The storm-!"

"I don't care!" Natsuo shouted back. "I just can't be in the same house as him!"

The door slammed shut. Silence permeated the mansion. Enji saw Fuyumi's shoulders shaking as she hugged herself. A chair screeched on the floor, and Shoto simply walked past Enji as if he weren't there. His hand brushed against his sister's arm before he disappeared into his room, and his door shut with a soft click.

"Fuyumi."

She jumped out of her skin and whirled around to him, crying.

"I'll...." He cleared his throat and turned his back. "I'll be in my office."

"O-okay...."

Enji walked away as Fuyumi suppressed sobs as she headed into the kitchen.

That vengeful demon cackled in glee at the gnarled sprig of betrayal blossoming around Enji's heart. He hasn't left his office since. A knock on the door startled him. Scrubbing at his face, he forced himself to sit tall, and folded his hands on the desk so that the scar wouldn't be seen.

"Enter."

Fuyumi opened the door and slipped inside with a downcast face. The little cup of tea rattled against the plate in her hands.

“I...” Her eyes flicked around the room, looking everywhere except him. “You haven’t come out to eat anything yet, s-so I thought I would make you a cup of tea.”

She approached and set it on the farthest corner of his desk. He didn’t know why he reached out to her, but she reacted immediately, her face turning ashen as she startled back like a rabbit.

“S-sorry,” Her voice shook as she pulled herself from his grasp and turned on her heel. “I should see if Shoto needs any help with his studies.”

He stood and she quickened her steps to the door.

“Fuyumi, wait.” She froze with hand locked on the doorknob.
“Please, look at me.”

Her hand fell to her side as she turned, fingers twisting together. He didn’t know what hurt more; her fear of what he might do or the way she refused to look at him.

Enji sighed as he placed his hands on the desk. What should he say? What should *he do* ? His hands have harmed his family more than any other.

“How is Shoto.... no, how are *all* of you doing?” He bit out.

Why was this so difficult?

“Uh...” Fuyumi blinked several times. “Natuso is still at the dorm, refusing to come home. As for me, I’m doing... alright. Shoto... he’s doing fine. School will resume in a few days now that the storm is breaking.”

“Good. That’s.... good.”

Enji sank back into his chair.

Fuyumi shuffled on her feet.

“Did you know that Shoto visited Mom for the first time?” She asked softly.

“Yes. The hospital notified me.” He said as he stared at his clenched hands. “But that is not the only thing that’s been brought to my attention. I also know it was Natsuo and Shoto who began the petition for Joker.”

“N-no!” Fuyumi’s eyes widened, and she whirled around, her hands waiving wildly. “It... it wasn’t.... it’s not their fault! They...”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I’ve had some time to think everything through since the raid... Actually, I am *proud* of them. Personally, I don’t agree with it, but they did what they thought was right. I am proud of you too, for always being at their side through thick and thin.”

Fuyumi’s jaw dropped and she finally, *finally*, looked into his eyes. Grey, like Rei’s.

“That is all I wanted to say.” He looked down and sighed. “Thank you for the tea. You may leave, if you wish.”

She snapped out of her stupor, blinking several times. Fuyumi fumbled for the doorknob and was gone in seconds, leaving him in ear ringing silence once more. Another sigh, an ever growing number, left his lips. He gazed at the cup of tea on the corner of his desk. It was ridiculously small in his hands, and he couldn’t help the snort as he brought it to his lips.

The amber eyed beast settled down as he savored the flavor.

Fuyumi’s tea tasted just like Rei’s too.

Fuyumi was just like her mother. Their eyes were laced in the same confusion and utter hopelessness from that night where Rei poured boiling water on Shoto. Enji closed his eyes to erase the memory, but her eyes were seared into his brain.

“Rei...”

Sunlight filtered through the clouds, a first after the storm. It painted Musutafu with the morning's first golden rays, warming the inhabitants with new hope. The lockdown had officially ended and a few people were out and about gauging the damage to the city.

“So, let me get this straight.” Akira looked away from the clouds to Hitoshi. “You live in a cafe?”

“Yup.”

“That’s-” Hitoshi shook his head. “That’s a little weird.”

“Hey, you’re one to talk!” Morgana poked his head out of Akira’s bag. “You live in a cafe too!”

“W-well that’s different! Our whole apartment is above the Blue Lotus, but the way you put it is that this is just an *internet* cafe.” Hitoshi glanced between Akira and the Raven’s Nest down the street. “How can you live in a tiny cubicle?”

“Don’t worry so much. It’s actually not that bad.” Akira put a hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder as they stopped at the door. “Having a roof over our head is better than sleeping in the streets, but please don’t tell your parents where I’m living though. They have enough to worry about.”

“I guess when you put it that way...” Hitoshi’s eyes softened. “Still, it doesn’t sit right with me that you don’t have anyone to look after you. Have you guys been alone this whole time?”

Morgana sucked in a breath.

“No. Everyone is gone.”

Hitoshi flinched, and Akira opened the door before he could respond. The little bell rang as they stepped inside.

Kaito's head snapped up at the sound, and he stood, eyes scanning over Akira. There was a little more color in his face, but it was nowhere near what was healthy.

"You-"

The lounge door burst open. Hitoshi jumped back as a little red blur crashed into Akira's legs and almost sent the both of them tumbling.

Aiba took a step back and balled her tiny hands. Tobita hovered at the door frame like a silent vigil.

"G-get down here, mister!" She cried.

Akira blinked rapidly as he knelt in front of her and ducked his head to avoid her eyes, dropping the bag from his shoulder to let Morgana hop out. He glanced in between the two, and stepped closer to Aiba when he saw Akira's lips tremble.

"Aiba." Morgana whispered. "I can explain-"

"No! Just... just let me see your face first, Akira." She reached up to grab his shoulders. "Please?"

Akira lifted his head. Aiba let out a shaky breath as she placed her hands on his pale cheeks, and her thumbs grazed the bruising under his eyes. Aiba bit her lip as she stared into those eyes. The bright silver was dulled and the brilliant gold around his pupils was gone.

"Oh, you... !" She punched him in the chest, but her tiny fist was like the brush of a butterfly wing. "I gave you a chance and you totally blew it! W-we thought that you were captured or *worse* when there was no news about you, a-and then with your disappearance a-and I couldn't even use my hacking to locate you!"

The dam broke and Akira curled into himself when her heavy tears plopped on the floor.

“But how can I stay mad at you when you look like this!?”

Morgana huddled beside Akira, ears flattened.

“I’m sorry.” Akira shook his head. “I didn’t mean to worry you all so much.”

“Y-you better be sorry...” Aiba leaned forward and put her forehead on his chest, all of her spitfire extinguished. “Just don’t do something like this ever again!”

“I...” Akira wrapped his arms around her with an exhausted chuckle. “I’ll try not to.”

Hitoshi’s stomach dropped to the floor. He glanced away as if he were intruding on something private. The mask that Akira kept up during his stay at the Blue Lotus was cracking, and it was only doing so because he was with people he *trusted*. Kaito stepped in between him and the trio on the floor, gently clearing his throat.

“Thanks for bringing him back here.” He whispered as not to disturb them. “But you better get back home.”

“R-right. My dad baked these for you guys.” Hitoshi handed Kaito a large paper sack, and his gaze lingered over Akira. “You’ll take care of him, right? He means so much to a lot of people.”

“You can count on it. He’s just as important to us.”

Hitoshi nodded. His footsteps were silent and he was careful not to ring the bell as he left through the door. Kaito ran a hand through his hair as he looked down at the bag in his arms, which smelled of mouthwatering spices and sugar. They’d unpack it later.

For now, he turned towards Akira and the others, and he shared a look with Tobita.

He was the next to move. He knelt down next to Aiba and Akira and placed a soft hand on either of their shoulders with a kind smile and warm eyes.

“Why don’t we all go into the lounge?” He asked. “I have a superb pot of tea brewing, so we can all get comfortable and have a talk. How does that sound?”

Aiba pulled herself back, and sniffled as she scrubbed at her face. Morgana rubbed against Akira’s legs, smiling up at his partner.

“It would be a lot better than sitting on the floor.”

Akira huffed. “Right.”

Aiba latched onto his wrists and dragged him into the lounge with Morgana at their heels.

“Thanks.” Kaito said as Tobita stood. “For taking care of Aiba after Akira went missing. The both of them haven’t had an easy life.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” Tobita’s eyes sparkled. “It’s vital to take care of each other in times of hardship. I’ve only known Aiba for a short time, and Akira even less, but I feel a certain connection to them that I haven’t had with anybody else. Plus, it is only natural to show kindness to those you care for.”

“Yeah, I feel the same.”

Tobita grabbed Akira’s bags from the floor, and they followed them into the lounge. Aiba had already pushed Akira onto one of the couches with Morgana splayed out on his lap, happily purring as Akira pet him. Tobita set Akira’s bags down by him and rushed to the whistling kettle. Kaito put the paper bag on the counter and went to sit on the couch arm, while Tobita prepared their drinks with an impressive flourish.

Akira mumbled his thanks as Tobita handed him the first cup, and he let its warmth seep into his clammy hands. Aiba spoke once the drinks were passed around and everyone was seated.

“So... do you two want to talk about it?”

“I-it...” Morgana flinched. “It was all my fault.”

The others blinked in surprise.

“What? No it wasn’t! It was my fault for wanting to train for so long, or if we didn’t even go out in the first place...”

“But I was the lookout! It was my duty to keep an eye out for trouble and I failed! If I had just sensed all of those people earlier, then it never would’ve happened! We would’ve escaped without them ever finding us!”

Akira opened his mouth, but Kaito suddenly raised a hand.

“Look, what happened *happened* .” He set his teacup on the table, then laced his fingers together and leaned forward. “Playing the blame game will get you nowhere, nor will it change the past. Let’s learn from our mistakes so that we don’t repeat them in the future.”

Akira deflated. “... You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” Kaito said with a firm nod. “Now, tell us everything that’s happened.

“Well...” Morgana shifted so that he sat tall on Akira’s lap, “It all started with a race...”

And so, they spilled everything; from the race, to Shirogane, to his time practicing with Kohryu and then... the inevitable.

“I tried warning Akira after I sensed them, but I was too late. I was cornered by Eraserhead and...” Morgana blinked and turned to

Akira, "But what happened to you? The next thing I know Kohryu destroyed that warehouse."

"I hid in the rafters after Kohryu's warning." Akira stared into his lukewarm tea. "I..."

'Enemies, here!? It can't be!'

'An ambush!?!'

'Joker, can you handle this!?!'

"Freeze!"

'Capture him!'

"Drop your weapon!" An officer shouted. "Drop it or we'll shoot!"

'Suspect confirmed. Cuff him!'

"No, stand down!" Midnight stepped towards him. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I'll make this quick."

The sickly sweet scent tickled his nose and he could feel himself falling-

"Akira?" Aiba lay a hand on his arm.

He jolted so hard that the teacup slipped out of his hands and shattered on the floor. Kaito was at his side, and he almost placed his hand on Akira's shoulder, but thought better of it.

"Are you alright?"

Akira pinched the bridge of his nose as the last of the voices faded, though a headache took their place.

"I'm fine." He grimaced. "Sorry about the tea."

Aiba and Tobita shared an uneasy look. Morgana's tail swished, and although it looked like he wanted to say something, he chose to stay quiet.

"Don't worry about it." Kaito left to grab a rag from the kitchen.

"Would you like another cup?" Tobita asked. "There's plenty of tea to go around."

"No, but thanks for the offer."

The *clink* of porcelain shards was the only sound as Kaito cleaned up the mess and threw the shards in the trash.

"You're still tired." Morgana whispered. "You need rest so that you can get better. How about we continue this later?"

"I already said *I'm fine*. I was just..." Akira scrubbed at his eyes, ignoring the way their concern gnawed away at him. "Midnight caught me and was about to use her quirk. If Shiva didn't appear and turn that quirk against her, then I wouldn't even be here right now. The rest of the story is already on the news."

"Oh, Akira..." Horror flashed in Morgana's eyes, and he nudged his partner's chin.

"Hey, you can't focus on that!" Aiba set her cup on the table and turned fully towards them, her eyes ablaze. "I would break you guys out if you got caught!"

"And I would help, of course!" Tobita nodded.

"Okay, that aside." Kaito shifted on his feet as he stared at Akira. "So, we all know that you escaped, but what happened to make you like.... that?"

Akira forced a shaky grin. "Are you saying I'm ugly? Truly, you wound me."

Morgana huffed and rolled his eyes.

“You know what he means!” Aiba slapped him on the arm. “How did you get so *hurt* ? If you got away from the heroes, then why were you unconscious for three days!? Why do you still look so sick!?”

“It was Eraserhead.” Morgana suddenly spat, eyes lit with righteous fire. “*He* did this to Akira.”

“A *hero* did this to you?” Tobita blinked several times.

“Not in the way you’re thinking.” Akira placed a hand over the twinge in his chest. “These creatures that I summon are as much a part of me as I am of them. We’re all tied together by our bonds, so when Eraserhead tried to stop Kohryu by forcibly erasing him, he inevitably tried to erase a part of *me* . This... is the result.”

Aiba gasped and covered her mouth.

“What of Kohryu, then?” Tobita leaned forward. “Is he...?”

“No. He’s still there, but barely.”

“Eraserhead probably didn’t know that this would happen.” Kaito said.

“And how would you know that?” Morgana glared at him.

Kaito huffed. “I’m just thinking objectively. He has a reputation for working with vigilantes and he’s a teacher at U.A., so I don’t believe he would intentionally hurt Akira like this.”

“And you know all of this how?” Morgana’s voice still had suspicion. “You seem to be pretty sure about this.”

Kaito pointed to his eyes. “My quirk allows me to see things from countless view points, so I learned how to string information together from multiple sources. I’ve been in Musutafu long enough to get a feel for nearly every hero in this town.”

“You really think he wouldn’t do this on purpose?” Morgana asked.

“No. Eraserhead is a rational man, but deep down he would care.”

“Akira gave him *one* chance to earn our trust and he blew it.”
Morgana chuckled, but it was a cold sound. “So excuse me if we can’t trust him as far as we can throw him.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on Akira’s lips. “I’m sure Arsene would love to throw him.”

“I’ll get Mercurius to help!” Morgana chittered.

“Umm...” They stared at Aiba as she tilted her head. “So Akira explained some of his powers, but what about you, Morgana? Who’s this Mercurius? Is he related to Arsene?”

“I have to say,” Tobita stroked his beard as his eyes glimmered with fascination. “I’m also interested in the answer. It’s not everyday you come across a talking feline, much less a talking feline with a powerful quirk!”

Kaito raised a brow at Morgana. “I thought you just had a wind quirk?”

“Well....” Morgana hopped onto the table. “That’s a bit hard to explain. Akira and I do have similar powers, but Akira’s a special case.”

Akira glanced at Morgana and bit the inside of his cheek. How much should they really say? Akira didn’t want to tell them everything, but fully hiding their powers might draw more suspicion.

“Where I can summon Arsene and several others,” Akira said slowly.
“Morgana can only summon one.”

“And he’s the source of my wind abilities!”

“Actually, now that we’re talking about Mercurius,” Akira clutched his chin in thought. “Have you been able to summon Mercurius at all?”

“I...” Morgana’s eyes widened. “I haven’t actually tried. But, if I’m being honest, he feels off somehow. Different. And not in a good way, either.”

“Is there something wrong with him?” Aiba glanced in between her boys with a knotted brow. “Are you going to get sick like Akira?”

“You don’t have to worry about that! Hmm, I wonder.” Morgana hopped off the table and traipsed over to the center of the lounge. “Lately, he’s been feeling farther away, and his voice is harder to hear too. I never noticed before, but now...”

Morgana turned and locked eyes with Akira.

“Maybe I should try summoning him to see what happens.”

“Please don’t break anything.” Kaito deadpanned. “Or I’ll have Akira pay for it.”

“Hey!”

Morgana snickered. “I won’t. Just watch and learn!”

He closed his eyes and concentrated. A small breeze swirled around the lounge as a soft green light shrouded Morgana. Aiba and Tobita cried out as blue flames erupted, dousing them all in sweltering heat. Kaito covered his eyes at the brightening flames.

Akira’s personas gasped in delight. He kept his eyes on Morgana when he sprouted a smug grin, but he had stayed in his normal cat form as Mercurius stepped out from the flames. He floated through the air by the sweep of his winged boots and raised his staff high. Akira’s grin matched Morgana’s, but it didn’t last.

“Wait, Trickster.” Arsene whispered. “Mercurius feels strange. Look at him, he’s not solid. He’s still transparent as if he were in the

Metaverse.”

“I-I... I feel...” Morgana wobbled.

Mercurius screamed, and there was a sudden *crack*, like that of a mirror breaking. The flames sputtered and died, and Mercurius was nowhere to be seen.

Morgana gasped, collapsing on the ground.

“Morgana!” Akira flung himself from the couch and hugged Morgana to his chest. “Are you alright!?”

“I-I think I’m fine.” Morgana blinked several times as he leaned into Akira’s embrace. “Why didn’t it work!? Why don’t I still have all of my powers? I thought they would all be back by now...”

“Hmm, perhaps it is because the Magician is not well known to the public.” Arsene said.

Akira stilled. *“What?”*

“Think, Trickster. Have you not grown in power ever since you waltzed into the public eye? How myself and many others have been stronger ever since that live radio interview or with countless videos showcasing our abilities? The Magician has not received such attention, thus Mercurius is weakened.”

“That’s it.”

“What is?” Morgana blinked up at him.

“Arsene thinks it’s because you don’t have a public presence like I do. If we could test that theory and get your powers back-”

Somebody cleared their throat. Morgana and Akira flinched and looked to their forgotten audience.

“Do you mind telling us what the hell just happened?” Kaito waved his hand around the room. “You’re lucky that didn’t set off the fire alarm!”

“Sorry...” Morgana muttered.

“That was quite an impressive show!” Tobita stepped around Kaito and held out his hand. “Although the finale was... well, it was quite worrying.”

Akira took his hand, and Morgana climbed to his usual perch.

“I...” Morgana glanced in between Akira and the others. “I don’t have all of my powers.”

Morgana felt Akira stiffen under his paws, but he continued.

“I should be able to summon Mercurius like Akira can with Arsene or the others, but as you saw that failed.” Morgana shook his head and stared at the floor, ears drooping. “I think our powers draw strength from the cognition of the masses.”

“Really?” Kaito said as he scrunched his brow. “You two have weird quirks.”

“I’ve never heard of a quirk working like that before, either!” Aiba tapped her chin in thought. “So, if Morgana had more of a public presence like Akira, then you would be able to summon Mercurius normally?”

“That’s the running theory.” Morgana said.

Aiba beamed and clapped her hands together. “I can help with that!”

“You can?” Morgana jumped off Akira’s shoulder and raced to Aiba. “How!?”

“Social media!” She glanced up at Akira. “Do you remember that present I was working on for you?”

Akira raised a brow at her. “Yeah?”

“It’s not finished yet, so don’t get ahead of yourselves!” She jabbed a finger at them, grinning. “But I’m working on a program that will save all of your posts and followers. The police would be on your account in an instant, so even if they try to take it down, my program will just put everything back up again!”

Kaito’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“Yep!” Aiba placed her hands on her hips and jutted out her chin. “It’s not easy, but my hacking skills make it possible! You can thank me later.”

Akira snorted.

“But now the question is,” Tobita said. “What should your first post be?”

“We could just take a picture,” Morgana blinked up at Akira. “It should work as long as I’m in it.”

“Maybe, but I feel like a single picture wouldn’t be enough. We need something that would really draw attention to it.” Akira glanced over to Tobita. “What would you do for this sort of thing?”

“I’m glad you asked!” Tobita put a hand to his chest as the other waved towards Akira. “A showman always knows that the encore should be grander than the original curtain call! One simple photo will not do for your reemergence into the spotlight!”

Kaito narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, I know!” Aiba dug into her pockets for her phone, then tapped away at the screen. “How about.... this!”

They all leaned in to get a better look at the article.

“A hospital?” Akira asked.

“Not just any hospital.” She said. “This is Musutafu’s biggest civilian hospital. It’s been completely overrun since the hurricane injured so many people. They usually would’ve been taken care of in a pinch, but the doctors have been floored with so many patients that it’s impossible to keep up.”

Akira winced, and Aiba grasped his arm as her face fell.

“Hey, don’t let it get to you. I remember you saying something about healing civilians during your interview with Taneo? If you feel guilty about this, then isn’t this the perfect way to fix it? It’ll certainly get the attention Morgana needs!”

“That’s not a bad plan!” Morgana tilted his head. “Do you think we can pull it off? That’s a lot of people to heal, not to mention the heroes are on the lookout for us. It’ll be dangerous.”

“If I may, Trickster.” Titania fluttered into his mind. “I believe this feat is possible if we use Concentrate, and then the Magician and I should cast Mediarahan together. It could expand our range and potency exponentially.”

“But Grandpa is the only one who can use that!” Alice said. *“And he’s been so sleepy!”*

“I know, my dear Alice. But the Trickster has a nice stockpile of Skill Cards, yes?” She chuckled. The sound was like birdsong. *“I’ve been meaning to ask for new skills. I feel like we are overbalanced in ice, with Black Frost and Byakko in the stock. I’ll gladly trade my ice skill for Concentrate, and one of my nuclear skills for a more powerful version.”*

“Of course.” Ishtar sneered. *“You’re trying to one up me, aren’t you? You won’t be able to heal any illness with a simple Mediarahan, so you’re exchanging quality with quantity.”*

Akira tuned them out as they fell into another argument with Arsene face palming in the background, but she had a point. He blinked

when he saw that everyone was staring at him.

“What?”

“You were staring off into space again.” Morgana said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m *fine* .” Akira said, not noticing how Aiba and Morgana winced at his tone. “I was talking with Titania. She thinks it’s possible to heal everyone if you two cast Mediarahan together.”

Kaito’s jaw dropped. Tobita’s eyes brightened as he peered into Akira with interest.

“You... could you heal the *entire* hospital?” Aiba asked, wide eyed. “Just like that?”

“It should be possible if we combine our powers!” Morgana bounced on his heels in excitement, “When did you want to try, Akira?”

“The sooner the better.” He looked at the time, half past eleven in the morning. “We... we could try tonight? Enough time for me to rest a bit more.”

“You *can’t* be serious.” Kaito snapped.

Akira flinched and blinked rapidly at the man. “What?”

“You want to go out and do something dangerously stupid, *again* .” His expression was like steel, and his shoulders were set and his eyes bored into Akira. “But this time half of the city’s police force and heroes are onto you! You were dead on your feet yesterday and you don’t look that much better today! How do you expect to pull this off without getting arrested!?”

Morgana and Aiba gaped.

“H-he does have a point.” Morgana said as the enthusiasm drained out of him. “We shouldn’t rush into this while you’re still not feeling

well, Akira.”

“Are you kidding me?” Akira narrowed his eyes at Morgana. “We can’t leave all of those people to suffer! They’re only there because of me! If we can heal them *and* possibly get some of your powers back in one go, then I think we should do it.”

“Akira, I...” Morgana glanced in between Kaito’s thunderous expression and Akira’s desperation. “I-I think Kaito’s right. I’m touched that you want to go out and help people, and to get my powers back, but its too soon. You’re not ready to go back out yet.”

Hurt flashed across Akira’s face. Morgana felt a sharp pang in his chest when Akira grimaced and glanced at the other end of the room. His hands curled into shaking fists.

“Think of it this way, Akira.” Tobita stepped forward and firmly grasped Akira’s shoulders. “The lead role must be in tip top shape so he can pull off his parts without error! Don’t forget about the support roles either. Once you recover, then I would ask that Aiba and I accompany you. With my quirk we could come and go with ease.”

“Yeah!” Aiba pumped her fist. “We’ll be in and out so fast they won’t know we were there!”

Akira’s lips soured, and he hung his head. Just thinking about all of those people that were injured because of *his power* made him uneasy. Worse yet, everyone else wanted to sit around and do nothing! It made his skin itch.

“Fine.” Akira shrugged off Tobita’s hands and turned his back to them. “I’ll wait... for now.”

He stepped around them and beelined for the other hallway, but a hand to his shoulder stopped him.

“Akira, wait.” Kaito pulled his hand back with a sigh, then ran a hand through his hair. “We should have a talk once you feel better.”

“A talk?” Akira faced him fully, grimacing. “A talk about *what* ?”

Kaito was silent for a few moments while the others exchanged glances. The man’s eyes turned soft, and the tension drained from his shoulders. He suddenly looked far older than he appeared.

“I think you already know.”

“*Oh.* ” Morgana perked up. “That kind of talk.”

“You too, Morgana? Now you’ve officially lost me.”

“It’s just...” Aiba stepped forward and grasped the end of his sleeve, her eyes darted between Akira and the others. “W-well, I don’t really know how to put it in words, but you know that we’re all here for you, right?”

“Okay.” Akira blinked and scrunched his brow. “Are you all going to use cryptic wording or can you guys just spit it out?”

“I’ll tell it to you straight then.” Kaito said with a sigh. “I wasn’t entirely sure of this until you wanted to patrol too early. Now you just wanted to run around as Joker while you’re still sick. Look, I recognize when someones tries to run away from their problems-”

“Running away?” Akira stumbled back, and he slipped from Aiba’s grasp. “I’m not *running away* from anything!”

“Oh?” Kaito straightened and looked Akira dead in the eye. “So you’re not using Joker as a means to avoid facing your fears?”

Akira’s eyes widened and he tried to ignore the cold sweat that broke out on the back of his neck and across his palms. His lungs suddenly didn’t want to take in any air. The personas whispered to him, but he cast their voices aside.

“Kaito!” Aiba said, horrified.

“Akira, I think he’s right.” Morgana shivered and curled his tail around himself, as if these words hurt him, too. “You know you can always talk to us if-”

“I said that I’m not running away from *anything* !”

The whole room went silent. Akira felt his face burn as they looked at him with wide eyes.

Tobita reached into his breast pocket and produced a handkerchief. He offered it to Akira with such a warm expression that it melted the iciness that prickled down his spine.

“I am certainly glad I packed more of these.” Tobita said gently. “Please, take it.”

Akira blinked at the red and black cloth. He took it with a shaky hand and blankly stared at it. A warm teardrop fell from his chin and stained the cloth, and it was then that he suddenly felt the wetness on his cheeks and how his eyes had burned. When did he start crying?

“I-I’m sorry.” He cleaned up his face, but he couldn’t look any of them. “I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“It’s fine.” Kaito sighed and bowed his head. “I shouldn’t have brought it up so brashly. I apologize.”

“Hey, you’re still exhausted Akira.” Morgana walked over and rubbed against Akira’s ankles. “Why don’t you go and get some rest?”

“Sure.” He muttered. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Akira nodded, and he walked into his cubicle without a sound. Tobita lightly sighed as he gathered the tea cups amidst the awkward silence. Aiba blinked tears from her eyes, hands gripping the hem of her shirt. Tobita gently patted her head as he walked past.

Kaito sulked.

“Everyone.” Morgana drew their eyes as he jumped on the table.
“Please don’t be upset with him. He’s been through a lot.”

“I know Akira’s sadness.” Tobita shook his head as he set the cups in the sink. “It is the sort of grief that one experiences when they lose everything. I have also felt such grief, thus I could recognize it.”

“Gentle...” Aiba said as she sniffled.

“Th-that’s... your observations are correct.” Morgana’s eyes flicked to the hallway. “There were originally nine of us, you know. One passed away before.... well, *before* . Then the accident happened and now there are only two of us. We don’t know what happened to everyone else or where they are.”

Morgana curled into himself and clenched his eyes shut. He wouldn’t cry. He *refused* to cry!

“O-or even if they’re still alive.”

“I see.” Tobita said softly. “To suffer that sort of fate at such a young age, it hurts one’s heart.”

“So that’s why he’s in such pain.” Aiba said, mournful eyes falling to the ground in shame.

Kaito frowned as he clutched his chin. “An accident?”

“There’s more to it than that. Joker was our leader. He feels responsible for everything that’s happened and blames himself for not being able to protect the others.” Morgana hopped down from the table. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t say anything else unless he feels comfortable sharing. I should go check on him.”

Morgana left them with more questions than answers as he scratched at the door. Akira opened it a moment later. The computer was on, the screen was filled with articles about the USJ. Skill Cards

were splayed out on the desk. Morgana's heart hurt as he recognized Yusuke's familiar brush strokes. He shook his head and stared at Akira.

"Hey, you're supposed to be resting."

Akira huffed as he plopped down on the cushion, and Morgana settled on his lap.

"Just doing research and getting the Skill Cards ready for Titania." Akira scrolled through the article, eyes scarily blank. "We're... we're no closer to getting out of this mess, are we? I'm wondering if we'll ever get to go home."

"I..." Morgana's eyes were drawn to something on the desk.

It was Akira's phone. Not the new one that Aiba set up for him, or one of the burners. *His* phone from their world. The one that had been hidden within a fake compartment in this cubicle for the last few weeks. He recognized that black and red chat room.

"Akira," Morgana swallowed and stared wide eyed at Akira. "What's that?"

Akira grimaced, but he reached for his phone and finally showed Morgana the Phantom Thief chat room.

[Joker]

Update: Mona and I are about to go on our first patrol. Wish us luck! ;)

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

[Joker]

We were nearly captured, but we only escaped because of Kohryu and now he's hurt too. A lot of people are hurt and it's all my fault.

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

[Joker]

I've already screwed up once, and now this...

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

[Joker]

Please, someone answer

Just let me know that you're all okay

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

[Joker]

I can't do this alone

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

“Oh, Ren.”

Hearing his real name froze him to his core, and he looked down into Morgana’s saddened eyes.

“I miss them, too. So much so that it feels like there’s an aching hole in my chest.” Morgana’s ears flattened and he huddled against Akira, who began to pet him. “But you’re right. We *can’t* do this alone. We would never be able to infiltrate Palaces or Mementos without our teammates, and remember there were countless people supporting us outside the Metaverse too.” He glanced at the door. “We can trust those people out there, Ren. We should tell them.”

Akira stilled, eyes wide. “Tell them what?”

“The truth.”

The words hung heavy in the air for a few moments.

“Kaito, Aiba, Tobita, and maybe Hitoshi, too. We shouldn’t lead them on like this.” Morgana sat up straight and looked Akira in the eye. “They should know ahead of time in case we ever find a way home. And... please don’t be afraid to reach out when you need help. We all need to be in top form if we want to conquer this!”

“He’s right.” Arsene said. *“Remember that Joker always comes second to Amamiya Ren. You need to take care of yourself, so that we can conquer the obstacles ahead!”*

“Agreed.” The Caped Warrior nodded solemnly. *“A general must ensure his own health, so that he can lead his comrades to victory.”*

“Plus, the more the merrier.” Titania said. *“A queen needs reliable advisers.”*

“More big brothers and sisters to play with!”

“I know. I just...” Akira couldn’t look his partner in the eye. “I need time to think.”

“I understand, take all of the time you need.” Morgana head bumped Akira’s chin. “But for now you should get some rest. We have a busy schedule ahead of us!”

Akira snorted as he took off his glasses and put them on the desk, and then shut off the screen and lay back. His heartbeat counted the seconds as they ticked by in silence. Akira shuffled and stared at his partner.

“Morgana?”

His blue eyes glimmered in the darkness. “Yeah?”

“You’ll still be here when I wake up, right?”

“Pfft, what kind of question is that?” Morgana splayed out across Akira’s chest. “I’m not going to leave your side after everything that’s happened. I promise.”

Akira nodded as he closed his eyes. He fell into a dreamless sleep wrapped in the warmth of Arsene’s presence and Morgana’s familiar weight.

Desire

Chapter 36: Desire

Maniacally laughs with Nezu

Happy Holidays everyone <3 :3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“So!” Ashido clapped her hands together and looked around the classroom. “What did everyone do with their week off!?”

“I slept in.” Sero covered his yawn and blinked the tears from his eyes. “I almost missed my alarm this morning!”

“That storm scared my little brother and sister, kero.” Tsuyu poked her cheek. “So we stayed in and played games with them. Baked some treats to make them happy. Oh, thank you for the baking tips, Sato-kun. The cupcakes were delicious.”

Sato beamed and gave her a thumbs up. “No problem!”

“Aww, that’s adorable Tsu!” Ashido waggled her fingers at Tsuyu.

“I’ve been trying to look up any news on Joker!” Kaminari called as he scrolled through his phone. “But nobody knows where he went! It’s like he just disappeared off the face of the earth!”

“Of fricken course you are.” Bakugo sneered at Kaminari. “I hope that loser is basking in all of this attention! Like he doesn’t have enough of it already!”

“Bakugo!” Ashido gaped on him. “Stop being jealous about how cool Joker is!”

“I’M NOT JEALOUS!”

“K-kachaan, please calm down!”

“CAN IT, DEKU!” A vein popped in Bakugo’s forehead. “I CAN SAY WHAT I WANT!!”

Ashido ignored them as she turned towards Todoroki, who stared down at his clenched hands.

“Yo, Todoroki! Endeavor was in on the raid, right?”

Todoroki’s expression didn’t change, but a harshness came into his eyes like the bite of winter wind.

“Yes. What of it?”

“W-well...” Ashido poked her fingers together. “I figured you’d have connections? Does anybody have news about Joker?”

“No.”

“I hope he’s okay.” Jiro said as she peeked over Kaminari’s shoulder. “Joker seems like a really cool guy.”

“Right!?” Kaminari sighed and put down his phone. “There’s no news! Nothing! You’d think there would be *something* by now!”

“It is a troubling time.” Iida interrupted as he adjusted his glasses. “My brother has been keeping an eye out as well, but there have been no sightings or reports about him. His silence is concerning me, too.”

“Dude.” Kaminari’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t think you would be a Joker fan, with him being a vigilante and all.”

All eyes turned to Iida as he stiffened.

"Th-that's..." Iida deflated with a sigh, the hair covering his eyes. "It's complicated. I have high respect for Joker because he healed my brother alongside Stain's other victims. I don't exactly *agree* with his methods, but he does help people."

"Hmm, that is true. He has gained much favor for such feats." Tokoyami steepled his fingers together and bowed his head. "But Joker walks a delicate line between the light and darkness, so you must remember that he cannot be fully trusted. I hope that he will make an appearance soon, if not to soothe the rampant discord that has broken out across Japan."

"Oui!" Aoyama shouted with a sparkly wink. "Joker is *fantastique*, *non* ? A man born for the spotlight! I eagerly await his encore!"

"I still think he's pretty manly, too! I thought he was *amazing* when we were at the USJ!" Kirishima's grin slowly fell. "I'm really worried about him though. That bounty totally isn't fair!"

Yaoyorozu flinched, and it caught the eye of Uraraka beside her.

"Momo?" Uraraka grasped her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"A-ah, yes." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I am perfectly fine."

At that moment the door slid open. Their chatter died as Aizawa trudged to the podium and tossed a stack of papers on it, then he dragged out a long sigh. His eyes scanned the class. Ashido was bouncing in her seat. Todoroki had an especially caustic glare. Iida and Midoriya had their hands folded on their desks, waiting patiently. Others looked to him with eager eyes.

"Welcome back." Aizawa droned. "I know that recent events have been exhausting, but there is an announcement from Principal Nezu

that all classes are receiving. First off, now that we know Joker is based in Musutafu-

Shocked whispers broke out across the room. Bakugo and Tokoyami sat straight up in their chairs with the former sprouting a frightening grin. Iida, Midoriya, and Todoroki exchanged quick glances.

"HE'S BEEN *HERE* THE WHOLE TIME!?" Ashido flung her hands in the air. "HEE-"

"*Ashido.*" Aizawa snapped as his eyes flared red. "Finish that phrase and you'll be serving detention again. Understand?"

"Yes sir..." She wilted over her desk like a dying flower.

"As I was saying," Aizawa continued with a sigh. "It's important to keep your eyes peeled since Joker is in Musutafu. Now, I don't want *any* of you to go around town actively looking for Joker, because doing so would be considered an act of vigilantism and will get you *expelled* on the spot."

He let that sink in for a moment. Bakugo sulked against his chair with crossed arms, and his lip curled.

"But if you do come across anything suspicious then immediately notify myself or any other teachers. A hotline will also be posted around the school. Any questions?"

Several hands shot up into the air, and Aizawa sighed. Oh, how he wished for a cup of coffee right about now.

"Midoriya."

"Are Midnight-sensei and Hound Dog-sensei alright? I-I heard on the news that they were hospitalized."

"Yes, they are fine." Aizawa said. "The heroes injured during the raid were already discharged from the hospital and are able to resume work as normal."

“Sensei!!” Ashido waved her arm wildly. “Is it true that you were there too!? Did you see Joker’s dragon for yourself!?”

Many of his students leaned forward with sparkling eyes.

“Yes.”

“Is it really as big as the videos make it look!?” Ashido beamed, and Aizawa thought he would be blinded by her smile.

Aizawa glared at Kaminari, who snickered. The boy sunk his chair as the room went quiet.

“It was.”

“He has two dragons!” Sero cried. “*Two !*”

“Right!? The Hosu dragon looks tiny compared to the other one!” Hagakure waved her arms wildly. “That’s so *cool!* ”

Bakugo scoffed and glared at his desk as if it had personally insulted him.

“I wonder how many creatures he has?” Tsuyu said as she tilted her head. “You would think there would be a limit to his quirk.”

“Th-that depends.” Midoriya gained that familiar spark in his eye. “I think it is limited in some way, because we haven’t seen him summon two or more at once. I-I think he can only summon one at a time? Then there’s the possibility of him holding back, so we don’t really know what his full power is. Is it really possible for him to summon two? Or three at once? How is he connected to his creatures? Maybe there would be too much of a mental strain if he summoned too many, but then again, I think some of them are intelligent enough to-”

“Midoriya,” Kirishima chuckled. “You’re going off on a tangent again.”

“O-oh!” Midoriya rubbed the back of his head as his cheeks turned red. “Sorry!”

“That’s okay, Mido!” Ashido rubbed her hands together. “Wouldn’t it be cooler if he had even *more* awesome creatures though!? I can’t wait to see them!”

Aizawa’s eyes flashed red and silenced the room.

“Let me get one thing straight. I know some of you admire him, but Joker is still a *vigilante* .” Aizawa glanced at every one of his students. “Joker’s creatures are on an entirely different level of power than anything we’ve experienced so far, that dragon made the USJ Nomu look like an ant - That’s why it’s far too dangerous for any student to try and go after him. For the sake of your own safety, leave Joker to us professionals.”

Several students gaped at him. Some of them, like Iida and Midoriya, couldn’t look him in the eye as they were lost in thought. Slowly, Todoroki raised his hand, and Aizawa nodded at him.

“I heard the dragon’s final roar for myself. It sounded like it was in a lot of pain.” He said with a dead set glare. “It’s too coincidental that the possibility of the dragon being injured is linked to Joker’s disappearance, but the only thing that could cause that would be you, Sensei. Did you use your quirk to erase it?”

The air in the room changed. A mix of discomfort and unease permeated the atmosphere, and it was so palpable that it buzzed across everyone’s skin. Iida’s expression was unreadable as he lowered his head. Ashido’s brow was pinched, and her golden eyes held fear. Others openly gaped at him, and that didn’t help the curl of dread Aizawa’s harbored since the raid.

“My quirk might have reacted badly to Joker’s dragon, so there’s always that possibility that something went wrong.” Aizawa’s eyes hardened as Todoroki narrowed his. “But I made a choice. It was between us heroes and all of the citizens in Musutafu, or risk letting

the dragon's rampage get out of control and end up killing hundreds of innocent people. As heroes, you will all have to make hard choices in the future."

Uncertainty trickled into their expressions. Uraraka's hand slowly raised amidst the tense silence. Aizawa nodded at her.

"Um..." She furrowed her brow as she placed a hand over her heart. "Do you think Joker's okay?"

"I hope so." Aizawa's eyes softened. "Despite what happened, Nezu, Detective Tsukauchi, Midnight, and myself want to *help* him. You can rest assured that we didn't intentionally want to hurt Joker. The decision for the raid was out of our hands."

It was at that moment that the bell rang, and saved Aizawa from answering any more questions.

"Now, scram." Aizawa waved his hand and trudged over to his desk. "I don't want to hear about anybody being late for English. Present Mic is loud enough."

Chairs scraped across the linoleum and the students gathered their things. They left one by one, with each of them harboring different emotions or whispering among each other. Aizawa sighed when he was left in peace, or so he thought. A shadow hovered over his desk and he looked up to Yaoyorozu.

"E-excuse me, Aizawa-sensei?"

She was hunched over, eyes downcast, and she was hugging herself tightly.

"What is it?"

"I..." Her eyes flicked between he and the floor.

In truth, everything was *her* fault. The whole raid. The hurricane. Joker's disappearance. The following protests and the petition. It

was her father that put up the money for that bounty in exchange for future favors with the Hero Commission. What did that mean? Did her parents not have any confidence in her abilities, so much so that they tried to *pay off* the commission? Not that she didn't deserve it. Her performance during the Sports Festival was shameful for her family-

"Yaoyorozu?"

She jumped and stared wide eyed at Aizawa.

"A-ah, I-its nothing!" She bowed to him. "Nevermind, Sensei. I apologize for wasting your time."

She walked out with Aizawa staring at her back.

Midoriya clutched a familiar bento to his chest.

He stared at the door and bit his lip. He raised his knuckles to knock, but he just couldn't do it, and his hand fell limply at his side. With a sigh, he got out his phone and scrolled through it. Kurusu's number was at the top of his contact list. He bit the inside of his cheek as he opened the chat room full of cat gifs. The last message was a few days old... which was odd. Kurusu usually sent at least one or two every day!

Kurusu really didn't talk all that much over text, but what he said at the beach had stuck with him. The other boy actually cared enough to give him advice! But now, standing right outside All Might's office, he was frozen. His finger shakily hovered over the keyboard. How could he ask Kurusu for even *more* advice?

He frantically shook his head and was about to shove it in his pocket, when it chimed. Midoriya blinked slowly. It was a text from Kurusu!

[Kurusu]

Sorry about not sending anything the last few days.

Came down with the flu ;)

Midoriya breathed a sigh of relief. In truth, he had been worried ever since they accidentally met at the beach, with Kurusu covered head to toe in sand, and with obvious signs of a struggle all around him. Kurusu was quirkless. Quirkless and probably riddled with more bullies than he could ever count.

[Mido]

Oh no! Are you any better?

[Kurusu]

It was bad for a few days, but I'll be better soon enough.

How have you been, with the storm and everything?

It got pretty crazy.

[Mido]

Good! My mom and I made it through okay.

School has started back up again.

Could I...

[Kurusu]

What is it?

[Mido]

Do you remember what we talked about at the beach?

Well, I really want to talk to that person but...

I'm standing right outside their door

And I just...

I don't know if I can do it??

*Part of me wants to do it but a bigger part just wants to turn away
and pretend it never happened*

Kurusu didn't answer right away, and at first he thought he wouldn't get a reply at all.

[Kurusu]

Take a breath.

You're over thinking it.

*Putting it off now will just make it harder to do in the future.
Sometimes its best to dive in head first and get it over with.*

You'll feel a lot better after, trust me.

Chin up, Midoriya. You can do this! ;)

His eyes watered as an equally shaky grin spread on his lips. His whole chest flooded with warmth when he read 'You can do this!' several times over. Midoriya sniffled and typed back.

[Mido]

Thanks!

You're right! I'll do my best!

Oh, I still have your bento too!

I was also wondering if you'd want to come over to my house for dinner sometime, so that I could return it? I'm having a few friends in class over too! You already know most of them from the cafe.

If you want to of course!

And after you're feeling better!!

Midoriya shoved his phone into his pocket and wiped his face with his sleeve. He took a deep breath and held his head high.

Then, he finally knocked.

"You don't understand, Gran." Toshinori paced back and forth, hobbling through the stabbing pain in his side. "Joker was... he was *scared*."

"Of course the brat was scared! He finally got cornered."

"That's not what I *mean* !" Toshinori sighed and ran a hand down his face. "I've seen countless villains become afraid when I appear on scene, but Joker wasn't like any of them. I looked straight into the face of a boy that was desperate and fighting for his very life. I've been around long enough to recognize the difference."

"So, you felt pity for a criminal and it bit you in the ass." Toshinori winced. *"And now your time is reduced even more. How long can you hold your transformation now?"*

Toshinori wandered over to one of the couches and sank into it. He leaned over and placed his head into his hand.

"I can barely hold on for 25 minutes. I've had to cut down on classes or get other teachers to fill in altogether."

Gran swore under his breath. *"All of this bullshit for a criminal brat. Remind me why you, Nezu, and Tsukauchi are all hung up on this kid?"*

Oh. He's never told Gran Torino about Joker's possible connection to *him*. A spike of pain shot through Toshinori, and he swiped up a wad of tissues to hide his crackling cough, but it didn't fool Gran. The older man waited patiently for Toshinori to calm down. Toshinori groaned and tossed the crimson tissues in the trash. He cleared his throat, but his voice remained scratchy.

"Joker has too many quirks for it to be natural, and the beasts he controls are too powerful for *one* quirk to be able to handle. We think Joker is one of All For One's experiments." A grave silence overtook the line. "Like... like the Nomu. That's why we *need* to find the boy, before All For One can recapture him and do who knows what."

"Shit."

Toshinori chuckled drily. "Yeah. Shit."

"So that ancient bastard is still alive after all." Gran grumbled. *"Toshinori, I think you should make a call to Nighteye."*

"What?" Toshinori jolted. "Why him?"

"Something about this whole situation with Joker just seems... off. It's like we're missing a big piece of the puzzle and we don't even know it yet. Don't you think that Nighteye would've been able to see something as big as Joker's appearance or how the kid could heal impossible injuries? I find it odd that he never said anything, or warned anyone about such an overpowered brat."

“I don’t know, Gran. We haven’t talked in *years* and we didn’t exactly part on the best of terms...”

“Just a suggestion, Toshinori. I know how it all went down, but it might be worth it.”

“I... I’ll give it some thought.” Toshinori jumped when there was a sudden knock on the door. “I have to go.”

“Don’t you dare hang up on-”

Toshinori hung up.

He hastily threw some more tissues in the trash to cover up the blood stained ones and went to the door. Toshinori grabbed the doorknob and readied himself. His transformation exploded with white hot pain, and he doubled over to put a hand on the wall, his body shuddering. He wiped the blood from his chin, before collecting himself and throwing the door open.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to-”

He looked down to see Midoriya, with one arm cradling a bento and the other raised to knock again. The boy blinked at him.

“Oh! Come in, Young Midoriya!”

“Y-Yes!”

He whisked Midoriya inside and shut the door. The lock clicked in place and Toshinori let go of his quirk.

“A-All Might!?” Midoriya rushed to his side as he bent over, coughing gobs of red into his palm. “A-are you alright!? Should I go get Recovery Girl!?”

“I’ll be fine, my boy!” Toshinori attempted to smile, but Midoriya only paled. “Just... could you help me to the couch?”

Midoriya nodded and took Toshinori's arm. They hobbled to the couch and his successor set him down as gently as a feather.

"I didn't mean to scare you. There's tea brewing if you wanted any."

Midoriya, still ashen, nodded. The aroma of fresh green tea wafted through the room, and Toshinori used the distraction to clean himself up. They sat amidst tense silence once the tea was poured and Midoriya sat across from him, the bento sat untouched on the table.

"I-If this is a bad time," Midoriya grasped his teacup with white knuckles. "Then I could come back later!"

"Don't be silly, Young Midoriya! I am still recovering from the injuries I sustained during the raid." Toshinori held a hand up when Midoriya winced. "Please don't worry about me. I am fine. So, did you need to speak to me about something?"

"W-well," Midoriya glanced at bento. "Todoroki and Iida wanted to eat their lunches alone, a-and I've been wanting to ask you something for a long time. So... here I am?"

"I see. You can ask me anything."

Midoriya bit his lip. His thumb idly traced over the phone in his pocket. Toshinori waited patiently, and after a few moments Midoriya sat up straight and looked him in the eye.

"Something's been bothering me ever since Joker's interview. S-so I have to ask." His eyes softened and he leaned forward. "All Might, you're going to stay around and help me be a hero, right? You're not going to..."

Midoriya swallowed thickly as ice poured through Toshinori's body.

"You're not just going to collapse one day, right?" The trademark Midoriya tears flooded the boy's eyes. "Y-you're going to stay with me no matter what?"

Toshinori lowered his head to avoid his successor's eyes. His whole body sulked with the weight of his answer. Usually, he would assure the boy that he would be fine, and that he would stay by his side no matter what, but now...

Midoriya flinched at All Might's silence.

"Let me share something with you." Toshinori looked up to see fat tears fall down Midoriya's cheeks, and it made his nonexistent stomach clench. "Are you familiar with my former sidekick, Nighteye?"

Midoriya's lip wobbled as he wiped at his eyes, but he nodded.

Toshinori heaved a sigh as he looked down at his fists. "He predicted that I would die a pathetic death."

"Wh-what!? Wh-when...?"

"Next spring."

"You... you're going to die...?" Midoriya hung his head as his hand tightly grasped his chest. "I'm going to be all alone?"

Toshinori pushed back the stabbing pain as he forced himself to his feet and rounded the table, kneeling in front of his successor. He put a hand to the boy's shoulders as droplets poured down onto the carpet.

"My boy..." Toshinori tightened his grip when Midoriya's shoulders began to tremble. "*Izuku*, please look at me."

Izuku froze, and slowly raised his head. Toshinori gently took the teacup from his hands and set it on the table, and then placed both hands on Izuku's shoulders.

"When Nighteye told me about his prediction, I just... I just accepted it. I decided to keep being the Symbol Of Peace until my inevitable death. Nighteye couldn't accept my decision, so that's why we parted

ways. However, recent events made me think things over.” His cerulean eyes blazed as a smile overtook his gaunt face. “And all it took were the actions of a young vigilante to spark hope in my heart.”

Izuku’s eyes widened. “Joker did?”

“That’s right, my boy!” Toshinori’s smile widened. “Joker has accomplished many great feats that were thought to be impossible. He beat the odds and did it all with a smile! I thought... I thought that if Joker could defy all odds and fight against fate, then why can’t I? After all, the future isn’t set in stone!”

“S-so... you mean...” Light returned to Izuku’s eyes. “You’re not going to die?”

“I can’t promise anything, Izuku. *But,*” One of Toshinori’s hands fell from Izuku’s shoulder and he made a fist. “I decide to fight! I’ll put my all into going against what fate has in store for me, so that I can raise you to be the best hero you can be!”

Izuku stifled a sob and lunged forward. Toshinori stiffened as Izuku’s arms wrapped tightly around him, but he relaxed and hugged back. He would deny how hot tears came to his eyes as Toshinori’s chin rested on Izuku’s head, or how his shirt was stained by Izuku’s tears. Neither of them knew how long they stayed like that. Eventually, the bell rang and snapped them out of their own little world.

“S-sorry.” Izuku was the first to let go and he furiously wiped his eyes. “I-I didn’t mean to take up so much time!”

Toshinori threw his head back and laughed. “That’s quite alright, my boy!”

“Thanks...” Izuku said as he gave Toshinori his biggest puppy dog eyes. “Thanks f-for being honest with me. I appreciate it. A-and you don’t have to fight alone! I’ll fight alongside with you, All Might!”

“I know.” Toshinori ruffled Izuku’s hair. “You’re my successor. There shouldn’t be any secrets between us! Right?”

“R-right!” Izuku wiped away the last of the tears. “I should get going before I’m late for class!”

“But... you didn’t eat. What’s your next class?”

“Math with Ectoplasm-sensei.”

“Now, hold on!” Toshinori held his hands up when Izuku shifted. “A young man like yourself shouldn’t skip out on meals! Stay and eat. I can write a note to Ectoplasm after you’re done. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

The thought rolled around in Izuku’s mind, but the loud gurgle of his stomach made the choice for him. Izuku turned beat red as Toshinori grinned.

“See?”

“O-Okay, if you’re sure!”

Toshinori beamed as he sat at his successor’s side. Izuku unwrapped his lunch and then clapped his hands together, saying his thanks for the meal. Toshinori tilted his head to study the bento. It was made with lacquered wood, and the lid was decorated with intricate cherry blossoms.

“Where did you get such a nice bento, my boy?”

“It’s not mine.” Izuku poked at an omelet with his chopsticks.

“Somebody else let me borrow it for a while! I’m going to return it to him soon, though!”

“Oh? Did you get it from someone in your class?”

“No, I actually met him outside of school!” Izuku smiled, but it slowly fell.

Toshinori furrowed his brow. "What's wrong?"

"Can I..." Izuku sighed as he scratched the back of his head. "Can I tell you something, All Might?"

He nodded. "Always."

"I..." Izuku frowned at the bento. "He's about a year or two older than me and... and he's quirkless."

Toshinori sucked in a breath as Izuku continued.

"B-But he's a lot stronger than I was before I got One For All! He's kind and caring, and gives great advice. He helped me out when he didn't have to." Izuku rubbed the bento with his thumb. "I haven't known him all that long, but I have this connection with him that I can't explain. L-like he honestly feels like a big brother to me? Is that weird?"

"Of course not! He must be somebody special."

"He is!" Izuku beamed with stars in his eyes, and Toshinori's face fell when they faded just as fast. "B-but I know that he's been hurting. He smiles, but I can tell when they aren't happy, o-or if he forces them so nobody else notices how sad he is. We accidentally ran into each other at Dagobah once and, well, you should have seen it. All of the sand was messed up and he was covered in it too. H-he said that nothing happened but I can't stop thinking about how somebody might have hurt him."

"I... I see." Toshinori clasped his hands together and looked at the floor.

Izuku blinked up at him. "Do you think I could help him like he's helped me?"

Toshinori chuckled and ruffled Izuku's hair. "I have no doubts that you can pull it off! The mark of a true hero is meddling even when it

might not be wanted. Keep letting him know that you'll be there for him, and I'm sure you'll get him to open up eventually!"

"Thanks, All Might! I'll try my best!" Izuku's eyes drifted to the clock, and he jolted. "Oh no! Math class is almost half over!!"

Toshinori waved his hands frantically as Izuku began to shove food in his face.

"S-slow down, my boy! You're going to-"

As if it was on cue, Izuku choked. Toshinori forced the cup of tea into the boy's hands and he gulped down in one go. Izuku turned beet red and he finished his lunch with smaller bites. Toshinori wrote his note and sent the boy on his way.

Their hearts were lighter than they had ever been.

"Why, for the love of all that is holy, did you invite them *here*?" Aizawa droned to the grinning rat on his shoulder. "And at the end of the school day no less. We could've done this at a police station."

"You should know as well as I do, Aizawa!" Nezu chirped. "We have the advantage of being on home territory. They know this and yet he accepted. He thinks he can challenge my authority. If he manages to beat me here at U.A., then nothing will stop him. I won't allow that to happen."

"Okay." Aizawa slowly blinked. "I'm going to pretend that I have any idea what you're talking about. You have some sort of crazy plan, don't you?"

Nezu grinned from ear to ear.

Welp, Aizawa wanted at least one more cup of coffee before all hell broke loose, but the gods were not merciful today. The only blessing was Nezu leaving that damn stuffed fish in his office.

The final bell had rung and students were milling about, though they parted like the red sea as he made his way to one of the conference rooms. Countless eyes were on him. He didn't know if it was because the principal was using him as a personal taxi or if word had gotten around about his role in the raid. He looked over his shoulder when he felt a sudden prickle on his scalp.

Shinsou Hitoshi was giving him a dead eyed stare. Aizawa meant to talk to the boy sooner, but they haven't had a chance to yet. He raised a brow at Shinsou, and he turned away to blend in with the crowd.

"What's wrong?" Nezu asked.

"Nothing."

They reached the conference room door and Aizawa opened it. The room fell silent, with only the creak of chairs to disturb the unsettling atmosphere. All of the U.A. staff was present. Tsukauchi and the Chief Of Police sat across from...

Aizawa narrowed his eyes at the President of the Hero Commission.

Kunikazu Hiroto was a decently built man, with a strong jaw and a nose like an eagle's beak, and his sharp citrine eyes glowed like harvest moons. His ebony black hair was slicked back, and Aizawa wondered how much hair gel he used on a daily basis. A much smaller man wearing the same suit, with a messy head of crimson hair and thin glasses, sat beside him. His eyes were icy blue and angled like a cat.

Nezu tapped Aizawa's back with his tail and he realized how long he'd been standing there, staring. Kunikazu drummed his fingers on the table as Aizawa walked past. Finally, everyone was seated, with Nezu at the head of the table and Aizawa taking the left handed seat. All Might, or rather Toshinori in his smaller form, sat to the right.

“Apologies for being late!” Nezu trilled. “Now I would like to thank everyone for coming to this meeting-”

“Let’s just get to the chase, Nezu.” Kunikazu’s deep baritone voice cut through the air. “As some of us actually have a busy schedule to keep.”

“Impatient much?” Snipe muttered under his breath.

Kunikazu glared at Snipe.

Chief Tsuragamae cleared his throat. “It’s not everyday that the President of the Hero Commission, the Principal of U.A., and the Chief Of Police all get together under one roof. Shall we get to the meat of this meeting?”

“Very well!” Nezu’s smile never wavered. “We are here to discuss the raid and possible steps we must take to safely take Joker into custody.”

“We would have had him if *some people* stuck to the plan.”
Kunikazu’s eyes landed on Eraserhead, who glared right back.

“You’re not pinning this on me.” He growled. “That plan of yours was flawed. If you had *listened* to Nezu and Tsukauchi, none of this would’ve happened in the first place!”

“Aizawa.” Tsukauchi shook his head. “We know it’s not your fault-”

“And how is it not?” Kunikazu leaned forward and folded his hands together. “If Eraserhead was with Midnight and Hound Dog, then the vigilante couldn’t have used his quirk to escape. There could have been *no* casualties, whether among the attack force or within the city. Remind me why you wandered off at such a crucial time, Eraserhead?”

Aizawa sighed. “Because I located Joker’s cat-”

“The cat. Right.” Kunikazu shook his head. “You were all outsmarted by a *cat* twice now. I find it hard to put faith in any of you because of it.”

“Do not be so quick to discount us.” Chief Tsuragamae growled. “Joker and his feline companion are more clever than we give them credit for. You have seen the footage from the police station and read Eraserhead’s report on the feline’s ability to speak. There is more to that cat than we currently know.”

“And besides,” Nezu swiveled his chair to stare at Kunikazu with beady eyes. “Even *if* Eraserhead was in the warehouse with Midnight and Hound Dog, there’s no guarantee that it would have went any different. It’s highly possible that the cat has some healing abilities, based on the interrogation room footage. Joker’s shoulder could not have been healed otherwise.”

“I agree.” Midnight said, calling their attention on her. “I believe, that like Joker, we don’t know the full extent of the cat’s powers. It would have gone to the warehouse to rescue his companion.”

“That’s where it was headed before I encountered it.” Aizawa said as he buried his face in his scarves. “And the things it said still bother me.”

Midnight and Hound Dog nodded in unison. Tsukauchi grimaced as he tightened his fists on his lap. The others exchanged glances. They had all read Eraserhead’s report on what the feline had... *implied* about Joker’s past. It sent shivers down their spines.

“The criminal’s past doesn’t matter.” Kunikazu sighed and drummed his fingers louder. “We expected to have Joker in custody by now.”

“I have a question for you, President Kunikazu.” Nezu said as he folded his paws together.

The man narrowed his eyes. “Then ask.”

“Very well!” Nezu’s smile turned sharp. “You seem particularly upset that he got away, more than I would have guessed if I’m being honest! Tell me, what were your plans for Joker, if he had been successfully captured at that warehouse?”

Kunikazu narrowed his eyes as all others in the room stiffened. His staff ogled at Nezu, some openly gaping at Kunikazu, others flinched back in their chairs.

“What else? He will be shipped straight to Tartarus after he is convicted of his long list of criminal charges.” Kunikazu said. “The plans for building a new cell are already in motion. The criminal will be kept deep underground in a specialized Maiden, and drip fed a steady supply of quirk suppressants and other medications to keep him docile.”

Tsukauchi paled. Chief Tsuragamae crossed his arms and leaned back into his chair, his eyes sparkled with an unknowable emotion. Nezu wasn’t the only one who gained a frigid look in his eyes.

“You’re not serious.” Hound Dog bore his teeth as his fur bristled. “You’re talking about locking a *child* into an underground pit, throwing away the key, and then putting him in a medically induced *coma* ?”

Kunikazu almost looked bored as he stared back at Hound Dog.

“A child?” He scoffed. “In what way is this criminal a child? We have no way of knowing his true age. For all you know he could easily be over eighteen. Our best projection is that he is in his early twenties.”

“I disagree.” Aizawa shook his head. “He can’t be any older than seventeen.”

“And you know this how?”

“I’m a teacher. That’s what my gut instinct told me when the kid appeared.” Aizawa’s eyes bored into Kunikazu’s. “That, and his

mannerisms. The way he speaks, acts, and the confidence he's shown reminds me of my own students. The similarities are too coincidental for Joker to be a legal adult."

Kunikazu laughed and pounded the table with his fist. "Good luck convincing a judge with a hunch! Unless you get hard proof of his age, then I doubt your little gut feeling will be admissible evidence."

"I believe in my staff's abilities to deduce such things." Nezu was still smiling, but most of the teachers inched away from how cold it turned. "Besides, I shall not allow you to lay a hand on Joker once he is taken into custody."

The man beside Kunikazu stiffened.

"And why is that? You'd have no say in where the criminal goes after he gets arrested."

"Oh, but I will. I fully intend to take him under my direct care." Nezu leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "For you see, I have decided to start my own Vigilante Reform Program!"

Nezu's grin was like a cheshire cat's as everyone's jaws hit the floor.

"WHAAT!?" Present Mic screamed.

"He can just do that...?" Ectoplasm stage whispered to Cementoss, who shrugged.

Toshinori covered his cough with a handkerchief. Tsukauchi and Tsuragamae exchanged glances before their eyes flicked in between Nezu and Kunikazu. Midnight sat up straight with a stern expression, and Hound Dog mirrored her in support of Nezu.

Aizawa's arms broke out in goosebumps as the President and Principal were locked in an intense staring contest, and one was likely to get struck by the lightning generated in between them.

“You’ve seen that criminal’s power for yourself!” Kunikazu’s fist pounded on the table. “A power like that could change Japan- no, the *entire* world! It’s far too dangerous to allow him into society! He needs to be contained!”

“I disagree.” Nezu’s grin turned feral. “Joker’s powers should be nurtured to make the world a better place. The boy has the skills and charisma to be a fantastic hero, and the power to back that up. We have all the resources we need at U.A. to support my program. He’ll be under strict watch and be required to wear quirk suppressants at all times. Besides, President Kunikazu, how would you cope with the ramifications of putting Joker in Tartarus? You’re barely holding together at the backlash from the raid.”

“Please.” Kunikazu scoffed. “The vigilante is merely a fad. They’ll grow bored of him and move onto the next new topic to hit the news. He’ll be forgotten once he’s shut away for good.”

“I do not think so! Especially when they learn of your *true* intentions for Joker.”

Kunikazu sat up straight, and his face scrunched into a thunderous expression. His glowing eyes suddenly burned with the intensity of the summer sun.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing much.” Nezu chirped with sickly sweet venom. “Just that the skeletons in your closet aren’t as hidden as you think they are. You should be more careful. I wonder what would happen if some of those skeletons were dragged into the light?”

Kunikazu shot up. “Is that a *threat*, Principal Nezu?”

“Enough!” Chief Tsuragamae shouted. “Both of you. We are professionals, and while the situation has been stressful for everyone involved, I expect us to stay as such.”

Nezu looked out across the table. His staff stared at him with wide eyes, and a few of them had pushed away from the table.

“Ah, I suppose you are correct.” Nezu said as his grin fell. “You have my deepest apologies.”

“And I apologize for almost losing my head.” Kunikazu grabbed his chair and sat down, and his eyes dulled down to a simmer.

Kunikazu’s subordinate stared at him with wide eyes and pursed lips.

“Nezu.” Tsuragamae leaned forward to look him in the eye. “May I ask why you decided to invite me here? I do not know my role in this meeting, aside from providing additional facts about Joker or the raid. You could have set this meeting up without my help.”

“It’s quite simple!” Nezu said. “In order to finalize a Vigilante Program you need the signatures of a judge and the chief of police. You could compare it to a sort of separation of powers. Otherwise any hero agency could start a Vigilante Program! I would only trust you with it, as your testimonies could help sway the judge to our side. You would also have a hand in overseeing Joker’s progress during his time at U.A.”

“I see.” Tsuragamae sighed and leaned back into his chair. “I understand what you need Nezu, but I shall stay neutral in this.”

Tsukauchi flinched back, eyes wide. “But Chief!”

“I shall remain neutral, *for now*, because of the state of the public. We would only add to this country’s unease if I took your immediate side, Nezu. However, I will not completely abandon you either. If we can get solid proof that Joker is underage, whether by his own confession or by some other nonnegotiable evidence, then I will lend you my full support.” Tsuragamae held his hand up and stared at Kunikazu. “I personally do not agree with putting anybody in Tartarus like that, regardless of what crimes they have committed or what quirk they have. I hope you understand the need for my neutrality.”

“Of course, Chief Tsuragamae.” Nezu said with a slight frown.

“Are we done, then?” Kunikazu glanced at his watch. “I do have other appointments to keep.”

“Not quite yet!” Nezu said. “We have one more point to cover, and this is quite important.”

Kunikazu huffed. “And what point is that?”

“Joker’s origins.”

“His origins?” Kunikazu refrained from rolling his eyes. “I already stated that his past doesn’t matter.”

“Perhaps not to you.” Nezu said without missing a beat. “But I think it is important enough. We have to know the boy’s current mindset. If we understand him, then it would be easier to take him in.”

Nezu glanced in between Toshinori, Midnight, and Hound Dog. The four of them have discussed this part of the meeting in length, and now was the time to unveil it. Toshinori cleared his throat as he stood up.

“Firstly, some of you are already familiar with my past.” He glanced in between Nezu, Kunikazu, Tsukauchi, Tsuragamae, and now Midnight and Hound Dog. “But for those who don’t, what is said here cannot leave this room, for I am about to share the details of the villain that put me in this state.”

He let that sink in as his fellow teachers looked at him with various expressions of confusion or interest.

“His name is All For One.”

And so, he told them. Not everything, of course. He left out the details of his own quirk and it’s long history against the wretched villain, but he told them about the man’s quirk, how he had ruled the criminal underworld for centuries, and their final brutal battle.

“All Might...” Thirteen raised their hand, and he nodded at them.
“Thank you for sharing that tale, I’m sure it wasn’t easy for you. That said, what does all of this have to do with Joker?”

“Yeah!” Mic shouted. “I don’t see how the Listener could be close to such a terrible guy!”

“That’s...” Tsukauchi dug out his notebook and flipped it open.
“That’s a little more complicated. All For One can take and give quirks and our running theory is that he created the Nomu, since they used multiple quirks and had the DNA of several different individuals. Joker has also showcased *multiple* quirks. Not to mention those creatures he controls are incredibly powerful, enough to overpower the Nomu.”

“I see what you’re getting at.” Aizawa stiffened. “The cat implied that Joker was experimented on before. Do you think it lines up with this... All For One?”

Tsukauchi pursed his lips, and nodded.

“Wait.” Vlad growled. “Are you saying that Joker is one of those Nomu things?”

“Not quite a Nomu, as he is able to act of his own free will.”
Tsukauchi said.

“I believe he and the cat were a different experiment altogether.” All eyes fell to Nezu as he lost his smile, and his beady eyes were unreadable. “An animal with a quirk, much like myself, would have an extensive file. Joker is also not in the system, so either the information has been completely erased or his birth was kept secret. He’s shown multiple quirks, inhuman durability, and his mastery with different weapons is superb. All evidence points to Joker being All For One’s experimental subject.... perhaps since birth. ”

“If that’s true, then I feel responsible for him. It took me years to unravel All For One’s immense network, so why did I never discover

him? Why is it that I could never save Joker from his tormentor?" Toshinori looked at Kunikazu. "That being said, I do not agree with putting Joker in Tartarus, either. The boy does not deserve such a fate after we heroes failed him so miserably."

Kunikazu glared at him, but didn't say anything.

"All Might." Midnight put a soft hand on his arm. "All For One covered his tracks completely. You couldn't have known about something like this."

Toshinori didn't answer. His hands curled into fists and he ground his teeth together.

"Hound Dog and I talked about it in great detail, too." Her colleagues gave her their utmost attention as her playful persona melted away with sharp eyes. "And we agree that Joker showed signs of severe PTSD and emotional trauma. We witnessed his panic attack when we met him at the warehouse."

"Grrr, he was dissociating as well."

Midnight nodded and clasped her hands together. "If he was an experiment of All For One, then his emotional state would make sense."

"Of course he was scared!" Kunikazu said. "He was finally caught red handed."

Toshinori's head snapped up as his mentor's words were spat back at him. Hound Dog slammed his hands on the table and stood up, saliva flung from his muzzle.

"GRAAAH! I KNOW WHAT I SAW!!" Hound Dog's eyes were alight by rage. "I don't have a psychology degree for nothing! I know a traumatized child when I see one!!"

“Kunikazu-san.” Toshinori said as his fists shook. “This wasn’t the simple fear of a common criminal getting caught. This was a young man who was truly afraid for his life.”

“Again,” Kunikazu waved his hand in dismissal. “This is all just conjecture. You have no solid proof of any of this. Even if its true, and that’s a big *if*, it won’t change his sentencing.”

“It will.” All Might forced himself to stand tall. “I’ll stand by Principal Nezu’s decision to help this boy.”

“Oh? You surprise me, All Might.” Kunikazu’s eyes brightened. “But even you can’t do anything once Joker is put on trial. Even the ‘good word’ from the number one hero would be useless in a court of law.”

Toshinori grimaced.

Nezu opened his mouth, but a trill ringing echoed in the conference room. Kunikazu sighed as he reached into his pocket for his phone and answered it, and it earned him incredulous looks from across the room.

“Kunikazu speaking.”

Nezu swiveled his ears to overhear, but the man took notice and turned away.

“He did *what* ? Tell him to wait in my office, I’ll be there soon.” Kunikazu threw his phone into his pocket and stood. “I have an urgent appointment, so I’m done with this pointless meeting. Ryoto, finish up here and report back.”

“Yes sir.” His subordinate muttered.

“W-wait!” Present Mic called. “You can’t just-”

“Let him go, Mic.” Aizawa said as the door closed. “He’s not worth it, his position be damned.”

“Fiiiine.” Present Mic sulked back into his chair. “But he left his buddy here!”

“I apologize for Kunikazu-san’s temperament.” Ryoto slid back in his chair and bowed to them. “He is usually much more level headed than that. I do not envy the stress that comes with his position.”

“Still, why did you accompany him?” Nezu asked. “Kunikazu is a man that likes to do things on his own, and a meeting like this should be no different.”

“Ah, that’s...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I might be young yet, but I am still on the board. The others insisted, as I was one of only three people who had opposed Joker’s bounty. I don’t want Joker to be put in Tartarus, but my word wouldn’t count as much either.”

Oddly, most of the teacher’s relaxed at that.

“So, you were to act as a neutral witness?” Tsuragamae said as he scratched his chin. “Or perhaps a show of goodwill from the commission?”

“The latter.” Ryoto said with a nod. “Despite how Kunikazu-san acts, the entire board knows U.A.’s value and would like to keep a positive relationship with all of you.”

“I see.” Nezu said with a pleasant smile. “Well, I believe that we have covered most of the points set for this meeting. Let us conclude on a lighter note, yes?”

“Very well.” Tsuragamae stood up and bowed. “Thank you for inviting me here Nezu. I truly hope that things turn out in your favor.”

With that, he turned to leave. Tsukauchi was out of his chair next, but he reached over and put a hand on Toshinori’s shoulder. Toshinori nodded, and Tsukauchi left with the chief.

Ryoto reached into his pocket and slipped a business card towards Nezu.

“My card.” Ryoto lips twitched in a half smile. “In case you ever need to contact me.”

“Ah,” Nezu perked up as he studied the card. “I’ll let you have mine as well!”

Ryoto accepted Nezu’s card with both hands. Then, with a respectful bow, he left with most of the teachers staring at his back.

“It’s always nice to gain an unexpected ally.” Nezu chirped as he tucked the card in his vest.

“Uuugh, finally!!” Present Mic fell back in his chair. “I’m glad that’s over! I could barely breathe through that whole meeting!!”

“You’re telling me.” Snipe tipped his hat. “That was a lot of information in such a short time.”

“But it was necessary.” Ectoplasm looked over to Nezu. “Do you really think we can pull this off? This... Vigilante Program?”

“Of course! We’ll find a way to get the Chief’s aid, one way or another.” Nezu looked into each of the teacher’s faces. “But the bigger question is can I count on all of you? You are heroes after all. I doubt you would abandon a traumatized child, even if he’s turned to vigilantism.”

“I see his face every time I close my eyes. I... I refuse to leave him behind.” Midnight said, eyes sharp like the crack of her whip. “You have my full support, Nezu.”

“RAAAUGH, SAME HERE!!” Hound Dog howled.

“I will lend my support as well.” Toshinori stared down at his clenched fists. “I cannot leave the boy to rot in a cell.”

“It’s hard to argue with that.” Thirteen said with a smile in their voice. “The USJ could’ve been so much worse without him. I want to help him, too!”

“... I owe the kid big time for healing me, and for protecting the students on more than one occasion.” Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon and looked at the corner of the room. “We’ll get him the help he deserves.”

“Indeed.” Cementoss said with a nod.

Present Mic threw his hands in the air. “YEEEEAH!”

“Mic.” Aizawa’s eyes flashed red. “You’re being too loud.”

“Sorry!”

“Truly, I am glad to have every one of you at my back. Well, dismissed everyone!” Nezu swiveled his chair around. “It’s been a long day.”

“Sweet! Oh, that reminds me!” Mic slapped Snipe on the arm. “I finally picked up that collectable that I broke! Where do you want to put it!?”

“Just put it on my desk in the lounge.” Snipe muttered as he rubbed his arm.

“Got it!!”

“Oh, and be sure to actually *lock* the door this time.”

“Uh....” Present Mic furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

Nezu suddenly stiffened and he whirled his chair back around.

“You forgot to lock the door during the Sports Festival.” Snipe said with a sigh. “You know anybody could walk in if we’re not careful!”

“But...” Present Mic shook his head. “I didn’t go near the lounge that day! I was too busy prepping in the first year stadium!”

“Yeah, and I had to be with you the whole time.” Aizawa huffed. “Unfortunately.”

Snipe whirled around to Midnight. “And it wasn’t you?”

“No.” She said. “I also had to prepare for the first years. I wasn’t in the main building all day.”

Snipe looked across the table. “Anybody?”

The room was silent. Then, Nezu sprouted the biggest grin of the day.

“Oh, you mean when Joker broke into the teacher’s lounge during the Sports Festival!”

Snipe snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that-”

There was a moment of dead silence. A pin dropping would sound closer to an atomic bomb exploding, then the inevitable.

“WHAAAAT!?” Several voices screeched in unison.

Nezu cackled as chaos descended upon the room.

“And Joker’s cat *knew my name* . That’s not easy information to access.” Aizawa lunged forward, eyes wide at Present Mic. “There was a pop-up on my computer, but I didn’t think much of it because I thought you tried to download something on it again.”

“No!” Present Mic shook his head frantically. “I didn’t touch your computer!!”

“So...” Aizawa deflated and pinched the bridge of his nose. “He probably got information from my laptop. I haven’t heard of anyone

selling secret information about us or the school, so he must be keeping it close to his chest.”

“GRAAAAUGH!!” Hound Dog grasped Snipe’s coat and snarled in his face. “I KNEW I SMELLED SOMETHING OFF AND YOU DOUBTED ME!!!”

“S-sorry!” Snipe waved his hands as his voice raised an octave. “I-I didn’t know!!”

“But... but how!?” Midnight was on her feet, gaping at Nezu. “We had airtight security!”

The teacher’s voices died down and they all stared at Nezu, who in turn looked over to Ectoplasm.

“The little girl.”

“The... the little girl?” Ectoplasm jolted in realization. “You mean the one that lost her family?”

“That’s the one! Did she not lead two of your clones away and leave one of the entrances unguarded?”

Ectoplasm ducked his head. “Yeah, when she was looking for her brother.”

“You’re not seriously blaming a little girl?” Aizawa raised a brow at Nezu, but he was on the edge of his seat. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I’ve seen a scrap of footage of that little girl before the cameras got hacked-”

“The cameras got hacked!?” Power Loader nearly flew from his chair. “When!? How!? I didn’t pick up anything when you told me to run diagnostics!”

Nezu chuckled. "This hacker was an expert in every meaning of the word. It was subtle, and it took me no small amount of digging through our system, but it was the same signal from when Silver Falcon's video was broadcast across the city."

Power loader sank back and clutched his head with both hands. "I see...."

"Don't feel bad." Midnight said as she hung her head. "That kid is either extremely skilled or he has a powerful ally."

"Indeed. Now, back to my original point! Did that little girl not remind you of someone? That blonde hair tied in a bow, and that blue dress...?" The mouse almost looked disappointed, and he sighed as he looked at Ectoplasm. "You do remember this girl's name?"

"Alice." Ectoplasm said with a shrug. "But I still don't see your point."

"Joker controls gods and mythical monsters alike. It is not unlikely that he could pull such beings from fairy tales as well."

"Alice. Where have I heard-" Toshinori's jaw dropped. "You're not talking about *Alice In Wonderland*, are you!?"

"That's the one!"

"But... but she's just a little girl!" Mic blinked. "And I thought that was a happy story? I'm so confused!!"

"Actually." Cementoss raised a finger. "The original fairy tales are much darker than their more popular counterparts. It's quite possible that Joker summoned her from the original grim dark story."

"Well, now that you mention it." Ectoplasm flexed his hands. "I sensed something *off* about her. She was far stronger than a girl her age should have been, and my clones felt sick to their stomachs after she appeared. I thought it was her quirk, but now I'm not so

certain. Her inhuman strength and strange aura would make sense if she was one of Joker's creatures."

"To think," Cementoss, who was the only calm one in the room, said. "We never thought of the possibility that one of Joker's summons could appear human. A lost little girl would make anyone drop their guard."

"We still don't know the exact number of creatures under his control, either." Nezu said. "Who knows what else he has in store!"

"Oh joy." Aizawa droned.

"We were outclassed by a snarky kid." Vlad face palmed. "I can't believe it."

"I TOTALLY CALLED IT!!" Hound Dog snarled. "AND THAT SMELL IN THE WAREHOUSE!! I just *knew* I smelled it before!! Now I know why!"

"*And* how some of the stuff on our desks was moved around? I wouldn't be surprised if that was caused by Joker's cat." Thirteen said. "Otherwise Mic's entrance wouldn't have caused such a ruckus."

Snipe escaped Hound Dog's grip and collapsed on the table.

"Oh, I see how it is." He muttered. "My broken collectable was karmic justice for shooting the kid at the USJ."

"To be fair." Toshinori said gently. "You only shot him because you thought he was aiming at me, correct?"

"Yeah." Snipe took off his hat and placed it over his mask in shame. "But now it would make a lot more sense if he was aiming for Shigaraki or Kurogiri. I didn't know."

"Now, now." Midnight patted his back. "You can apologize once we get him here!"

“We’ll have another meeting to discuss further security upgrades.” Nezu chipped in. “Still, I applaud him! It’s not everyday that somebody can actually break into our school and leave without anyone knowing! It took even me a few weeks to put the pieces together.”

“Especially during the *Sports Festival* .” Ectoplasm groaned as he face palmed.

“And... and you want to take the Listener under your wing.” Present Mic swallowed thickly. “I can’t think of anything more terrifying!”

Nezu’s cheshire grin returned in full force and sent a shiver down their backs. He cackled as he hopped down from the chair and skittered from the room before anybody stop him. Nezu reached his office with a smile plastered on his face.

“Why, good afternoon Admiral Feesh!” He greeted the stuffed animal sitting in one of his armchairs. “You missed out on quite a lot of fun! Kunikazu thinks he has the upper hand, but he truly doesn’t. I can’t wait to see his face when I pull the rug out from under him! Ah, to have a student again, and one of such high caliber as Joker! It makes me feel nostalgic.”

He straightened Admiral Feesh’s bow tie, before hopping up to his chair and pouring himself a cup of tea.

“Alice, Titania, Cerberus, Seth, Kohryu...” Nezu swirled his tea. “And Midnight’s description of the one in the warehouse highly resembles the Hindu deity, Shiva. And there are others in which we have no name for, yet they might be based from mythologies across the world. Hmm, I wonder if this has to do with Joker’s comment on a ‘Sea Of Human Souls’? Isn’t this mystery exciting, Admiral Feesh!? “

Admiral Feesh didn’t answer, but that was quite alright.

In truth...

Nezu's heart was *warm* . It was an odd sensation, a feeling he had never experienced towards any other human before Joker. Perhaps it was because Nezu truly understood the boy better than anybody else? He rubbed at the spreading pool of warmth in his chest.

"The Phantom Thief of Hearts." He chuckled as he took a sip of tea.
"Indeed."

Guess who got Royal for Christmas? ;D

ALSO!! I would like to thank my betas Mystik_Owl, Gundoru, and Lofti Lofi for helping me so much with the Christmas chapters ;D!

Gentle Madman

Chapter 37: Gentle Madman

“What...” Kaito blinked rapidly as she smiled sweetly at him. “What are you?”

“I’m Alice!”

“I... I know.” Kaito shook his head. “I saw you being... created? I don’t understand.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

First off, oodles of fanart!!

[Amaris](#) on Twitter

[Wrath_Of_Nature](#) on Twitter

[Sabo](#) on Twitter

sirblack4 on Deviantart [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

Kaito was bored out of his mind.

He blinked slowly as he propped his chin up with his hand and scrolled through the news feed. He skimmed over titles such as ‘*Joker Still Missing During Protests*’ and ‘*Total Damage Calculated For Musutafu In The Millions! Should The Hero Commission Pay For It?*’, but his eyes lingered on ‘*Top Hero Ryukyu Leads Musutafu Cleanup!*’. The lounge door creaked open before he could click on it.

He looked up, half expecting to see Akira waltzing in, but there was nobody there.

“Akira?” Kaito stood and peeked over his desk. “Morgana?”

Nobody answered, but something had changed. An intangible feeling trickled into the air, a heavy aura that sent shivers and goosebumps across his body. Kaito narrowed his eyes. It felt like he was being watched, but nobody else was in the room.

Then, there was a giggle.

He sputtered and whirled around to the airy sound. There was a little girl standing behind him, with blonde hair and an old fashioned blue dress that draped past her knees. Her lips were quirked in an amused smile. Kaito stared into wicked golden eyes that didn't belong on a child, his body went rigid as he was torn away from reality, plummeting into the depths of an inhuman psyche.

There was a woman singing within a circular room of velvet. Kaito couldn't move or speak out, but his body was... different. He had too many arms clutching curved swords and the indomitable rage writhing in his chest nearly consumed him. He was weightless, and the fluctuating pool of shadows around his body chilled him to the bone.

There were others too, ancient creatures born from the deepest reaches of humanity's Sea Of Souls. A steady bond flowed through them with the strength of a bursting river, and yet the source of this power, the strongest of them all, was locked away in a cell.

Realization coursed through him like a poison as he saw Akira clutching the bars with white knuckles. His striped clothes were torn and dirtied. Hefty chains bound his hands together and his movement was restricted from the massive weight tied to his ankle. His expression was set with such deep sorrow that an inexplicable need to comfort him replaced Kaito's rage.

Suddenly, the creaks and groans from the countless chains ground in their ears, but that was harmless compared to the death sentence that lay before them. Guillotines, their ethereal blades glowing an unsettling blue, were ready for execution.

Kaito could almost hear his death throes, but his vision was snuffed out by a thick shroud. He thrashed like a worm in the pitch black darkness, his heart beating out of his chest as the fabric suffocated him. There was a sudden, screaming grind of metal on metal. It screeched to a halt within seconds, and the room was doused with a tense silence. Some glimmer of hope sparked in their hearts at the thought of being spared.

Someone clicked their tongue off to the side.

“Damnit! We just fixed this stupid thing!”

“Calm yourself, Caroline. You know what to do.”

“Right!”

A chainsaw’s roar drowned out everything else. It was over so fast. A flash of hot pain, his other selves screamed in silent agony as they were all split apart. He experienced an endless darkness colder than a winter’s night, heard the call of an eternal sleep. Was this how death felt? But... no... There was a sudden bright light, the birth of something brand new came together from the ashes of the old.

His new self was born from that flow of arcane energy.

“I’m Alice! I think I’ll be your mask.” She giggled and curtsied to the one in the cell. “You’ll play with me... won’t you?”

Ah, his new self felt this bond before. He was the Trickster. A Wild Card. The master of them all, their true other selves. Another flash of pure white energy turned him into... a mask? Just like the one Joker would wear. There was a serene voice just before everything went dark, an eternal vow.

I am thou, thou art I.

Kaito was thrown back into reality with a gasp. He collapsed back in his chair as sweat trickled down his brow. His heart fluttered in his chest like a bird in a cage. He whipped around and gaped at the girl, his hands curling into fists to hide their trembling.

“What...” Kaito blinked rapidly as she smiled sweetly at him. “*What* are you?”

“I’m Alice!”

“I... I know.” Kaito shook his head. “I saw you being... created? I don’t understand.”

Alice tilted her head to the side, her eyes narrowing in glee.

“You don’t need to be so scared! Big brother actually likes you, so you have nothing to fear from me!” She held a plate of steaming curry in one hand and curtsied with the other. “You wanted to meet some of us anyway, didn’t you?”

“I...” Kaito swallowed the thick lump in his throat. “I did say that before.”

Alice swayed from side to side as she peered into him. She ogled him like a spoiled child would when they contemplated on how to destroy their toys, and he glanced down at the glistening curry in her hands to avoid her soul devouring stare. He vaguely wondered if this is where he would die, if his life happened to be some bad horror movie.

“Well, big brother was nice enough to make you some lunch!” She said as she pushed the plate into his hands. “He worked hard on it, so you better eat all of it!”

“Thanks?” He flinched as she leaned into his personal space. “I thought Akira would still be sleeping?”

Kaito could breathe a little easier as she stepped away. Her hands fiddled with the hem of her dress and her eyes were downcast.

“He just woke up a little bit ago. We were all worried because he slept in all day yesterday and through the night!” Kaito shivered at the spike of malice in the air, and he swore he saw the ends of her hair *wriggle* . “I... I thought he would be asleep forever, like Grandpa! He’s still recovering and we’re all worried about him. Bird Dad says he might wake up soon, I hope he’s right.”

Kaito blinked slowly. “Bird Dad?”

“Yeah, Bird Dad!” She clapped her hands and giggled. “That’s what we call Arsene! He pretends not to like the name, but we all know he does.”

“I... I see.” Kaito shoved curry in his mouth to keep from smirking.

“Oh, we have a surprise for you! You’re not one of us, but since you looked out for our Trickster, we decided to adopt you too!” Alice grinned from ear to ear. “ You’re not a bird dad, but something close to it. We all decided to call you Step Dad!”

Kaito bowled over as he choked on the curry. Alice patted him on the back before she skipped away giggling, and her polished black shoes sharply tapped against the floor. She slipped into the lounge and he was left there alone, and with his face burning. He hacked a few more coughs and shook his head.

“That kid, I swear to *god* .” He rasped as he rubbed his raw throat.

Kaito frowned as he looked down at the curry. He glanced between his lunch and the lounge door. What the *hell* did his quirk show him? A singing woman, a prison with purple velvet, and brutal executions with multiple bodies that were technically all *one* person.

And Akira...

Why was he in a jail cell? Had someone kept him captive? Was he forced to watch those horrid executions day after day? Forced to... *kill* parts of himself over and over to gain strength? Is that why the kid was so powerful? Akira had looked broken and resigned, as if witnessing such atrocities was routine for him.

“What the hell was *that* ?” He asked to the empty air.

Kaito shook his head and scrubbed at his eyes to push away the growing headache, that or the barrage of new concerning questions that Akira wouldn't answer. He sighed as he grabbed his plate and went into the lounge.

Akira, or rather *Joker in full costume*, sat on one of the sofas. He leaned back, an ankle crossed over his knee, and one of his arms was splayed out on the back of the couch while the other held his phone. He idly scrolled through it. The black tailcoat spilled off the couch and onto the floor. A plate of untouched brownies lay cold on the table.

Morgana, who had opened an eye to stare at him, was curled up on Joker's side. Alice hummed a hauntingly familiar tune as she lay her head on Joker's other shoulder, playfully kicking her legs.

“You know you'd be arrested on the spot if anybody else came in here.” Kaito said as he sat on the opposite couch. “Or you know, we'd *all* be arrested?”

Joker looked up from his phone. “But nobody else stays here, aside from us.”

“Ouch.” Kaito huffed, displacing a few of his stray bangs. “But a fair point, I guess.”

Joker chuckled and stared back to his phone, oblivious to Kaito's inner turmoil.

The person sitting in front of him was supposed to be the same kid locked away in a cold cell. And yet, despite all of the torture he endured, none of that trauma was visible on Joker. Kaito's stomach sank. Akira's alter ego was just a mask, a persona thrown on the bury the heart wrenching pain as if it had never existed.

Without it though...

He was just a teenager. A *kid* . Someone who was lost and alone in a cruel world, forced to grow up far too early. That same child who was an inch away from having a complete emotional breakdown the other night. Kaito swallowed back the emotions still lingering from his terrifying vision.

Alice lost her playful smirk as she contemplated Kaito, but she stayed silent.

Morgana had both eyes on him now, and he wondered how long he had been sitting here, just staring at Joker.

"So," Kaito cleared his throat. "Are you feeling any better today, Akira?"

"I'm starting to feel like myself again." Joker tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowing in thought as his free hand covered his heart. "Well, mostly."

"I'm glad that you're getting better." Alice wrapped her arms around Joker's neck. "He couldn't play with any of us!"

Joker grinned and patted her head.

"Good. Great." Kaito sighed as he set his curry down on the table. "Akira, there's something I want to ask-"

"Oh, speaking of which!" Joker said as he glanced around the empty lounge. "I wanted to have an important chat with Aiba and Tobita

today, but they weren't here when I got up. And.... I would like to apologize for yelling the other day. Where'd they go anyway?"

"I..." Kaito deflated with a sigh. "Tobita wanted to explore Musutafu today, and I gave Aiba a list of groceries to get before they get back. We'll need a bigger stock now that we have more mouths to feed."

Morgana chuckled as he stretched out. "They were wearing ridiculous disguises. I hope they don't get caught."

"Hoo boy." Joker said. "I'm sure they'll be fine. Hopefully. We'll keep an ear out in case something goes down though."

Morgana gave him an odd look, and Kaito had to keep his face from scrunching up.

"So, about-"

"Oh hey!" Joker turned his phone towards Morgana. "Midoriya just invited me over for dinner with his friends."

Kaito's eye twitched.

Alice gave him a smug grin, but the other two didn't notice.

"Who's Midoriya?" He asked as he straightened his glasses.

"A student from U.A." Joker said with a nod. "He's a first year, I think he's about a year younger than I am? We met a few times and I think he's a good kid."

"... I see. Then I think you should take him up on that offer."

The three of them gaped at Kaito, with Joker blinking rapidly.

"You're actually going to let me out?"

Kaito rolled his eyes. "There's a difference between letting you run around town as a wanted vigilante and actually letting you hang out

with kids your own age. It'll be good for you."

"Huh, thanks *dad* ." Joker typed away on his phone as Kaito jolted.

"*Please* don't call me that." Kaito muttered as he hid his red face in his hands. "It's bad enough that the purple kid assumed I was your father, I don't need you adding to it too."

"Aww, but we've officially adopted you!" Alice said. "You can't take it back!"

"Alice is right, you know. Once they give you a nickname they won't take it back, just ask Arsene." Joker blinked at his phone. "I guess I'll go to Midoriya's. Maybe I could text Aiba and have her get a cake? I don't want to be a bad house guest!"

"Yeah, you do that." Kaito muttered.

Alice giggled, and while Joker didn't look at Kaito's beet red face, there was a tiny smirk on his lips as if he knew. Morgana huffed as he rolled his eyes. They were quiet for a moment as Kaito gathered his thoughts. He waited until the burn on his face ebbed away, and then he sat up straight and placed his hands on his knees.

"Akira, I need to ask you something-"

Kaito shielded his eyes when a blinding flash of light and a hiss of flames overtook the lounge. He slowly lowered his arm, and gaped as Akira was in a dark shirt and sweatpants.

Alice beamed as she bounced on the seat.

Morgana was on his feet. "Hey, that one didn't take as long as I thought!"

"Yay!! You mastered my bond!" Alice said. "How was it? Was it as hard as Grandpa's?"

“Nobody could beat Kohryu’s bond. I think he was right in saying that his bond would be a stepping stone towards the others.” Akira put a hand to her head as a genuine smile lit up his eyes. “Yours was still more difficult than most, though, since you’re the ultimate in the Death arcana. You should be proud.”

Kaito paled. Was the little girl somehow *death incarnate* ? He decided that would be a conversation he *never* wanted to have, before throwing the topic in a familiar box and locking it deep within his psyche.

Alice hopped down from the couch and curtsied. Then, with a playful twirl, she vanished in a flurry of blue embers.

“Well, that was certainly... something.” Kaito said.

“Yep, one more bond down.” Akira glanced at Morgana. “I think I should completely master Cerberus’ first, and then move onto Ishtar. I know she’s been mad at me since I mastered Titania’s.”

“Right!” Morgana said with a smile. “The more bonds you master the better off we’ll be.”

“Exactly.” Akira raised a brow at Kaito. “So, you were trying to say something?”

“I...” Kaito suppressed a shiver when he remembered chains creaking. “I am thou, thou art I.”

Akira and Morgana’s jaws dropped to the floor. Akira shot to the edge of the couch as his eyes were blown wide. A pool of gold emerged around his pupils, and Kaito just knew that he was being scrutinized by something not human.

“H-how did you know that phrase?”

“My quirk. It activated when Alice came in to give me the curry. I saw a velvet prison, listened to a woman’s beautiful singing, felt the pain

of those beings when they were executed to *make* Alice. And... I saw *you* . Chained up and thrown in a tiny cell. The last thing I heard before my quirk stopped was that eternal vow. I am thou, thou art I."

Akira's face was bone white, and Morgana's fur stood on end.

"Why were you locked away in that cell, Akira? What did they *do* to you?"

The silence stretched as the air became heavy, so he decided to go in a different direction.

"These creatures that you control..." Kaito leaned forward to look Akira in the eyes. "They aren't just a mere quirk, right? They are as much a part of you as you are of them. They feel... like your other selves."

Akira and Morgana exchanged quick glances, before Morgana's eyes turned sharp, and his tail began to twitch.

"... That's correct." Morgana said. "It's the same for Mercurius and I, too."

Akira nodded. "But how did you know that they feel like our other selves?"

"I..." Kaito took a moment to think. "Because I completely understand what that feels like, to be as much a part of another person as they are to you. Obviously, I can't control my 'other selves' like you do, but it would be the same concept."

The gold in Akira's eyes intensified.

"You've told us a bit about your quirk before." Morgana scanned Kaito from head to toe. "But how are our powers similar?"

"My quirk throws me into another person's shoes." Kaito took off his glasses and put them on the table, then scrubbed at his eyes. "When I relive a person's life, I really *relive* it, from their first memories all

the way to the present day where my quirk activates. What is mere seconds for the rest of the world could be *years* for me.”

“Years?” Akira said softly. “So, when you met the Shinsou’s at the cafe, did it...?”

“Yes.” Kaito sighed, and in his eyes glimmered something ancient, exhausted, and incomprehensible. It reminded Akira of Kohryu’s eyes. “Risumi is 35, Ayumu is 37, and Hitoshi is 15. I relived every moment of their lives, experienced all of their hardships, first loves, times of joy and times of loss, and everything in between. They are as much a part of me as I am of them. I gained 87 years when I walked into the cafe that day.”

“87 years?” Akira furrowed his brow. “How old are you, then?”

“Physically, I’m only 29.” Kaito stared down at his fists, his lips dipped into a frown. “Mentally, I have lived countless lifetimes. I’ve stopped adding up the years after ten thousand, though.”

“T-ten thousand!?” Morgana blinked rapidly. “That’s... th-that’s.... How is that even *possible* ?”

“Well,” Akira forced a shaky grin. “Maybe we should call you step *grandpa* instead of step dad.”

“Maybe.” Kaito chuckled, but there was no mirth in it.

“What about Akira and I?” Morgana suddenly perked up, ears forward. “How much of our past do you know about?”

“You two.... are an enigma to me.” Kaito sighed and scratched the back of his head. “My quirk has been an impeccable factor throughout my entire life, but that changed when I met the two of you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Akira asked, shoulders tense. “How are we different?”

“When I first laid eyes on you, my quirk acted... strange. It didn’t show me much, only broken bits and pieces of your memories here and there. Quick glimpses into such places as a floating bank or a perverted castle, or a ship sailing through a flooded city? There was one from a warped underground subway, too. However, when I looked at Alice...” Akira stiffened when Kaito peered into him, his electric blue eyes as clear and pristine as a crystal. “That velvet room was the only clear thing I saw from your past.”

Akira shifted as his face drained of color. His hands were tight fists that grasped his pant legs. He looked over to Morgana, and several silent conversations were exchanged between them in a blink of an eye.

“Despite this, I feel like we understand each other like nobody else has ever understood me before.” Kaito clutched his chin and studied the other end of the room. “Though I have to admit, trying to get to know someone like this has been odd. Isn’t this how other people normally socialize...?”

“If you have a point to make in all of this,” Morgana’s voice turned chilly. “Then make it.”

“Right... I got off topic.” Kaito shook his head and deflated with a long sigh. “I felt your immense pain through Alice, Akira. I understand that it’s not easy for you to share, and I wouldn’t expect it of you when you hardly know anything about me. So, I’ll share something with you that I’ve never shared with anyone else.”

Akira looked at him warily.

Morgana climbed into his partner’s lap, and Kaito didn’t mention how shaky Akira’s hands were as he pet Morgana.

Kaito’s heart thundered in his ears. “I’ll tell you how my quirk first manifested.”

Akira and Morgana settled back as Kaito took a moment to gather himself.

"I was only four years old. There was a big parade right in the center of Tokyo, a celebration for the police and heroes in the city. I *begged* my parents to go. We lived in Tokyo anyway at that time, so it wasn't hard for them to say yes. I barely remember my father carrying me on his shoulders just so I could see everything. It was right in the middle of the parade where I... I..." Kaito sighed as he clasped his shaking hands together, Akira and Morgana stiffened when he blinked unwanted tears from his eyes. "There was a vast sea of people all around us. I relived their lives, one after another after another after another in a near endless cycle."

"What happened?" Akira asked gently. "A-after it stopped?"

"I-it... *broke* me. The mind of a young child isn't prepared for that kind of thing. To *experience* everything that these people have been through." Kaito shook his head as the ghosts of old memories haunted him. "Natural disasters, catastrophes, murders and other *unspeakable* crimes. I was a hero digging bodies out of a landslide. One person was nearly crushed in a villain attack, only to be saved at the last second by a passing hero. I once held a knife to someone's throat, listening to them as they begged for their life, and they... I can still hear the sound of their blood splashing the pavement..."

"Hey..." Akira shifted in his seat. "You know that you didn't really do those things, right?"

"I know, but it's hard to separate them from myself sometimes." Kaito leaned forward and massaged his forehead. "My quirk doesn't allow me to forget."

"But... there has to be some good things too, right?" Akira said, eyes soft. "It can't all be bad?"

“... I guess.” Kaito muttered. “I’ll never forget the loving warmth of a first time mother holding her newborn, or the unbridled awe of seeing the aurora for the first time. These are only a few examples among many, but it always feels like the bad outweighs the good.”

Morgana jumped from Akira’s lap and onto the table, gently nuzzling Kaito’s hands.

“You don’t have to continue if you don’t want to.” Morgana said.

A sad smile came onto Kaito’s face as he scratched Morgana behind the ears.

“It’s okay. It... actually feels good to get this off of my chest.” Kaito said as he continued to pet Morgana. “I... I don’t remember what happened when my quirk *finally* stopped, just a white haze of pain. The doctors told me that I wouldn’t stop screaming until my voice gave out.”

“Doctors?” Akira asked.

“Yeah...” Kaito was lost in thought as he recalled endless white walls. “I had to be placed in a special facility for quirks like mine. My own power left me as nothing more than a broken husk. I... I wasn’t *me* anymore. There were a constant flow of doctors and quirks that had to put all of the shattered remnants back together. It took them nearly two decades to sift through everything.”

“I’m sorry.” Akira said with soft eyes. “You shouldn’t have gone through that.”

Kaito shook his head. His hand dropped from Morgana’s head and went to his heart. Kaito bit his lip, but he nodded to himself. He reached behind his neck and undid the chain that was hidden beneath his shirt. Akira and Morgana exchanged glances when Kaito held up a silver medallion, intricately etched with two phoenixes circling around a blade. He held it out for Akira to examine.

“My mother gave this to me ages ago. It’s my family crest.” Kaito said as he let Akira take it, Morgana peeked at it curiously. “It’s a reminder of who I am, in case.... in case I ever lose myself again.”

Akira turned it over in his hands. The necklace wasn’t some cheap knockoff, it was real silver, and the tiny twin jewels that made the birds’ eyes were genuine. He handed back the medallion and Kaito put it back on, letting the silver hang over his shirt.

“Akira, I have to be honest with you.”

Akira raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

“What I said the other day, when I told you that I know what it looks like when someone runs away from their problems?” Akira flinched and Morgana’s ears flattened. “I was talking about myself, too. I was so afraid when they finally let me out of that hospital ward. I... I took what little was left of my parents’ money and fled from Tokyo. Why else do you think I set up this tiny little internet cafe in the middle of a back street? If you haven’t noticed, it’s not exactly the bustling center of town.”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at.” Morgana hopped onto the couch and rubbed against Kaito’s side. “You don’t want to lose yourself again, right? Putting a business in a busy district would draw a lot more customers...”

“And a lot of customers would mean reliving more lives.” Akira said as he clutched his chin. “Especially since your quirk doesn’t come with an off switch?”

“That’s right.” Kaito sighed as he grasped his medallion. “My real name isn’t even Kaito.”

“Oh? What is it?”

Kaito glanced at Akira with amusement. “I’ll tell you mine when you tell me yours.”

“You-” Akira chuckled as he ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

They were all silent for a few minutes, digesting the information that was shared. Eventually Kaito stood with a long sigh.

“I’ll listen if you ever wanted to share your story, Akira.” He said. “But thanks for listening to mine. It did make me feel better.”

“... Yeah, thanks for sharing that.” Akira glanced in between Kaito and the cold food on the table. “Are you going to eat that, or...?”

Kaito shook his head. “I’m not feeling that hungry right now.”

“Alright.” Akira grabbed the plate and went into the kitchen, and he glanced over his shoulder with a huge smirk. “I’ll wrap it up so you can eat it later, *grandpa* .”

Morgana choked back his laughter.

Kaito sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, then he swiped up his glasses and went to the door.

“Whatever.” He said as his ears turned crimson. “Just let me know when you want to go visit your friend.”

With that, he left the room.

Akira’s smirk fell and he stared into the plate of curry with a frown.

“Wow.” Morgana jumped down. “I never expected him to share something like that.”

“Yeah.” Akira shook his head. “He’s been through a lot, too.”

“I wonder though...” Morgana glanced at the door. “It wouldn’t be too hard to find records on a family crest like that. We could do some research and find his real name for ourselves.”

“No.” Akira set the plate on the counter and leaned against it. “He put his trust in us, and I would rather not go behind his back like that.”

“Fair enough.” Morgana nodded. “So, what do we do now?”

“I think you’re right. We can trust them with the truth.”

Morgana’s eyes brightened. “Yeah! We’ll just have to find the right time.”

“... Yeah.” Akira sighed. “Just not today. I’d like to get it over with and only tell it once.”

“We have plenty of time.” Morgana pranced back to the couch and splayed himself out on the cushions. “Until then, we should just relax until you’re strong enough to heal those hospital patients.”

Akira snorted as he dug out his phone. He smiled at the newest text from Midoriya.

[Mido]

I did it!! I really talked to him!!

[Kurusu]

See? I knew you could do it! :)

I’d also like to take you up on your offer for dinner with your friends?

Just name the address and time.

Akira left that chat room and went to Aiba’s.

[CurryGod]

Hey, do you think you could pick up a nice cake for me?

[Haxxor]

A cake? Sure!

But what for?

[CurryGod]

I'm going to hang out with some friends.

Or at least I think they're friends?

I don't know yet.

[Haxxor]

OMG

YOU HAVE FRIENDS!?

You are telling me the full story when we get back mister!!!

Akira snorted and tucked his phone away, then got to work on putting the leftovers in the fridge.

Hawks placed both hands on the back of his head and leaned back into the leather chair. His vibrant wings were splayed out in a crimson mess. He rolled his shoulders and shifted his wings around, but he just couldn't relax. Why were there no comfortable chairs for people with wings? He clicked his tongue and got to his feet, glaring at the chair as if it had personally offended him.

How long was the president going to make him wait, anyway?

He spread his wings and closed his eyes. His feathers picked up the sounds of the whole building. The incessant *tap tap* of countless keyboards. The hum of the air conditioner. How every person's clothes rustled. The *ding* of the elevators and the ring of a dozen phones. Inane small talk and false pleasantries peppered most of the building.

Ah, there it was.

There was a screw loose on the front door that gave off a very distinctive creak. Hawks lost his smile as he recognized the sharp footsteps from the president's polished black shoes. He followed them all the way to the door. Hawks forced his wings to relax as it swung open, and he threw on an easy smile.

"President Kunikazu!" He chirped. "Sooo, how did that all important meeting at U.A. go?"

Kunikazu scoffed as he rounded Hawks and sank into his plush desk chair.

"It was a waste of time." The man said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I swear that school is cursed. I've had a blasted migraine ever since stepping foot onto the grounds. But we aren't here to discuss what happened at U.A."

"Oh?" Hawks tilted his head. "Then why did you call me here?"

Kunikazu leaned forward with a glare, and Hawks felt a curl of dread when the president's eyes glimmered. He relaxed back with a playful smirk, but he swore that Kunikazu knew that he was sweating. In truth, Hawks *hated* those eyes. They were eyes that could burn a person from inside out, scorch their very soul until there was nothing left but a burnt corpse.

He's had plenty of experience with Kunikazu's quirk during his early years of training. 'Pain tolerance' is what they said. Or at least that's

what he thought he heard. He couldn't exactly tell when his seven year old self was screaming and begging for mercy.

"-awks. "

"I'm sorry. Come again?" Hawks blinked as the president's glare intensified. "I worked long hours yesterday, so I'm sorry if I'm a bit spaced out."

"I said you know what you're here for." Kunikazu waved his hand. "You signed that petition."

"Oh, really?" Hawks tapped his chin as he pretended to think. "I think I would've remembered signing a petition! A petition for what? Save the whales? Or was it save the trees? I can never remember-"

"*Hawks* ." He froze as the president stood, and Kunikazu's shadow loomed over him. "You know what petition I'm talking about. One of my agents watching it saw *your* name on the list."

"Ohhh, *that* petition." Hawks grinned as he clapped his hands together. "Now I remember! The one for Joker, right?"

"You arrogant-" The president cut himself off with a shake of his head. "Do you know how much work goes into making sure that your real identity doesn't reach the public? And then you throw all of that back in our faces! What the hell were you thinking!? There's also the matter of you 'conveniently' losing your phone the morning of the raid. Don't play me for a fool."

Hawks' grin faltered, but he forced it back up. The president was acting... strange. He normally wasn't this angry over one of Hawks' mistakes... or a deliberate act to get under their skin. Kunikazu was usually calm and collected, so maybe that meeting at U.A. really did frazzle him, but he'd dig into that later.

"There's more than one Takami Keigo in the world, you know." Hawks said with a wink. "And besides, do you really think that the

bounty matters anymore? I doubt people will call in after what happened in Musutafu. Not to mention poor Hiro.”

“What are you talking about?” Kunikazu grumbled.

“The guy who called in the tip, Hotaru Hiro.” He lifted his wings in a shrug. “His name somehow got out to the public, and now I hear that he’ll be breathing through a tube for the next several months. No witnesses to the assault either, what a surprise. I’m just sayin’ that the bounty won’t work anymore. You should seriously try something else, but Joker is so popular now that I don’t think anything will work.”

“Are you trying to tell me how to do my job?”

Hawks refrained from rolling his eyes. “Of course not-”

“Then I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself.” Kunikazu sank back into his chair, and Hawks breathed a bit easier when he wasn’t drowning in the man’s shadow. “I’m disappointed in you, Hawks. To think that you’d take a vigilante’s side after everything we’ve done for you.”

“I-”

Hawks shut his mouth when Kunikazu’s eyes brightened. He could almost feel his insides smoldering.

“I’m cutting your allowance and increasing your patrol hours. Perhaps a bit of hard work will help you see that your silly little games won’t get you anywhere. Now get out, I have real work to do.”

Hawks ground his teeth together as he kept up his cheeky grin. He turned on his heel and skipped towards the door, but his smile dropped when it shut behind him. Hawks clutched at his chest as a bead of sweat trickled down his brow. He looked up and down the empty hall and decided to make himself scarce. He walked over to

the elevator and tapped the button. Hawks waited, his foot tapping incessantly on the too clean floor.

The elevator finally opened, and he was about to step in when he ran into someone.

“Oh, Ryo-chan!” Hawks fluttered back to give the man space. “Long time, no see!”

“Hawks.” Warmth came into Ryoto’s smile. “It has been a while. How have you been?”

“Oh, you know...” Hawks waved his hand. “Busy. Too busy if you get what I’m saying.”

Ryoto’s eyes softened. “I’ll order fried chicken from your favorite place and have it sent to your apartment tonight. Sound good?”

“I knew you still loved me!” Hawks beamed as the tips of his wings quivered. “It would be much appreciated.”

Ryoto was... well, Hawks didn’t know how to put it. He was one of the only people in this whole building that wouldn’t outright stab you in the back. Ryoto was a ray of hope when Hawks was first thrown into the Hero Commission’s clutches. He was only Kunikazu’s secretary at the time, but he would sneak into Hawks’ room after a rough training day and read stories to help him fall asleep, or snuck candy and other treats when nobody was looking. There was one time where he risked everything to sneak Hawks out one night to see a fireworks festival.

It was the best night of his life, full of fried festival food and glittering fireworks.

They got in serious trouble for that one, but Ryoto somehow turned it around and was invited to join the board. The man never lost it in him to treat Hawks with kindness.

“Hey, sooo...” Hawks looked up and down the hallway as he stage whispered. “Does the pres seem different to you? What happened at U.A. to make him so....”

“Irritable? Irrational?”

“Yeah! That.”

“I’m not sure.” Ryoto clutched his chin. “I know he got a sudden migraine when we got there. The meeting itself was... *interesting* to put it lightly.”

“Ooh?” Hawks grinned. “Interesting how? You can’t keep all of the gossip from me!”

Ryoto snorted, but he paled when he got a text message. Hawks peeked at the screen and recognized Kunikazu’s number. He had the feeling that Ryoto was just as much under Kunikazu’s thumb as he was.

“I would love to stick around and chat, but Kunikazu’s patience is especially short today.” Ryoto bowed his head and walked around Hawks. “See you later?”

“Yeah.” Hawks waved with a grimace. “Later.”

He had to call the elevator again, and the sudden sense of loneliness on the way up made his feathers itch. He buried those feelings in the usual desolate place in his mind, sighing in relief as he reached the top floor. Hawks always felt lighter once the wind caressed his hair and filtered over his wings. The familiar cityscape stretching out around him would never get old.

“That was totally worth it.” He muttered as he spread his wings.

Signing his own name was an act of rebellion. If he could, he would support Joker with everything he had. Right now though, he was just a pretty bird in a cage on the verge of getting his wings clipped. As

he stared out into the city and heard its myriad of different sounds, he just knew.

He'd never be free.

Nezu from Chapter 12 - "However, I think that his keepers used this person, under a false name, to try and gain his trust. It was not an uncommon tactic to get experimental subjects to cooperate. Torture was always a close second, though."

Ryoto's not using a fake name, but same concept.... ;)

Some people on the discord chat called Kaito a boomer, not knowing just how right they were xD

ALSO!! We hit some more milestones!! Passed 100k hits and just over 3k Kudos?? I never thought to see those numbers, ever... Thank you so much everyone! :D

When My Mother Was There

Chapter 38: When My Mother Was There

“Izuku! Kurusu-kun is here!”

“YOU INVITED KURUSU-KUN!?” A pair of voices screeched in unison.

“Kirishima, Ashido, there is no need to shout!!”

“S-sorry!”

“Hey, you’re shouting too!”

As usual, I want to thank my awesome betas Lofti Lofi, Mystik_Owl, and Gundoru for helping out with this chapter!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!

[Sabo](#) on Twitter

[sirblack4](#) on Deviantart

[CurryGod]

I can handle this by myself.

I don’t need babysitters.

[Haxxor]

Cut us some slack!

You know what happened the last time you were left unsupervised.

[CurryGod]

But I won't be unsupervised...?

Sigh. Fine.

Tobita, Morgana, I know you can read this.

Please make sure she doesn't do anything crazy?

I don't want these kids' private lives violated, either.

[Haxxor]

Fine!

We'll be nearby if anything goes down.

Just give us a signal if you need an intervention!!

Akira sighed when she sent a thumbs up emoji and he pocketed his phone and looked up to the apartment buildings. Strange, they looked like those buildings Kohryu dropped him at. Maybe it was just a coincidence. He adjusted his glasses and made his way up the second building.

"Fourth floor, apartment number three." He mumbled.

Akira hovered at the door. The little bronze number 3 hung on the door and there was a happy welcome mat in front of it. He raised his hand to knock, but froze when faint laughter echoed from within. It reminded him of when Ann and Ryuji would joke around. How Futaba and Yusuke would bicker with one another, with Makoto shaking her head and sighing at their antics. He imagined Haru's angelic smile as she took it all in, quietly sipping on tea.

Akira's stomach clenched and a cold shiver ran up his back, and his hand slowly fell to his side. He stepped away and shook his head.

"Why the hesitation, Trickster?" Arsene asked.

"I just..." Akira swallowed thickly. *"These kids aren't like the people from back home, so I'm having second thoughts about coming here."*

"It's not like you to have such doubts."

"Hmm, I think I know what the problem is." Ishtar whispered. *"You're afraid to get close to these other children because you feel that they are shallow replacements for the friends you lost."*

"You're right." Akira said as his stomach churned. *"I just miss them so much..."*

"I know, Trickster, but remember the Magician's words." Ishtar's confidence flowed into him. *"I believe we can put our trust in these children. Not as Joker, but as Kurusu Akira. The Kurusu Akira who would like nothing more than to have friends. Perhaps they can heal Amamiya Ren's heart as well."*

"Nothing will replace the other Thieves, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't get close to others here. That was our original goal, right?" Arsene said gently. *"The more people we have in our circle, the easier our time in this world will be."*

"You can leave and pretend that something came up, or you can gather your courage and knock on the door. I trust you will make the

right decision.”

They left him in silence.

Akira shuffled on his feet as he looked up and down the hall, Ishtar’s faithful presence at his back. He could do this. Akira took a deep breath and slowly let it out, and then raised his hand to knock on the door. The laughter in the apartment stopped, and the faint thud of footsteps trailed closer.

A plump woman opened the door. Her long viridian hair was tied up in a loose half bun, with the rest flowing down her back. Her eyes were soft. Warmth blossomed in his heart when she smiled at him.

“Oh, you must be Kurusu-kun!” She held the door wider. “Come in, come in! My son has told me so much about you! Oh, what’s that you have there?”

“Strawberry shortcake.” Akira sheepishly grinned as he held up the box. “For dessert. I hope that’s okay, Midoriya-san?”

“Of course it is, sweetheart! And please, call me Inko.” She leaned in with a subtle smirk. “Midoriya-san’ makes me feel old.”

Akira chuckled as he slipped off his shoes and she led him down the hallway.

“Izuku! Kurusu-kun is here!”

“YOU INVITED KURUSU-KUN!?” A pair of voices screeched in unison.

“Kirishima, Ashido, there is no need to shout!!”

“S-sorry!”

“Hey, you’re shouting too!”

Inko laughed as she turned towards him. "I'll go ahead and take the cake to the kitchen, dear. The others are in the living room."

Akira nodded as she took the box, and she waved him down the hall to a small living room. Its pale walls were decorated with small paintings and family photos, and bookshelves with textbooks and hero movies alike lined one wall.

Uraraka sat on the couch between Asui and a grinning Ashido. Kirishima shot up from the arm chair, beaming. Midoriya stood up from where he sat on the floor next to... Iida. The blue haired boy blankly stared as Midoriya approached.

"Kurusu-kun!" Midoriya smile was too bright. "I'm glad you could make it!"

Akira couldn't help it. The brotherly instincts that Futaba honed were too great to ignore, and his hand reached up and patted Midoriya's fluffy hair. Midoriya's eyes exploded with stars and sparked warmth in Akira's heart, but they froze at the *click* of a camera. They slowly turned towards the others in the room, who were all gaping.

"This one's a keeper!!" Ashido said with a devious grin.

"Sorry." Akira withdrew his hand and rubbed the back of his head. "Force of habit?"

Midoriya was as stiff as a statue, but he couldn't hide anything from them.

"D-deku!" Uraraka shouted. "I-I don't think I've ever seen you go that red!?"

"Your face is just as red, Ochako-chan." Asui said.

"That was so manly!" Kirishima called.

"We didn't know you were coming!" Ashido pocketed her phone and pouted. "Mido, why didn't you tell us!?"

"I-I wanted it to be a surprise?" Midoriya squawked, face still crimson.

"Well, it was a pleasant one. Long time, no see, Kurusu-kun." Asui said as she tilted her head at him. "How have you been, kero?"

"I've been..." He put on his best smile. "Alright."

"Are you sure?" She slowly blinked as she caught his hesitation. "You look a little bit pale."

"I was pretty sick for a while with the flu." Akira chuckled as he waved her off. "But I'm feeling much better now."

"Hmm, if you say so."

"I'm glad you're feeling better!" Midoriya whirled around to Iida. "Oh! You and Iida haven't met yet, have you?"

Iida adjusted his glasses as he got to his feet. "I don't believe so, but there has been no small amount of words from Ashido about you."

"Huh?" Akira blinked several times as he looked at the pink girl. "*Really*?"

Ashido's grin turned sheepish and she scratched the back of her head. Her cheeks were dusted a dark maroon.

"Yeah, dude! We told our whole class about you!!" Kirishima said. "I hope you don't mind?"

Akira snorted. "Not at all, as long as it's good things, of course."

"They have been mostly positive." Iida said. "And she talks nonstop about the cafe."

"I can't help it!!" She cried. "The food there is just too good for words!"

“Oh!” Kirishima turned to Iida. “How have you not been to the Blue Lotus yet!?”

“To be fair, I don’t think half of our class has been there.” Uraraka said. “I-I haven’t been there in a while either.”

“I will have to change that then!” Iida froze, and then wildly chopped his arms. “But where are my manners!? It’s nice to meet you Kurusu-kun! My name is Iida Tenya!!”

Asui chuckled. “He does that a lot, don’t let it get to you.”

“Yes!! I-” Iida froze as he scrutinized Akira’s face. “I’m sorry, but have we met somewhere before? You look awfully familiar.”

“So I’m not the only one who still thinks so, kero?”

“RIGHT!?” Kirishima pumped his fists.

“But it’s like I said back at the cafe.” Akira slid on an easy smile as he held up his hands. “I only came to this city recently, so it would be impossible for me to have met any of you.”

“Ah, I see!! Is it a side effect of your quirk, then?”

Everyone stiffened. Midoriya’s eyes flicked between them. Ashido and Kirishima exchanged quick glances, with the former’s bright grin falling into pursed lips. Iida furrowed his brows as he looked at his friends.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Not really, no.” Akira said with a shrug. “Actually, I’m quir-”

“Everyone!” Inko stepped into the living room. “I was about to start on dinner! Is there anything specific that you want?”

“Ooh!” Kirishima’s grinned at Akira. “I wish we could have the curry from the cafe!”

“Yeah!” Uraraka beamed. “Mina always brags about it. Is it really that good?”

“It’s too delicious to even put into words!” Ashido threw her hands up in the air. “I can’t help it! Aw man, now I’m craving it, too!”

“It’s alright, Ochako.” Asui smiled as she patted Ashido’s arm. “I am curious about the curry too, kero.”

“Well,” Inko rubbed her hands together. “Good thing I bought ingredients for curry! I did buy some pork in case Izuku wanted some katsudon.”

Midoriya gasped. “Maybe we can have katsu curry?”

Akira couldn’t say no when Ashido and Kirishima gave him the biggest puppy dog eyes. He smirked as he turned towards Inko.

“Can I help?” Akira asked.

“But you’re a guest, sweetheart! You should relax.”

“It’s okay.” Akira waved his hand as he looked at the others. “I love to cook, and I’m always eager to learn a new recipe. Besides, I don’t think I can say no to them.”

“And Kurusu’s curry is amazing!” Kirishima clapped his hands together. “Please, Inko-san!? You won’t regret it!”

Ashido threw herself off the couch and got on her knees. “Pretty please!?”

Inko chuckled. “Very well. I just can’t say no when you give me those puppy dog eyes. Come along then, Kurusu-kun!”

Akira chuckled as he followed her into the kitchen amidst victory cheers.

“Mom’s katsu and Kurusu-kun’s curry... *combined* .” Midoriya whispered with wide eyes. “I can’t think of anything better.”

“Yes!” Kirishima dug out his phone as he plopped back into the armchair. “I am so bragging to Sero and Kaminari about this!”

“Ooh!” Ashido whipped out her phone. “Let me join in too!”

“You all seem to get along with him relatively well.” Iida clutched his chin as he looked towards the kitchen. “I have never met him before, but it feels like I *know* him from somewhere. I just can’t place it.”

For some reason, a phantom pain in Iida’s shoulder burned, but he paid it no mind as Kirishima looked up from his phone.

“I think he just has one of those faces?” He said with a shrug. “I thought that too when I first saw him!”

“Me too!” Midoriya said.

Asui raised her hand. “Guilty as charged.”

“Strange.” Uraraka blinked. “He didn’t have that effect on me or Mina.”

Ashido tore her eyes away from her phone with a curt nod.

“And you’re sure it’s not his quirk?” Iida asked.

“W-well, that’s-!” Midoriya opened and closed his mouth several times, but nothing came out.

Iida’s brow pinched as they all exchanged glances. Uraraka shuffled in her seat as she avoided Iida’s eyes. It was Asui who cleared her throat.

“Iida-kun...” Asui poked her cheek and blinked at him. “Kurusu-kun is quirkless.”

Iida flinched. "O-oh. I... I see."

Ashido stiffened as she gave Iida an inscrutable look.

"But that doesn't matter!" Kirishima placed his phone on the table and sat at the edge of his seat. "He's quirkless, but he's so nice! A-and so manly and cool too! He's a total *badass*. He even stood up to *Bakugo* when he found out that Kurusu-kun was quirkless!"

Midoriya's face drained of color. "H-he did!?"

"Yeah, man!" Kirishima's grin stretched from ear to ear. "I don't think I've ever seen Bakugo scared like that!"

"Oh my gosh!" Ashido cackled and slapped her knee. "I never would have thought that Bakugo could look like such a frightened kitten! Kurusu-kun was *scary*, and then he just served us our food with this angelic smile. It was too funny!"

"I wish we got a picture of it." Kirishima said.

"He..." Uraraka tugged at her hair as her eyes fell to the floor. "He also let me borrow his umbrella when it was down pouring and I didn't have one."

"And that's how we all got to meet him." Asui said with a smile. "Because Mina-chan wouldn't let it go."

Ashido winked. "You know it!"

Midoriya scratched the back of his head and chuckled. "He gave me advice when I was struggling with something. He... he really helped me when he didn't have to."

"I see. You have all spoken so highly of his character." Iida stared at the ground, and then chopped the air with both arms so suddenly that Midoriya had to duck. "People are not the sum of their quirks! As heroes-in-training, I think that we should take that to heart!"

Midoriya's head snapped up to Iida, his eyes watering.

"I feel like it's a lesson that a lot of people have yet to learn, hero-in-training or not." Asui looked over her shoulder towards the kitchen, where the clatter of dishes could be heard. "I can tell that there is a deep sadness in him. I wonder what's happened to make him like that."

"W-well..." Midoriya's hands curled into fists as several emotions flowed through his eyes. "P-People aren't that nice when they figure out that you're quirkless, especially in our generation. They can be.... pretty harsh. O-or that's what I read, anyways!"

"Maybe that's why he's so strong." Uraraka's eyes softened as he clutched her chest. "I remember when Deku-kun and I first bumped into him. He was just trying to find a job, but I don't think people were kind to him since he was quirkless. It took him ages to find that cafe!"

"Well, if he's sad, then we just have to make him feel better!" Kirishima pounded his fists together, beaming. "After all, he has us now!! What kind of heroes would we be if we just abandoned him!?"

"Yeah!" Midoriya pumped his fist.

"I agree, Kero."

"I already consider him a badass friend!" Ashido's golden eyes gleamed with mirth. "And I'll always help my friends!"

"Hmm, I can see how much trust everyone has placed in him." Iida stood ramrod straight. "Very well! As Class Representative, I shall do my best to also befriend him!!"

"Uhh..." Kirishima's eyes flashed with amusement. "So are you actually going to be his friend or are you going to lecture him as our class rep? He doesn't even go to our school."

Iida sputtered, and it earned a round of chuckles.

“Besides, I think he’s older than us?” Midoriya said with a head tilt.

“Oh, so that makes him like an awesome big brother!?” Kirishima suddenly lurched forward, his hands rubbing his hair. “Hey, do you think if I ask nicely, then he’ll give me a head pat too!?”

“M-maybe?” Midoriya jolted as his face regained its crimson hue, his voice in a slightly higher pitch.

“I want one too!” Ashido said. “So, Mido, how does Kurusu’s head pat feel!?”

“I-it...” Midoriya’s eyes darted around the room as he refused to look at them. “It feels nice...? I-I don’t h-have any other siblings, s-so maybe it’s what a r-real big brother would do?”

“He certainly does give off that sort of vibe, kero. I do that to my younger siblings all the time.”

“Tensei also gives off that same feeling.” Iida clutched his chin in thought. “Like... like you could count on him in a crisis, that he would have your back no matter what.”

“Totally!” Kirishima opened his mouth, but he froze as he sniffed the air curiously. “Do you guys smell that!?”

They all took a moment. The air danced with delicate spices that warmed their palettes as well as their hearts, and the faint *sizzle* echoed from the kitchen.

“Oh, wow!” Uraraka beamed as her mouth watered. “That smells *amazing!*”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Kiri!?” Ashido said.

“Yeah! It’s what the Blue Lotus smells like now!” Kirishima hopped to his feet. “Hmm, I wonder...”

“Kirishima, where are you going!?” Iida asked as he chopped his hand.

“Shh!” Kirishima held a finger to his lips as he crept towards the kitchen. “I want to see Kurusu-kun in action!”

Ashido leapt to her feet and rubbed her hands together.

They looked in between one another, and they followed with a shrug. The girls stood on one side of the hall and carefully peeked around the corner. Kirishima, Iida, and Midoriya took the other side, with Kirishima squishing the other two to the wall. They watched as Akira and Inko hovered over the bubbling stove.

Inko ladled some curry sauce into a small saucer and took a sip.

“Oh my!” Her eyes flew wide open, and she gaped at Akira. “You have quite a talent, young man! Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“I had a good teacher. I worked with him at his cafe and he taught me everything he knows about coffee and curry.”

“That’s lovely! Is his cafe still open? I would love to visit it!”

“You have eavesdroppers.” Arsene whispered, amused. *“Now would be a good time for a heartfelt reveal.”*

Akira saw them in the corner of his eye. They all stared at him curiously, and Kirishima and Uraraka were drooling over their friends. Did they even teach stealth at U.A.? He was doubtful, because one of them shifted, and the creaking floor gave them away. Still, he pretended not to notice.

“Ah, well you see...” Akira idly stirred the bubbling sauce, frowning. “It was in Tokyo, but there was a villain attack that got out of hand and he... he didn’t make it.”

Inko gasped and covered her mouth.

It was easy for Aiba to forge. There were huge villain attacks in Tokyo all the time, and to insert Leblanc's information into the database was child's play for her. Both Sojiro and the building were listed in the casualty reports taken from a destructive battle between a villain and multiple heroes. Even though it was fake, his heart wrenched when he first laid eyes on Sojiro's death certificate, and it stayed at the bottom of the file. Anyone would find the information if they decided to look into Akira's 'background.'

"Oh, you poor dear." She put a soft hand to his shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks. To tell you the truth, he was more like a father figure to me." Akira smiled, but it wasn't happy. "He was the sort of guy who gave you tough love, but deep down he really did care. He was the one who took me in after my parents abandoned me."

"Why did your parents..." Inko wrinkled her nose, but her shoulders fell with a long sigh. "I'm sorry, it's none of my business if you don't want to talk about it, sweetie."

"It's okay. My parents..."

Akira curled into himself as he stared into the curry sauce, his eyes fogging over with certain memories. His parents were always a sore subject, even back home.

"A sprinkle of truth always makes the story believable." Arsene said softly. *"But sharing your real past is for you to decide."*

"My parents and I were never that close. It always felt as if they were pushing me away." Akira made his decision, pushing back the prickly thorns around his heart. "My mother was crass and overbearing. My father... my father wasn't the nicest man either, especially when he was drunk. Their marriage wasn't the happiest, and they screamed at each other more often than not. I think... I think it was *my* fault that they had to stay together. But then..."

Akira sighed, and the whole apartment held it's breath.

"They got rid of me the first opportunity they had, because of something that I had no control over. You see, I... I don't have a quirk. Maybe I was just a burden on them the whole time."

He heard Midoriya gasp as Inko stiffened.

"Sweetheart, look at me." Her tone left no room for argument as she placed her hands on his shoulders. "I'm sorry to say this, but those people were not your parents. They may have raised you, but real parents would never abandon their children, no matter the reason. I think it was fate that brought you and that man together. Remember that *he* was your real family, not *them*."

There was a certain fierceness and iron willpower embedded in her entire body.

Akira didn't know what sparked the burn in his eyes or the lump in his throat. He tried to hold back the sudden surge, but his quivering lip gave him away.

"Oh," Inko's bubbly softness returned with a watery smile, and her eyes glistened too. "Do you need a hug?"

He nodded, and she gently pulled him forward. Her embrace was like Risumi's. They both encased him in the warmth and softness of a mother's love, and Risumi smelled of cinnamon and sugar while Inko had a vivid aroma of carnations. He basked in it.

Why was it that he never got this from his own mother?... Did his parents really hate him that much? He never got so much as a text or a phone call after they booted him to Tokyo. Inko must have sensed his distress, and she tightened her embrace. She gave him all the time he needed, and after a few more moments in warmth he decided to pull away. He lifted his glasses and dabbed at his eyes.

“S-sorry.” A shaky chuckle escaped him. “I didn’t mean to share that much. It all just... spilled out?”

“Don’t worry about it. I think we all need a nice, warm hug every once and a while, no?” Inko blinked, and stiffened. “Wait. You... Where are you staying if your previous guardian passed away? You aren’t... you aren’t living by yourself or out on the streets, are you?”

“I have somewhere to stay.” Akira nodded. “I’m living with my grandfather right now, he’s strict but fair. He doesn’t care that I’m quirkless.”

Kaito would *murder* him if he ever heard Akira say that.

“Good. That’s... good.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “But you will always have a place here if you ever needed a day or two away from things. I know Izuku won’t mind one bit. We don’t have all that much, but we’d gladly share our home with you.”

Akira smiled as his heart filled with warmth. “Thanks. I’ll... keep it in mind.”

“Good. Oh!” Inko turned to the stove. “The food should be finished! You can go clean yourself up if you want. The bathroom is just down the hall.”

“I’ll be fine. Really.”

“If you say so, sweetheart. Well, let’s go tell Izuku and the others-” She turned, and then stiffened. “Oh dear.”

Akira followed her gaze and flinched.

Midoriya and Kirishima’s eyes leaked like waterfalls and made their own puddles on the floor. Uraraka had both of her hands over her mouth as if she tried to stifle sobs. Asui was the most stoic of the bunch, but her eyes were watery. Iida’s face turned crimson and he

bowed his head. Ashido looked torn between punching something and choking him with a hug.

He honestly forgot they were there.

“Did...” Akira scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin. “Did you guys hear all of that?”

“We’re sorry!” Uraraka stepped out from behind the wall. “W-we didn’t mean to eavesdrop like that, honest!”

“Yeah! We just wanted to watch you make curry!” Kirishima bolted into the kitchen and shook Akira’s shoulders. “But dude!! How do you keep getting even *more* manly!?”

Akira blinked at him. “Huh?”

“You went through all of that, kero.” Asui approached with a faint smile. “And to still be so kind to other people is pretty amazing.”

“My dude!” Ashido lightly punched him in the arm, and now he noticed the film of tears in her eyes. “That’s it! We’re officially adopting you into the group! And no, you don’t have a choice!”

“You’re our buddy now!” Kirishima threw an arm over Akira’s shoulder. “You’re stuck with us whether you want to or not! Isn’t that right, everyone!?”

Iida adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. “You can count on us if you ever need something, Kurusu-kun!”

There was a round of hearty agreements. Even Inko clasped her hands together and nodded.

Akira looked into all of their smiling faces.

“If anything comes up, you tell me. I’ll help you with whatever you need.” Ryuji’s voice echoed within his mind. *“I’ll be countin’ on you, Leader! And you can count on me too!”*

"You can lean on me, too!"

"It must have been troublesome dealing with me, but for some reason, I knew you wouldn't abandon me until everything was said and done. Thank you, my friend."

"... Thank you for your help. It must've been difficult babysitting the uptight Miss President, right? Even so, I'm glad I asked you."

"You gave me my life back, so it's my turn to risk my life for you. Feel free to tell me anything. I'll do whatever I can to help!"

"I'd like to return the favor. If you ever find yourself in trouble, I'll be there for you. Feel free to rely on me from now on."

"You know, I only wanted you to help out with the store. But you showed me so much more, you showed me I have a family that I need to protect. Not just Futaba, but you too."

His silence sparked concerned looks between them. Then, he laughed. It was lighthearted and bounced around the kitchen, and he couldn't help the honest smile blooming on his face.

Midoriya gaped as Kurusu's eyes changed. The dull grey brightened into polished silver. The gold around his pupils glimmered like he had never seen before. Almost as if... as if Akira had regained his hope.

"Thank you, everyone." Akira said, and his eyes were so soft and brimming with warmth. "This means a lot to me."

Midoriya suddenly burst into tears.

"Hey, man!" Kirishima shouted. "Why are you crying?"

"I-I don't know!?" Midoriya scrubbed at his eyes. "B-but you're crying too!"

"What!? I-I'm not crying! I just caught something in my eye!"

“Really?” Ashido sniffled, but she was grinning, too. “Then what did you catch?”

“TEARS!!!”

Akira grunted as Kirishima latched onto him with an iron grip, his glasses fell askew and bounced on the end of his nose.

“Kirishima!!” Iida chopped his arms wildly, like a machine going haywire. “You don’t need to strangle Kurusu! That, and what would you do if his glasses fell off and broke!?”

“S-sorry!!”

“Don’t worry about it.” Akira had a grin to match theirs as he adjusted his glasses.

Suddenly, they were all silenced by a gurgling rumble. All eyes turned to Uraraka, who turned beet red as she clutched her stomach.

“I’m sorry....” She whispered. “I skipped out on lunch.”

“Well, then I think now would be a good time to eat!” Inko’s smile stretched from ear to ear. “Izuku, can you set the table?”

“O-on it!”

“I’ll help too!”

Kirishima released Akira and helped Midoriya carry dishes out.

“Um...” Uraraka glanced at Akira as she wiped away the last of the tears. “If it’s not too much trouble, could I have some of that hot chocolate you made from the cafe?”

“Oh, I’ll try some too!” Kirishima called from the other room.

“I would not be opposed to having a cup.” Iida said with a firm nod.

Akira smiled. "Sure."

"Everyone get seated as I put the food on the table." Inko waved them from the kitchen, except Akira and Asui. "I'll be back in a moment to show you where everything is, Kurusu-kun!"

Akira nodded, and then he turned to Asui. "Did you want to try some hot chocolate too, Asui-san?"

"I would love some."

She studied him for a long moment, blinking slowly. Then, she approached and gently patted his arm.

"And please, call me Tsu-chan." She said as a smile quirked her lips. "It's what my friends call me, and after all of that I would like to consider you my friend."

Akira blinked rapidly. "Thanks, Tsu-chan."

Her eyes brightened and she nodded at him, before she went to join the others. Inko came back into the kitchen and they made a round of Akira's special hot chocolate before going to the table. They were all squished into one tiny table, but nobody cared about the closeness. The food was passed around and they said their thanks, and Akira snorted when they got their first taste.

"I could die happy now..." Uraraka said as she scooped another massive bite.

"Right!?" Kirishima had curry sauce all over his face. "This is awesome!"

Ashido slapped the table as she shoveled more food into her mouth.

Iida was as still as a statue, gaping at the delicious food in front of him as if his brain crashed. Like Kirishima, he had curry sauce on his lips and dove in for the next bite.

Tsu-chan was the quietest of the bunch, but the honest smile and the bright light in her eyes had said enough.

Inko was positively beaming as she watched them eat.

Akira's eyes occasionally fell to Uraraka, who had finished her plate first. She reached for seconds, but hesitated with a scrunched brow. She slowly pulled her hand away and sat quietly, everyone else was too busy eating to notice her downcast eyes.

Akira's heart hurt as she reminded him of Yusuke. He gently took her plate and scooped another heaping portion, giving her a wink as he handed it back. She hastily muttered her thanks and tucked in.

"-And then Mina shouted 'Hee hoo!', and oh man you should have seen our sensei's face!"

"His expression was certainly.... thunderous." Iida said.

"What happened then?" Akira asked with a subtle smirk.

"She totally got detention!!" Kirishima laughed.

"Yep!" Ashido leaned back in her chair and fanned her face. "He made me sort through all of U.A.'s files! *All* of them! It was totally not fair!!"

"It was kinda funny if you ask me." Kirishima added, and she elbowed him in the gut.

"Aizawa-sensei still gets angry at that phrase, and also any time somebody mentions glitter." Iida said with a firm nod. "But in his position I think I would be too."

Aizawa. *Eraserhead*.

Akira sipped on his hot chocolate to soothe his bone dry mouth. He set the cup gently on the table and balled his fists on his lap. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“What’s your teacher like?” Akira asked carefully.

“Hmm?” Iida looked at him. “Why do you want to know?”

“Oh, no reason.” Akira smiled to hide his nerves. “I took online classes because of all the bullying, so I never really had a teacher like him before.”

“Really?” Inko blinked at him. “And how are the online classes treating you?”

“They were pretty easy. I got enough credits to be able to graduate high school early.”

“Oh, I remember you mentioning that a while ago!” Kirishima said.

“That’s quite impressive.” Iida said as he adjusted his glasses. “I admire your dedication!”

“Lucky.” Ashido muttered. “I can barely understand half of my homework.”

“But to answer your question, Kurusu-kun...” Tsuyu tilted her head and looked to the ceiling. “The very first day Aizawa-sensei had us all do a quirk assessment, and whoever got last place would have been expelled.”

Midoriya’s face burned, and he poked at his curry.

“Seriously?” Akira blinked. “Did he really expel someone?”

“Nah,” Kirishima shook his head and nudged Midoriya. “He called it a ‘logical ruse’ so that we would all do our best! But man, it was pretty scary!”

“No kidding...” Uraraka shook her head. “It would suck to get expelled on your first day!”

“Aizawa-sensei is certainly a rugged man.” Iida said slowly. “But he is a fair mentor. I believe that he just wants to prepare us for the real world of hero work, so he doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to his teaching methods.”

“Sounds rough.” Akira muttered.

“Yeah.” Midoriya scooped up the last of his curry. “But I agree with Iida-kun! He works us hard, but it’ll be worth it in the end.”

“And he really does care about us!” Uraraka said. “H-he fought so hard to protect us at the USJ, a-and he takes the time to tutor us if we really need it!”

“He’s certainly rough around the edges.” Tsuyu said as she set down her spoon. “But he’s a good man.”

Akira thought of Kaito’s words.

‘I’m just thinking objectively. He has a reputation for working with vigilantes and he’s a teacher at U.A., so I don’t believe he would intentionally hurt Akira like this.’

‘Eraserhead is a rational man, but deep down he would care.’

“Hmph.” Arsene’s growl resonated with many others. “Just because he is a ‘good man’ to his students, doesn’t mean that we’ll forgive him so easily! He doesn’t deserve our trust. Remember how charismatic Shido was? How Madarame’s simple charm deceived the rest of the world? Such desires can lay below the surface. Who’s to say that this man is any different?”

Akira’s stomach sank like a stone.

“I don’t know what to think right now.” Akira said honestly. “But I agree with you, Arsene. He had a chance to earn our trust and blew it.”

“Well, if everyone’s finished.” Akira snapped out of his thoughts as Inko stood. “Then I think it’s time for dessert! Kurusu-kun was nice enough to bring a cake!”

“There’s always room for cake!” Kirishima shouted as he slapped Akira on the shoulder.

“What kind of cake?” Tsuyu asked.

“Strawberry shortcake.”

“Oooh!” Ashido cheered. “The best kind!”

Inko brought out the cake covered in white frosting, succulent red strawberries glistened when she cut into it. There was enough for everyone to have one slice, and it was pure sugary heaven. It was perfectly simple dessert after a heavier meal. They all leaned back in their chairs when there wasn’t so much as a crumb left.

“Oh man.” Uraraka said as she patted her stomach. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so full.”

“Food coma time...?” Kirishima mumbled with droopy eyes.

“Falling asleep at the table is considered bad manners!” Iida said as he chopped a hand at Kirishima. “You should know better!”

“R-Right!” Kirishima jolted and rubbed at his eyes. “I’ll stay awake, I promise!!”

“It is getting late though.” Inko eyed the clock on the wall. “And most of you have class tomorrow!”

“Aw man!” Ashido sulked in her seat.

“I-it’s that late already!?” Uraraka stood up. “I-I better get going before the last train leaves!”

“It feels like we just got here.” Tsu-chan said with a tilted head.
“Funny how fast time flies when you’re having fun.”

“Well, if it’s alright with Midoriya and Inko-san.” Iida pushed up his glasses as he stood. “Then we should not overstay our welcome! And remember we all need at least eight hours of sleep before classes tomorrow!!”

Oh, Morgana would be fast friends with Iida.

“It was nice to have you all here.” Inko said with a smile. “I’m really glad that my Izu made such lovely friends!”

“M-Mom!!” Midoriya hid his crimson face behind his hands.

“And to think we didn’t even get to your baby photos, Izuku!”

“BABY PHOTOS!?” Ashido slammed her hands on the table and shot up. “Now this I just have to see!!”

“I-it’s getting too l-late!” Midoriya frantically waved his hands and bolted from his chair. “I-I’ll s-see you guys out!”

He hurried them towards the entrance, his face still burning.

“Oh, Midoriya.” Akira said. “You still have my bento box, right?”

“R-right! Um, one moment.”

Midoriya ducked down the hall and opened a door with an All Might plaque.

Kirishima exchanged glances with Akira. Kirishima popped his head into Midoriya’s open door, and his jaw dropped.

“Dude! You have so much All Might merch!!”

“You really are a fan boy, Midoriya.” Tsuyu chuckled.

Midoriya whirled around as they all glanced around his room. All four walls were lined with All Might posters, his desk had rows upon rows of All Might action figures, and his bed had the hero's bright blond hairdo and smile, too. One item on his desk was different.

"Is that Joker's mask?" The others froze and looked to where Akira pointed.

"Y-yes!" Midoriya was a tomato at this point. "I-I just saw it a-at the mall and thought why not? Y-you know!?"

"Can I try it on!?" Kirishima beamed.

"Uh, sure?"

"Me next!!" Ashido said as she bounced on her heels.

"You two!!" Iida shouted. "You can't just wear somebody else's merchandise!!"

"It's okay, Iida!" Midoriya said.

"I kind of want to try it on, too." Tsuyu said with a tiny smile. "My siblings really like Joker."

Akira had to bite his lip to keep from smirking as Kirishima threw on the mask.

"Woah, this is so cool!" Kirishima stood tall and placed his hands on his hips. "Do you think Joker knows about all of the merch people are selling?"

"How can he not?" Iida said as he furrowed his brows. "The stores selling them have exploded in popularity. I find it hard to imagine that it would escape his radar!"

"Well, they're right about that." Arsene whispered.

“My turn!!” Ashido swiped the mask and put it on, blinking several times. “Man, I need one of these! Wouldn’t it be hilarious if Joker saw us right now!? How do you think he would react?”

It took every strand of willpower in Akira to keep a straight face.

“Who knows? I would ask for an autograph if he were here!” Kirishima said.

Iida and Midoriya exchanged quick glances as they stayed silent.

Ashido passed the mask to Tsuyu, who stuck it on her face, blinking innocently.

“They are adorable.” Titania whispered. *“Hey, Cerberus....”*

“Hmm?”

“Now that I’m getting a close up look at your green child, I can’t help but make a certain comparison to another persona.”

“O-Oh, really?” Cerberus’ tail twitched. *“A-and who would that be?”*

“Your little brother, Orthrus! The green child’s hair is the exact same color as Orthrus’ mane. Its just as unkempt too!”

“No way.” Byakko grinned at Cerberus. *“Is that why you like this child so much?”*

“I-I....” Cerberus turned away from them.

“Oh my gosh, it is!” Alice chuckled. *“That’s adorable, Cerberus!”*

“There’s no shame in it.” Arsene said as he tipped his hat. *“You feel a special bond with Midoriya because of Orthrus, right?”*

“... Yes.” Heat radiated from Cerberus as he turned his back to them. *“I-I just see the green child as family, okay!? And now his mother too... I am happy that we got to see them today.”*

The other personas cooed at him.

“Kurusu-kun?”

Akira blinked up at the others, who were all staring at him with some concern.

“What?”

“We were just wondering if you wanted to try on Joker’s mask!” Kirishima said. “But you were kinda staring off into space?”

“Oh. No thanks.” Akira held up his hands. “Sorry, I’m just tired.”

“Aw, I bet you would look good in it Kurusu-kun!” Ashido said with a sly wink.

“Well, it is getting late!” Iida shouted. “I don’t blame you for being exhausted. Let’s call it here, yes?”

“Can we get a picture first?” Tsuyu asked. “Just as a memento?”

“Uh, s-sure?” Midoriya had donned the mask, and it ironically fit perfectly

“Dude, keep the mask on!” Kirishima said as he pulled everyone together and held up his phone. “Say cheese!”

Uraraka and Tsuyu huddled in between Iida and Kirishima. Midoriya was in the middle with *his* mask on, and although Akira was at the end, he threw on a grin and held up bunny ears behind Midoriya. Ashido was squished into his side and also put bunny ears behind Akira’s head. The picture was taken with a blinding flash.

Midoriya sputtered as he stared at Akira, who shamelessly grinned back. Uraraka and Tsuyu giggled. Iida had a soft smile on his face as he studied the picture.

“Can you send it to me?” Uraraka asked.

“There’s no way you’re cutting me out on that!” Ashido gently elbowed Akira. “You’re totally getting it too!”

“Sure!” Kirishima snickered. “Kurusu! What’s your number so I can send it to you?”

Akira blinked as he dug out his phone and they all exchanged numbers, save for Midoriya. He stared at his ever growing contact list, a hint of a smile on his lips.

“R-right!” Midoriya slipped off the mask as he handed Akira a wrapped bento from his desk. “I believe this is yours?”

“Yeah, thanks for keeping it safe.”

Midoriya’s eyes sparkled. “No problem!”

“Let’s do this again sometime, kero.” Tsuyu said as they left Midoriya’s room. “I had a lot of fun.”

“So did I!” Uraraka said with a grin.

They filed from the room and stepped down at the genkan, slipping on their shoes as Midoriya opened the front door. The cool night air seeped in.

“It is imperative to keep in touch with such important people in your life!!” Iida said with a firm nod. “I would not be opposed to it either.”

“You have a funny way of putting things, bro.” Kirishima nudged Iida with his elbow. “But I agree!”

Akira pushed up his glasses. “Same here.”

Kirishima and the others grinned at him.

Uraraka paled when she checked her flip phone. “Th-the trains!!”

“Right!” Iida turned on his heels and power walked down the hallway.
“Let’s all go to the station together!!”

“Iida-kun, wait up!” Uraraka called as she ran after him.

“Hey, don’t forget about me!!” Ashido waved her arms as she chased after Uraraka.

Tsuyu followed along with a chuckle.

Midoriya waved as Kirishima linked arms with Kurusu and raced after them. He felt a soft hand on his shoulder and he looked to his mother.

“You have such wonderful friends, Izuku.”

Izuku looked down the hall.

His eyes fell on Kurusu and Kirishima. Kurusu was *smiling*. It was a *real* smile. That deep seated sadness, while Izuku knew it was still lurking under the surface, was nowhere to be seen. Kurusu was livelier than he had ever seen him!

“Yeah.” The radiating warmth in Izuku’s heart seeped into his smile.
“They really are amazing.”

Later, Akira was grinning at the group photo. The flash had whited out his and Iida’s glasses, but it was a good picture nonetheless.

“Hey, put that thing away.” Morgana squinted at the bright light. “We need as much rest as we can get. We’re going to heal those hospital patients tomorrow night, right?”

“Right. Sorry.” Akira turned off his phone and huddled down in the blankets. “Hey, Morgana.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you ready for your debut?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Morgana sighed. “I just hope it works. Mercurius and I need to get stronger so we can help out more!”

“What, have you getting bored since you can’t go to the Blue Lotus with me?”

“W-well it’s not just that.” Morgana stretched out over him and yawned. “I’ve been doing some thinking. I should find something more to do while you’re at work during the day. I could scout places out, or maybe dig up information when Aiba is too busy. Me just sitting here day after day is a waste of time and my skills.”

“I don’t know...” Akira said with a frown. “What if something happened to you and I wouldn’t be around to help?”

“Now you know how I feel about you.” He said with a dry chuckle. “How about we talk about this more some other time? It’s getting late.”

“Okay. Good night, Morgana.”

Morgana crawled up and settled his head underneath Akira’s chin.

“Good night, Ren.” He whispered as he fell asleep.

The Raven Nest’s peaceful silence and Morgana’s even breathing relaxed him, and his heavy eyes slowly drooped closed.

All in all, it was a good day.

Alright, we've had fluff! We've had angst! Now, it's time to get on with the show!

NEXT TIME on 'Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?'!!!

Joker and Mona take the Spotlight!

Keep Your Faith

Chapter 39: Keep Your Faith

“Relax Mona,” Joker said with a smirk. “This won’t be as bad as riding Seth or Kohryu. Maybe.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring.” Mona mumbled into his chest.

“Now, there’s no time to lose!” Gentle Criminal cried. “We jump!”

“J-jump!?” Mona cried. “Now, wait a second-!”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[Amaris](#) on Twitter

[sirblack4](#) on Deviantart

Akira rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he closed the door to his cubicle.

“Are you sure you don’t want to nap a bit longer?” Morgana whispered from his shoulder. “We still have some time to kill before we head out.”

“Nah.” Akira shook his head. “I don’t want to oversleep, either.”

“Hmm, if you say so.”

Akira stepped into the lounge, and Morgana’s nose twitched at the faint scent of flowers and a hint of citrus. Akira glanced over Tobita’s

shoulder, who stood over a boiling pot in the kitchen.

“Is that Oolong?” Akira asked.

Tobita glanced over his shoulder. His eyes brightened and he warmly smiled. Akira felt a knot in his stomach, as he felt like he didn’t deserve the man’s kindness after his outburst the other day.

“It is!” Tobita said. “I always brew tea before going out as Gentle Criminal! Oolong has many health benefits, and I thought it would be a perfect beverage before we head to the hospital! Do you want a cup?”

Akira smiled. “Sure.”

“It’ll be done momentarily.”

Akira nodded and went to sit on one of the couches.

Aiba, who sat on the opposite couch with her laptop on the table, looked up at him. She tilted her head, studying him from head to toe.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Akira leaned back into the cushions as Morgana hopped down next to him.

“You look like yourself again.” Tobita brought a tray of steaming oolong tea to the table. “Perhaps hanging out with your friends was the best remedy after all?”

“Maybe.” Akira grasped the cup that Tobita offered and took an experimental sip.

“What about Kohryu?” Morgana asked as Akira savored the flavor. “Is he awake yet?”

“No.” Akira sighed as he swirled his tea. “Arsene thinks he could wake up at any time now. It just doesn’t feel the same without

everybody there, you know?”

“I get it.” Morgana’s ears drooped. “Mercurius went silent since I tried summoning him. I miss him.”

Akira grimaced.

“Do you think Mercurius is okay?” Aiba asked gently as she took the next teacup.

“I don’t know.” Morgana furrowed his brow with a sigh. “He feels pretty weak.”

“Let’s hope that our plan works, so that your companion can recover.” Tobita said as he sat next to Aiba. “But are you certain you’re ready to go back out? There’s no need to rush.”

“I’m sure.” Akira took a slow sip. “Most of those people are still in the hospital. That, and the protests are really getting out of hand, so reemerging into the public might calm people down.”

“Agreed.” Morgana said with a firm nod. “We should act now that Akira is feeling better.”

“When do you want to leave?” Aiba asked.

“Well, there’s still some time before it gets dark.” Akira leaned back and crossed his legs. “And there’s something that I wanted to ask before we do anything.”

“Alright.” Aiba smiled at him. “We’re listening!”

Tobita nodded as he nursed his tea.

“First, I wanted to apologize about yelling the other day-”

“You don’t need to apologize!” Tobita said. “You went through a traumatic experience, and such things need time to properly heal. Please don’t be sorry for feeling out your emotions.”

“Exactly!” Aiba said. “We’re not mad at you or anything, either. We understand.”

“I...” Akira blinked several times and then ducked his head. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” Tobita waved his hand. “Though I am curious as to what else you needed to talk about?”

“Just a question between fellow thieves.” Akira shrugged and looked at Tobita, who blinked curiously at Akira’s sharp eyes. “What’s your ultimate goal as Gentle Criminal?”

“Oh!” Aiba perked up. “That’s easy!”

“Indeed!” Tobita stood up and placed a hand on his heart, the other raised his teacup in a toast. “My ultimate goal is to carve my name in history, so that future generations will know how I, Gentle Criminal, have lived! I aspire to take steps towards the highest echelons of infamy, so that my name will never be forgotten!”

Aiba had stars in her eyes as she set down her cup and clapped, Tobita preened at her praise. Akira and Morgana were frozen, waiting.

Akira bit the inside of his cheek as he and Morgana shared a look. Morgana was thinking the same thing. The fame nearly tore the Phantom Thieves apart, it burrowed into their heads until they lost sight of their goal to help people. If it wasn’t for Morgana and the harsh trials Haru went through, then they would have lost their way.

“A false claim to the Gentlemen Thief name!” Arsene cried. “We must reprimand him and fix this before the damage is irreversible!”

Akira nodded and decided to rip off the band aid. He gently placed the teacup on the table and leaned forward, and Morgana’s fur bristled. Akira’s eyes blazed gold, but neither Tobita nor Aiba noticed yet.

“Is that it?”

Aiba and Tobita jumped and whipped their heads towards him, eyes wide. Aiba shivered as goosebumps broke out on her arms, and Tobita looked as if Akira had just slapped him.

“What...” Tobita cleared his throat. “What do you mean?”

“If *fame* is the only thing you’re after, then you have no right to call yourself a gentlemen thief.”

Aiba froze. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Summon me! Allow me to show them the error of their ways!”

“Arsene wants to talk to you.” Akira stood with a sigh. “I think you should listen to what he has to say.”

Tobita swallowed, but he nodded.

They cried out at the flash of blue flames engulfing Joker. He stood there, grinning as the flames ebbed and fluttering embers danced around him.

Another being stood behind him, dwarfing everyone in the room with a sweep of pitch black wings. They’d apologize to Kaito about the faint scorch marks later. Arsene ran a finger under his hat and splayed his wings. The room was small enough for the feathery tips to touch opposite walls.

Tobita felt like a tiny child when Arsene stared him down, his fiery facial markings simmering with a quiet rage.

“Let me ask you this.” Joker peered into Tobita’s wide eyes. “What do you think makes a gentlemen thief?”

Tobita nodded. “Being famous is a must for a gentleman thief!”

“That is a part of it, I suppose.” Joker shook his head. “But there’s a bigger meaning to the title. Arsene?”

Arsene leaned over the Trickster with his arm outstretched, and the tip of his claw prodded Tobita’s chest, right over his hammering heart.

“A true gentlemen thief doesn’t only long for the throes of fame!” Arsene shouted. “Taking the title of a Gentlemen Thief should be no simple task! They do not want for reckless violence or intimidation, they steal from those who do not deserve their wealth and aiding those that truly need it!”

“We’ve seen your videos.” Morgana’s ears drooped. “All you do is cause a public scene and run away when the heroes get there, right?”

“W-well-”

“Have you ever planned any heists or stolen anything?” Joker asked. “Or are all the things you do random?”

“I...” Tobita slowly sank into the couch. “I’ve never actually *stolen* anything? I don’t really plan anything before hand, either.”

Aiba bit her lip as she threw a confused glance at Joker.

“Hmph.” Arsene pulled his arm back and shook his head like a disappointed parent. “Not only do you tarnish the name, but you have no panache! It’s any wonder that you got this far with your selfish desires.”

Hurt flashed in Tobita’s eyes.

“Arsene.” Joker glared at his other self. “You don’t need to be so harsh.”

A puff of smoke fumed from Arsene’s mask, but he said nothing more.

“Look, it’s not that we doubt your skills.” Morgana said. “But if you want to be a *real* gentleman thief, then you need to go in a different direction. You can help a lot of people with powers like yours, but the things you’ve been doing are more harmful than good.”

“He’s helped me!” Aiba threw her arms into the air. “W-without Gentle, I.... I would be....”

She rapidly blinked the tears from her eyes as she wildly shook her head.

“I know, and I’m glad he did.” Joker said as his eyes softened. “But he could help so many more with a little nudge in the right direction. There could be countless others like you who might need help.”

Aiba wrung her hands together and glanced over at Tobita, who turned pale. His eyes were downcast and an ugly knot of shame slithered around his chest, right where Arsene’s claw touched him.

“I... I think I understand?” Tobita gently smiled as he placed a hand on her head. “Manami is one of my closest friends now, but you’re saying that I could help more people like her?”

Aiba wiped her eyes and blinked at Tobita.

“Exactly.” Morgana said.

“Gentleman thieves will help those who cannot help themselves.” Joker reiterated. “Like.... like this person.”

Arsene stayed quiet as Joker reached into the hidden breast pocket, and held it out to Tobita. The man gently took the paper, and blinked down at it with a furrowed brow. Aiba peeked at it, her eyes lighting up in recognition.

“This is...?”

“The missing poster for Shirogane Kaien.” Aiba’s eyes softened. “He’s a quirkless teenager who went missing three weeks ago. Th-

the police stopped looking for him within a handful of hours.”

“Oh?” Joker glanced at her. “Did you find information on him?”

“Well, not about Shirogane directly, but I should bring it up. I meant to share it with you earlier, but with the raid and the storm, a-and everything else that’s happened, I just forgot about it.” She glowered at her lap. “A-and then I found something else too.”

“What do you mean?” Morgana asked. “What else did you find?”

“I-it’s just...” She reached for her laptop and flipped it open. “I was digging around in the police archives.”

Joker raised a brow. “And?”

“And he’s not the only person who went missing in the same time frame.” She flipped her laptop around so they could see, Tobita leaned forward to look at all of the files on screen. “All of these people went missing around the same time, with more disappearing as time goes on. Most of them have been quirkless, that’s probably why it’s not getting much media attention. But there’s another group of people who have been missing for quiet a while longer, and from different parts of Japan. They didn’t *seem* connected at first, but when I dug deeper...”

She tapped on her keyboard, and a sickening image came up, all exposed brain and dead, beady eyes.

Arsene’s growl was like a roll of thunder, mimicking the trepidation sparking in Joker’s own heart.

“T-the USJ Nomu?” Morgana’s blinked rapidly. “What does this have to do with the missing people?”

“The information was classified, so it took me a bit longer to crack it.” Aiba sighed and shook her head. “The DNA of multiple people made

up that Nomu, m-most of them match some of the missing files you see in front of you.”

Joker turned ashen. “What about Kaien?”

“As far as I know his DNA hasn’t been matched, but I haven’t looked into any of the other Nomu yet. The police network is highly protected, so it’ll take more time to get that information without getting caught.”

“But...” Morgana’s eyes widened. “But that means he’s in serious trouble. All of these people are! Can you get information on the Nomu from Hosu?”

“I can manage it, I just need time.” Aiba firmly nodded. “But I wonder how they are made in the first place?”

“Wait. The League Of Villains.” Joker’s eyes lit up with a righteous fire. “They were the first to appear with a Nomu *and* Handy Man and Smokey were present during the Hosu disaster, too. That could tie them to the kidnappings, if not make them responsible.”

“I don’t like this, Joker. Not one bit.” Morgana curled his tail around himself. “I just thought that the Nomu were powerful people with even more powerful quirks, but if they’re *manufactured* like some twisted experiment...” Morgana shook his head and hopped on all fours, his eyes burning bright. “Then we have to do something!”

“And we will. I promised Kaien’s sister that I would do what it takes to find him.” Joker pulled at his gloves. “We’ll rescue Kaien and any others who were kidnapped. I’ll stake my name on it.”

“Spoken like a true Gentleman Thief!” Arsene shouted with a wave of his arm.

“I...” The poster crunched in Tobita’s hand. “I wish to help, but... but if I’m not a true gentleman thief, then what use am I?”

"You *can* help." Joker reached over and placed a hand on Tobita's shoulder.

"How? Arsene is right. I've failed a lot of things in life, but if I've even failed at being Gentle Criminal, then what more do I have?"

"You have all of us." Joker grinned. "You'll have to find your own answers in the end, but let Morgana and I help you out."

"You will?"

"Of course." Joker nodded. "First things first, we'll heal those at the hospital, and then we'll plan out our next move from there."

"Didn't you say that Giran contacted you before?" Aiba asked as she looked in between her boys.

"Yeah." Morgana narrowed his eyes. "But we don't trust him."

"I know, and I'm not saying that you should trust him, but Giran is the *best* at what he does." Aiba said. "If anybody could dig up information on these missing people and the league of villains, then it would be him. Even I have limits, you know."

"I guess it's worth a shot." Joker shoved his hands into his pockets. "But we'll be careful when we meet up with him."

"And if that man dares to fool us-" Arsene held up his arms as cursed black and red mist flowed over them. "Then he'll have *us* to answer to."

Tobita swallowed thickly. He made a mental note to *never* make Arsene angry again.

"Well." Morgana jumped to his usual perch and rubbed against Joker's hair. "We have our work cut out for us! C'mon, it should be dark out by now! We're burning the midnight oil here!"

“Right!” Joker ran a hand through his hair and grinned. “It’s showtime!”

Arsene boomed with laughter as he vanished in a display of dark feathers and bright blue flames.

“Ah!!” Aiba blinked several times to get rid of the spots. “Warn us next time you do that!”

“And where would the fun in that be?”

Aiba jumped down from the couch and stomped over to him, her tiny fist didn’t even hurt as she punched his leg several times.

“Just... just give me and Gentle some time to change into our costumes!” She darted towards her cubicle. “Not all of us can be as fancy as you!”

Morgana chuckled as Joker smirked. They looked over to Tobita, who had been staring at the missing poster with inscrutable eyes.

“Are you okay?” Joker asked. “I’m sorry if Arsene sounded harsh, but I think you needed to hear that.”

“Y-yes, I’m alright.” He slowly looked up. “You and Arsene made me realize that I have been very self-centered. To think that I could have helped a lot more people like this young man here, but I didn’t even think about them. I only thought about myself.”

“Hey.” Joker’s footsteps splashed the lounge with color as he approached. “Don’t beat yourself up too much. Everyone has room to improve.”

“I... I wanted to be a hero when I was younger.” He said with a shake of his head. “But I failed to get my license several times, and then got expelled after an incident with another hero. I thought that being Gentle Criminal would redeem me.”

“You can still be a hero to people!” Morgana chirped.

“Just not a legal one.” Joker winked at him. “Besides, you’re not doing *all* bad. You have a reason to keep going. There’s something that only *you* can do, right? Someone that you want to protect?”

Aiba rushed back into the room in her La Brava costume, her fingers fiddling with one of her heart shaped earrings.

“Gentle, I think one of my earrings is stuck! Can you help me?”

Tobita’s unease melted with gentle warmth as he looked at Aiba, and he suddenly knew what Akira meant.

Thirty minutes, one costume mishap, and a harsh lecture from Kaito later, and the group found themselves on the roof. The night sky was clear and the city stretched out before them like a glittering map of stars. The calm breeze weaved through their hair.

Joker had a smile on his face as he looked out to the city. Just standing here, gazing out into the streets, soothed that constant ache in his heart. Joker glanced at La Brava as she chuckled, the screen splashing her face with pale light. For a split second, he mistook La Brava for Oracle. He shook his head to clear it. La Brava was a whirlwind on her laptop, eyes tracing over the lines of code that only Futaba would understand.

“Aaaand....” La Brava tapped the enter key with finality. “There!”

Mona blinked at the screen. “And what did that do, exactly?”

“She certainly did...” Gentle Criminal stroked his beard and tilted his head. “Something?”

“Boys...” She rolled her eyes and pulled up a map. “First, I launched my one social media program, so that’s ready to go when you are. Second, I just hacked into the police radio and cleared a path to Musutafu General Hospital! There won’t be any heroes or police nearby as long as we stick to this route.”

“But what about heroes like Ryukyu?” Joker asked as he glanced at the sky. “She’s still in town looking for me.”

“Not necessarily.” She closed her laptop and tucked it into her bag. “They’ve been having her help clean up the destroyed warehouses, so she hasn’t been able to patrol for you. We should be fine as long as we don’t draw attention to ourselves.”

“Alright then.” Joker stepped to the edge of the roof. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

“Wait!” Mona glanced over to La Brava and Gentle Criminal as they stepped up beside Joker. “How are we all getting there, exactly?”

“I’m glad you asked!” Gentle Criminal beamed as he held his hand out to La Brava. “I believe the use of my quirk would be the swiftest way. I’ve memorized the route that La Brava planned out!”

La Brava took his hand and then smiled up at Joker, who grinned back as he took La Brava’s other hand. Mona stiffened as Joker used his other arm to tuck him safely against his chest. Mona’s claws pierced his leather suit.

“Relax Mona,” Joker said with a smirk. “This won’t be as bad as riding Seth or Kohryu. Maybe.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring.” Mona mumbled into his chest.

“Now, there’s no time to lose!” Gentle Criminal cried. “We jump!”

“J-jump!?” Mona cried. “Now, wait a second-!”

Joker stepped off the roof, hand linked with La Brava’s. Mona screamed as the wind whistled in their ears and the hard concrete reached up to meet them. Magic tinged the air as Mona was about to cast Garudyne, but he was too late. They met the concrete. Or rather, the three of them sank a good foot into the ground, the concrete as elastic as a trampoline.

Joker had a second to marvel at how their landing spread warped ripples of color across the stretchy pavement.

Mona's eyes were comically wide. "What the-"

He was cut off as they were launched into the sky. The not-cat held on for dear life as the wind whipped at them and they soared over the rooftops. Joker's tail coat flared against the moonlit sky. La Brava and Gentle had equal grins on their faces.

They reached the height of their jump, their stomachs in their throats, before plummeting back to earth. Joker burst out laughing when another elastic barrier formed in mid air, high over the heads of oblivious people.

"Hang on!" Gentle Criminal said.

"I want off this crazy ride!" Mona shouted when they were shot through the air a second time.

"C'mon, Mona!" Joker said as the rooftops were a blur underneath them. "Why don't you live a little and just have fun!?"

"I'll have 'fun' after this craziness is over!!"

"I thought you weren't afraid of heights!?" La Brava laughed, her pigtailed bouncing. "And don't you already have wind powers!? Flying shouldn't bother you so much!"

"W-we can talk about this later!"

His following shrieks were diffused by the busy nightlife down below. Nobody thought to look up to the chain of vigilantes flying through the air, and no heroes or police were around to report any strange activity, either. An idea sprang in Joker's mind.

"Hey, you want to see a trick?"

"What kind of trick?" La Brava asked over the wind.

“Here, take Mona and watch!”

“J-Joker, don’t even think about it!” Mona shouted, but it was too late.

Joker smirked as he put Mona on La Brava’s shoulder. His hand slipped away from hers and they cried out as he plummeted to the ground. His grin stretched from ear to ear as he splayed out his arms towards the open sky. Several personas joined in with surprised wails.

“Yatagarasu!”

A blue spark summoned Yatagarasu from the mindscape, flapping his wings wildly as he trailed Joker.

Joker shot out his grapple, the wire coiling several times over itself as the hook embedded into a brick wall with a solid *thunk* . His hair was swept back as he swung in an arc. He pulled it back on the height of his swing, laughing as he pulled his body into a familiar backflip, before shooting out the grapple once more. He sprouted the widest grin as he twirled through the air like an acrobat.

He came to the apex of his jump, a sweet moment of stillness spent gazing out into the city, before it was ripped away by gravity. His laughter bounced around the empty alleyways as he pulled himself into flips and elegant rolls, the wind howling in his ears. The pure sense of *freedom* shot through him like adrenaline, and his worries were cast aside, if only for a moment. There was no other feeling like it.

“Trickster!” Yatagarasu called. “As fun as this is, should we not concentrate on our task?”

“Oh, fine.” Joker shot out the grapple one last time. “You mind helping me get back to the others?”

“Leave it to me!”

He took a page from Mona's book and used Yatagarasu's Magarudyne to launch himself high into the air.

La Brava gaped as he linked hands with her mid-jump.

"Are you an idiot!? You could've gotten hurt!" She said.

"Do you see what I have to deal with everyday!?" Mona griped as they landed on another elastic air trampoline. "I tell him he's crazy all the time!"

"He certainly doesn't lack the theatrical prowess."

"Don't encourage him, Gentle!"

"R-right. Sorry."

"It was worth it, though!" Joker said, laughing. "You should've seen the looks on your faces!"

"That's not funny!" Mona shouted.

Subtle amusement flowed from Yatagarasu's bond as he soared gracefully behind them.

Gentle Criminal made several smaller barriers to slow their descent, and they landed on a grassy hill overlooking Musutafu General Hospital. Mona groaned as he slowly slid from La Brava's shoulder and landed on his back.

"I don't want to ever do that again." Mona murmured.

"You can't tell me that that was any worse than riding two dragons!" Joker knelt next to him and poked his belly. "Or do you remember when we rode Bird Brain's quirk at the USJ? That was pretty fun, too!"

"You did *what* at the USJ!?" La Brava asked.

“A lot of things.” Joker looked over his shoulder and winked at her. “But that’s a story for another time.”

“Ugh,” Mona rolled over and shook his head. “Can we just heal these people and go home?”

“You do realize,” Gentle Criminal stepped forward, his eyes shone with amusement. “That we’ll have to be faster on our way back? Healing an entire hospital will certainly draw attention!”

Mona stilled. He blinked several times. His whole body drooped as he accepted his fate.

“We’ll be fleet of foot and as swift as the wind.” Yatagarasu landed on Joker’s shoulder, shuffling his wings. “As long as there are no more ‘tricks’ up the Trickster’s sleeve.”

Joker snickered as Yatagarasu playfully nuzzled his hair. “Alright, alright! We’ll take a picture and then get on with the show!”

“Fine. *Fine* !” Mona jumped on Joker’s other shoulder, his tail thrashing. “But first…”

Mona smacked his paw right in the dead center of Joker’s forehead.

“Ouch, your tiny paw hurt so much.” Joker smirked as he rubbed at the spot. “What was that for?”

“For being an idiot.”

La Brava and Mona stared at each other, having said it at the same time. Gentle Criminal covered his laughter with a cough. Yatagarasu huffed in amusement, before vanishing into cinders.

“I knew you’d gang up on me one day.” He said with a shake of his head, his other hand reaching into his pocket. “Let’s just take the picture.”

Joker chuckled as he held up his phone, making sure that the hospital was clear in the background. He held a calling card between his pointer and middle fingers, only the 'Take Your Heart!' side was visible. Mona simply rolled his eyes and smirked back at the screen. Joker threw on his best smile as the camera flashed.

Joker tilted his head as he stared at the screen.

"Hey, can you look up certain numbers from your computer?"

"Yeah?" La Brava blinked at Joker. "Why? Who's number do you want to look up?"

"Detective Tsukauchi's."

"What!?" Mona flinched, but Joker had that smirk that wouldn't take no for an answer. "Why would you want to contact *him* !?"

"What kind of Phantom Thief would I be if I don't tease the detective who's after me?"

For some reason, Arsene hummed in approval.

"Fine!" La Brava rolled her eyes. "But not until we get home safe and the signal is scrambled."

"Deal." Joker's smirk grew. "You have all the other cards in your bag?"

"Yup!"

La Brava shrugged off her backpack and dug through it, producing a thick stack of calling cards. She handed it to him with a raised brow.

"Why did you need so many copies?" She asked.

"For this."

Joker held up the stack, and Mona concentrated. A powerful breeze picked up around the hill, and countless cards fluttered in a vast cloud of black and red.

“Normally, we’d post these all around the hospital the day before.” Mona said.

“But that’s not an option we have anymore.” Joker gestured to the hundreds of cards raining down on the hospital grounds. “We figured this was easier.”

He pulled Titania into reality with a mere thought. She brushed off the lingering embers and smirked, with Gentle Criminal and La Brava marveling at her beauty. The moonlight made her fluttering gossamer wings sparkle and her emerald dress almost ethereal. She tucked her hair behind her ears and turned to Joker.

“Are you ready?” He asked.

“With my new skills?” Titania chuckled. “We’ll be unstoppable! The Magician need only be on my shoulder as we cast Mediarahan together, so that our magic can combine in beautiful harmony.”

Mona nodded as Titania allowed him to climb over.

There was blue light at a snap of her fingers. Joker felt it. Like with Kohryu, Titania’s Concentrate flooded him with boundless energy, tingling across his limbs as if he were struck by lightning. If only they could try out Titania’s new Atomic Flare skill, but that could wait until later.

Determination set into their faces as they cast Mediarahan over the hospital.

Koharu Yuna shifted on the hard hospital bed for the hundredth time, huffing in frustration.

“Can’t sleep either?”

Yuna opened her eyes and looked to old man Yoshiro in the hospital bed across from hers. Their room was relatively small, and yet four other beds had been crammed into this one room. There was no space left. The subtle beeps and whirs of machinery formed a constant drone.

“Yeah.” She said, nodding down to her bandages. “I just can’t get comfortable with these things.”

“Hmm, I see.” He said with a sigh. “I can never sleep anyway because of my bad back, so it’s nice to have some company to talk to.”

Yuna chuckled.

Another moved in their bed, a teenager by the name of Rio.

“Well, it looks like another joins the world of the living.” Yuna said as she laid back on the pillows. “What’s keeping you up, kid? Are you hurting, too?”

“Not as much, just thinking.” He muttered softly.

“Oh? Well, our ears are open if you wanted to talk.” Yoshiro said.

“I heard that the heroes in the raid have already recovered and are out of the hospital.” Rio scowled. “I don’t think it’s fair that we’re stuck here and they’re out doing whatever they want.”

“I used to work in one of those, you know.” The old man sighed with a shake of his head. “Hero hospitals are generally better funded, so that they can afford more doctors and upped security. It’s not a surprise at this point.”

“Figures.” Yuna huffed.

“Yeah, it’s-”

Suddenly, they were silenced by an odd shift in the atmosphere. A strange floaty feeling overcame them, and a sense of peace wrapped around them like a warm blanket in a winter's storm.

Yuna shivered at the refreshing chill that sprouted at the top of her head, travelling like a cool river down her entire body. Then, there was a beautiful white light. It showered them in a curtain of marvelous colors, as if the light had been through a prism, and she cried out at the multiple ribbons of light that suddenly sprouted from their bodies. They playfully wove through the air before vanishing entirely.

"Wh-wh-what was that light!?" Yuna cried as she shot up.

Her shout jolted the others awake, but their confused murmurs were lost on her.

"My... my leg!" Rio gaped at his bandages. "It doesn't hurt anymore!"

She flexed one hand, and then rolled her shoulder, expecting lancing pain from her broken clavicle. Her eyes traced down to her left foot, where she wriggled her toes in the thick cast. There was *no more pain* . Slowly, she swung her legs over the bed.

Quiet murmurs exploded into excited shouts, with more chaotic noise trickling in from the hallway.

"What's that!?" Another pointed out the window.

"Hey, are those-"

"Joker's calling cards!?"

A girl threw off the covers and hobbled to the window, pulling on her IV bag. She opened the window and a few black and red cards fluttered in on a refreshing breeze. Yuna gasped as one floated through the air and landed by her foot, and she picked it up with a shaky hand.

Yuna glanced over to Yoshiro, who had sported an equal, teary grin as he read another card.

Taneo groaned and threw his pillow over his head.

He ignored the first few *dings* from his phone. It was probably just Yuma or Minato bugging him over their workload or something, or his boss pestering him because she had one too many drinks tonight. He huffed as his phone kept going. He sat up with a sharp sigh and swiped up the darned thing, freezing after he unlocked it.

[???

Hey! Guess who? ;)

Sorry I've been out of the limelight for a while!

Just decided to lay low after the raid.

What a crazy time, huh?

Well, I have something special for you. An exclusive picture of yours truly!

Think of it as an apology for not contacting you for so long.

Taneo grinned from ear to ear as he tapped on the picture.

It was Joker standing on a grassy hill with Musutafu General looming in the background, a black and white cat clung to his shoulder. The cat's face was unusually expressive, as if it had actually grinned at the camera on purpose. But that wasn't all. He recognized Titania from the interview. She delicately draped her arm on Joker's other shoulder with a smirk, copying Joker's peace sign.

Joker then sent a link to a social media website specially made for heroes. Shivers crept up his spine at the mere implication as he tapped the link. It loaded, and he couldn't believe his eyes.

Taneo threw his head back and laughed until his stomach hurt and tears ran down his face.

Tsukauchi's office was swamped with paperwork.

His desk was a complete mess, piles upon piles of files and folders were splayed out. Behind him hung several cork boards. Maps of the city, police reports, hero patrols were all marked in a sea of red. He bit his lip and downed his sixth cup of coffee. His stomach turned at the stale taste as he stared at the maps with bloodshot eyes.

"Kid, where are you?" He said as he set the cup down on his desk.

There was *nothing*. No sightings, no media attention, no... *anything*. Eraser and Midnight were working themselves to the bone patrolling. Hound Dog tried to track down Joker's scent, but that trail had long went cold because of the constant rain. Nezu threw his all into searching through video files and street cameras, and that got them nowhere fast.

And then there was Eraserhead's concern about his quirk.

If Joker had somehow been weakened or injured because of a bad reaction, then...

Tsukauchi swallowed.

Was Joker weak enough to be recaptured by All For One? Maybe he was able to drag himself to safety? Or.... or maybe some thugs were overjoyed to find an injured vigilante and took him hostage? He shook his head to get rid of the image of Joker being tied to a chair, beaten and bloody. He ran a hand down his face and sighed, jumping when his phone pinged.

It was a text message from some unknown number.

{ERROR}

Hey! Did you miss me? ;)

His keyboard glitched out when he tried to reply.

{ERROR}

I bet you're wondering who this is.

Well, be prepared, Detective!

Tsukauchi's heart raced and the hairs on the back of his neck raised when a photo was sent.

Joker leaned against a nondescript brick wall and shot finger guns at the camera, and the cat on his shoulder had a devious grin that was all fangs. Judging from the staggering height difference, he must have had one of his creatures take the photo for him, but he tried not to picture something like the winged demon that had destroyed a police station taking a photo. He snapped out of it and immediately pressed dial.

He scrambled to find a clean piece of paper and pen as the trilling noise drilled in his ear.

"Tsukauchi! Long time no see, huh?"

Tsukauchi's blood turned into ice. Joker's voice sent a shot of adrenaline throughout his body, yet at the same time a mountain of relief vanquished the dread encumbering his heart.

“Joker?” He leaned on his desk to steady himself. “It’s really you?”

“The one and only! What, were you expecting some other vigilante to call you? I hope you’re not cheating on me!”

At that moment his door burst open and Officer Tamakawa ran in, his pupils were like saucers and his fur was a frazzled mess. Tsukauchi held up a hand and motioned for him to shut the door.

“Why did you contact me, Joker? I thought something bad happened to you after the raid!”

Tamakawa whipped towards him, gaping.

“Is that actual concern I’m hearing, detective?” Joker chuckled so coldly. Tsukauchi’s heart sank. *“Truly, I’m touched, but I just wanted to tease you a bit! It’s the least I could do after what happened at the hospital.”*

“Hospital?” Tsukauchi furrowed his brow. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh? You don’t know yet!? How surprising!”

Tamakawa showed his phone to Tsukauchi. It was on a new article about Musutafu General Hospital. He paled at the familiar black and red image at the top of the page.

“Joker, what did you do ?”

“Well, you’ll just have to find out for yourself! Have fun with this one, Tsukauchi. This act won’t leave a dry eye in the house. Ciao!”

“Wait!” Tamakawa flinched as Tsukauchi shouted, but he sighed in relief as Joker stayed on the line. “Can I ask you one question?”

“Hmm, you just did, but I’ll allow one more. Make it count.”

Tsukauchi’s mouth went dry.

He doubted he could hold Joker on the line long enough for them to be able to find the signal. *If* they could find a signal. The kid was too smart for that. What should he do? Apologize? Ask him to turn himself in peacefully? A thousand and one other questions filtered through his mind, but his lips moved before he could think about it.

"I want you to know that I never wanted things to go that far. Are you safe?" He asked sincerely. "We didn't.... you didn't get *hurt*, right?"

Joker inhaled sharply.

Tsukauchi counted his thundering heartbeats as the resulting silence stretched, Tamakawa was as still as stone beside him, his twitching ears listening for Joker's reply. There was a shaky breath, and then-

"You don't get two questions, detective."

The line went dead. Tsukauchi tore it from his ear and pressed redial, but the number didn't exist anymore. He tossed his phone on his desk, cursing under his breath as he hid his face in his hands.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, just peachy." Tsukauchi pulled his hands away with a sigh. "You heard him, right?"

"Yeah." Tamakawa's eyes softened. "His voice was trembling."

"Which means that our hunch was right. Something really *did* happen to him. Eraserhead already feels guilty about Joker's mysterious absence, what am I supposed to tell him now?"

"The truth." Tamakawa crossed his arms. "Look, it's easy to see that you all care for Joker, even if he is a cocky brat. If Eraserhead feels guilty, then he could use that to push himself and find the kid, maybe even apologize. It's at least worth a try, right?"

"... I guess." Tsukauchi's shoulders dropped in exhaustion. "What the hell is going on? What did he do this time?"

“See for yourself.” The officer handed him the phone, which was still open to the article. “The call only came in fifteen minutes ago, and the chief is already there. I’ll bring the car around and meet you out front.”

Tamakawa waved for him to follow, and they left Tsukauchi’s office.

Tsukauchi dodged the other officers as they ran through the police station like chickens with their heads cut off. Phones were ringing off the hook and frazzled secretaries scrambled to answer them all.

Tsukauchi only had eyes for the article. Hundreds of people were healed. *Hundreds*. Most of them were injured during the raid’s catastrophic aftermath. There were already pictures of calling cards and a few short videos flooding the web.

Tamakawa honked his horn outside, and Tsukauchi rushed into the passenger’s seat. The tires screeched as Tamakawa took off towards the hospital. Streets were mere blurs through the windows and the officer’s erratic driving made his stomach churn, but he didn’t complain. Tamakawa hissed and tapped the wheel impatiently as they came to a red light.

“So the kid heals all of these people, and now he suddenly has an account on Spotlight.”

Tsukauchi whipped his head towards the officer. “He has an account on *Spotlight* !? How? When?”

“Sometime within the last half hour and it’s already spread around like wildfire.” The light finally turned green, and Tamakawa sped past it. “I’ll never know how that kid got past the Hero Commission’s *rigorous* security.”

Spotlight was the Commission’s official social media website. Heroes needed to have a valid licence to be verified and make posts. Civilians could make accounts too, but they could only follow other heroes and comment on their posts.

Tsukauchi pulled up the website and paled at the screen. Joker's account was on the front page. It already had a few thousand follows, and the first post was a captioned photo reading '*We're alive! Mona and I are fulfilling our promise to help people! ;)*'

The top comment was from *Miruko* of all people.

'YOU HAVE A CAT!?!'

Hawks and Ingenium liked her comment. There were several hundred civilian replies, too.

Tsukauchi decided he's had enough and tossed the phone on the dashboard.

The car was quiet until they reached their destination. There was a perimeter around the whole hospital, and they were let in after they had shown their badges. The officer parked in the nearest empty spot.

The hospital was as much a flurry of activity as the police station. A dozen police cars had surrounded it, painting it with flashes of red and blue. Officers and heroes in costume patrolled around, their bodies lined with tension. Others were scouring the grounds, gathering up the dozens of red and black cards.

"Why is he like this?" Tsukauchi pinched the bridge of his nose. "We were all so worried about him and then he decides to pull off *another* crazy stunt. I'll start getting grey hairs at this point."

"Now you know what it's like to have kids."

"Wh-what are you talking about!?" Tsukauchi sputtered. "What does *that* have to do with anything!?"

"Oh, come on." He said as he opened his door. "Nezu is already fighting tooth and nail for custody after he gets arrested. Aizawa doesn't say it outright, but we all know he loves kids. You can't tell

me that he doesn't have a soft spot for Joker. Just admit it detective, you'd adopt him too if you had the chance."

Tamakawa left the car and a shell shocked Tsukauchi behind.

The detective shook his head and decided to file that whole conversation away for later.

Now though, he had work to do. He blatantly ignored Tamakawa's smugness as the hospital doors opened, revealing the whirlwind of activity.

Old and young patients alike were scattered around the halls, wandering through their rooms or laughing amidst small groups. Streaks of tears had shone on some of their faces, but they were *smiling*. A pair of laughing children ran past them, obvious that the heavy casts on their body were no longer needed. Each of them clutched calling cards.

Nurses, while they were trying to contain the chaos, were as bright and bubbly as their patients.

"Tamakawa, Tsukauchi." They looked over to Midnight, who approached with a strained smile. "I'm glad you made it."

"This is..." Tsukauchi scanned the lively hallway. "Do we even have words for something like this?"

"The patients are calling it a miracle, and I can't find it in me to disagree." She gestured for them to follow. "The outside cameras didn't catch anything, but there are already videos spreading online of what happened inside. We don't know who leaked them yet."

"Where are Hound Dog and Eraserhead?" Tamakawa asked. "I heard they were here. Ryukyu too?"

"Scouting the area." Midnight pursed her lips. "Hound Dog went to the outlook where Joker took the picture that's on Spotlight. Ryukyu

and Aizawa are circling the neighboring districts.”

Tsukauchi and Tamakawa exchanged glances as she led them into a security room. Nezu was at the desk, kicking his feet as he grinned at multiple screens. A calling card sat on the desk.

Chief Tsuragamae loomed over him, his expression grave.

“This is quite fascinating!” He chirped as he waved his paws. “Not only can Joker heal debilitating wounds, but the fact that he could heal so many people at once is nothing short of superb! I wonder what separates the different tiers of his healing abilities? He had to break in to heal Stain’s victims at a close proximity, but could heal this entire hospital of minor injuries from a distance-”

“Nezu,” Tsuragamae shook his head. “We can theorize later. Let the others see what happened.”

“Oh!” Nezu blinked, and then whirled around in his chair. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“That’s fine.” Tsukauchi leaned over Nezu’s chair. “Can you show us what happened?”

Nezu rewound the footage.

The hospital was quiet, the nurses and doctors trudged from room to room like exhausted zombies. They paused in their routine, looking around as if they sensed something in the air. Suddenly, the camera was drowned out in a prismatic flash, but it caught the dancing ribbons of light before everything returned to normal. The staff jolted as their exhaustion melted away. Curious patients wandered out of their rooms within a handful of minutes, and the resulting chaos still lingered in the halls.

“We received a general report of the patients here.” Tsuragamae said as he scrubbed his eyes. “The people who have been healed were all physically injured in some way. The ones who were ill,

everything from a common cold, to pneumonia, to even cancer patients and those in the ICU with various illnesses, have not shown any improvement.”

“Really?” Tsukauchi made a quick note on his pad. “So Nezu might be onto something about the different degrees of healing powers?”

“That is correct!” Nezu grinned from ear to ear, his tail swishing excitedly. “The first round of healing was quality over quantity. This time it’s quantity over quality. A face to face encounter with Joker and a ‘floating woman’ healed the most debilitating wounds from Stain’s attacks, yet he didn’t need to step foot in this hospital to heal hundreds. Hmm, but Joker’s post also mentions Mona, and we know it has healing abilities as well. I wonder if they combined their powers for this?”

“Maybe. From the looks of it.” Tamakawa crossed his arms and squinted at the screen. “It’s not just physical injuries, but the hospital staff looks refreshed too. I wish we could have some of Joker’s mojo in our coffee.”

“If only.” Midnight covered her smirk with her hand.

Tsukauchi face palmed and the chief cleared his throat to hide his chuckle. Nezu gained a humorous spark in his beady eyes.

“What about the calling card?” Tsukauchi asked. “What does it say?”

“The patients are oddly protective of these cards. I honestly don’t blame them.” Nezu handed the card to Tsukauchi. “Here, see for yourself!”

“‘To all of the innocent civilians in Musutafu General, we aid you in your time of need. We shall heal those injured from an unjust raid as recompense against the ‘heroes’ who have hunted us. Our debt to you is repaid in full. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts’?”
Tsukauchi looked up from the card. “A debt? He blames himself for injuring them?”

"It seems that way." Nezu said with a sigh. "When in truth it was our fault to begin with."

The door opened before they could say anything else. Eraserhead and Hound Dog trudged in, and their sullen appearances spoke volumes of their success.

"No luck?" Midnight asked with a frown.

"No." Eraser growled.

"And Ryukyu?" The chief asked.

"Still patrolling, she wanted to circle around one more time." Aizawa shook his head. "I told her it would be useless, because Joker left nothing behind."

"It's more than *nothing* !" Hound Dog snarled. "The scent around the hill is strange!"

"Strange how?" Tsukauchi asked.

"I'm used to having scents all mixed together at crime scenes!" Hound Dog scratched at his thick mane. "But... but *this*, there's just *nothing* ."

"Are you saying that Joker used chemicals to mask his scent?" Tsuragamae asked. "It's not an uncommon tactic to use against quirks like ours."

"No, if he used chemicals, then I would be able to smell it!" Hound Dog paced a small circle in the cramped room. "Usually there would be *something* around a verdant hill like that! Dirt, grass, insects, and other small animals! It's like... like the scents around that hill simply *don't exist*. It's unnatural!"

"Ah," Nezu folded his paws together. "So he has a way to completely *erase* scent altogether? Fascinating."

“There weren’t any footprints either.” Eraserhead sank into his scarf and glared at the floor. “He didn’t leave a single trail to follow.”

“Joker has proven to be a master of stealth and deception!” Nezu chuckled as he gazed at the screen.

“It’s not something to be *happy* about, Nezu.” Eraserhead growled.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Nezu replied. “But you have to admit that this is an exciting challenge!”

A collective groan swept through the room.

Tamakawa nudged Tsukauchi with his elbow.

“There’s something else.” Tsukauchi tucked away the card and got out his phone. “Joker contacted me while I was still at the police station.”

Tense silence stifled the room as all eyes turned to him.

Nezu clambered onto Eraserhead’s shoulder as he leaned in for a closer look.

“Did he say anything else?” Nezu asked as his grin fell.

“I called him right after-”

“You called Joker!?” Midnight shouted.

“The conversation lasted less than a minute.” Tsukauchi handed his phone to the chief, who stared down at Joker’s picture with furrowed brows. “And the number was already nonexistent when he hung up.”

“What did he say?” Nezu lurched forward, his black eyes intensifying.

“He didn’t say that much, but he implied a lot.” Tsukauchi sighed. “Something *did* happen to him after Eraserhead used his quirk on

that dragon. It's possible that the bad reaction from your quirk was the same backlash he felt, too."

Eraserhead flinched as the color drained from his face.

"I was there and overheard the end of the conversation. He didn't give a direct answer," Tamakawa said softly. "But the way his tone drastically changed told us enough."

"I had a splitting headache after the raid." Eraserhead put a hand over his heart. "And it felt like my heart had been *ripped* out. It was almost unbearable."

"Hmmm, given his extended disappearance it's quite possible that Joker suffered a much more severe backlash than you." Nezu finally lost his smile. "He might have recovered from it just recently."

Eraserhead's hands formed into shaking fists. He hung his head as an icy cold dagger sunk into his heart that twisted into self loathing.

"Shouta, I know what you're thinking." Midnight's eyes softened as she put a hand on his shoulder. "You couldn't have known that your quirk would do this."

"Maybe not." He growled. "But how am I ever going to get the kid to trust me if I hurt him that badly?"

"Start with an apology." Hound Dog peered into Eraserhead. "It'll be up to him to forgive you, but we must start somewhere."

Eraserhead said nothing and chose to glare at the floor.

Tsuragamae cleared his throat to draw attention. "So, Joker does have a major weakness, but it comes at a grave cost while one of his creatures are physically present."

"But he was fine when he had the quirk suppressant cuffs in the interrogation room." Midnight said.

“He only suffers such a harsh backlash when one of his creatures is in the real world?” Nezu asked. “Then he won’t be injured if they aren’t present!”

“I’ll be extra careful if I run into him on patrol.” Eraserhead muttered. “I won’t use my quirk on him unless I’m absolutely sure his creatures aren’t there. I don’t want to hurt him again.”

“Hmm, for now I believe we should keep this information to ourselves.” Tsuragamae handed the phone back to Tsukauchi. “We don’t want this information to get to any... *unsavory* parties.”

“Agreed.” Nezu said as he hopped down from Eraserhead’s shoulder.

“This kid is more of a headache than anything else.” Eraserhead said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Even my class isn’t this bad.”

“Maybe.” Midnight smirked as she nudged him with her elbow. “But I know you care about him, right? He’s becoming one of your famous Problem Children!”

Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon as the tips of his ears turned red.

“Whatever.” He growled.

Suddenly, there was another knock on the door and an officer stepped in.

“Sir.” She saluted Tsuragamae. “The media sharks are gathering outside. We can only hold them off for so long before they beat down the doors.”

Tsuragamae sighed. “Alright, I’ll be out in a moment.”

She nodded, and left them in peace.

“Well, I guess there is one silver lining in this mess.” Tamakawa crossed his arms and smirked.

“And what would that be?” Tsukauchi asked dryly.

“Thanks to Joker, we’re all becoming immune to spontaneous media storms!”

Several faces deadpanned at the officer, who’s smirk slowly faded.

Nezu, for once, was quiet as he padded back to the camera controls. Hound Dog grumbled to himself as he left the room. Eraserhead followed after him with a stormy expression. Midnight was the only one who cackled, patting the officer’s shoulder as she vacated the room.

“What?” Tamakawa whirled around to Tsukauchi and threw his paws up. “It’s true!”

“I’ll do a couple of interviews between the staff and patients.”
Tsukauchi sighed as he ignored Tamakawa’s betrayed squawk.
“Maybe they could add something that’ll make sense in this mess.”

“Wait, detective.”

Tsukauchi blinked at the chief. “What’s wrong?”

Tsuragamae peered into him with crossed arms. Tsukauchi suddenly felt like that kid in grade school who was sent to the principal’s office. Did he have something on his face? Did he do something wrong?

“You should go home, detective.”

Tsukauchi flinched. “*What?* ”

“Go home and get some rest. You look like you’re about to keel over any minute.”

“But chief-”

“Actually,” Tamakawa raised his paw. “I agree with him.”

“But-”

“No, no buts!” Tamakawa put his hands on his hips and gave Tsukauchi a stern look. “Everyone here has the hospital covered. And besides, when was the last time you actually got any sleep? Or shaved? Or even *showered* ?”

Tsukauchi opened his mouth, but the feline officer shook his head.

“That doesn’t include quick naps at the office, and guzzling the station’s coffee *definitely* doesn’t count!”

“I... I don’t even remember what my bed feels like.”

“Exactly my point.” Tamakawa said sadly.

“Let us take over for a while, Tsukauchi.” Nezu swiveled around in his chair. “You have had first official contact with Joker ever since we captured him at the USJ. We’ll need you to be sharp and alert in case we get that lucky again, and driving yourself to the brink won’t help any of us. That *includes* Joker.”

“But, I...” Tsukauchi looked around the room, then deflated with a heavy sigh. “Fine. You win.”

“Good!” Tamakawa grinned. “I’ll drive you home!”

“Oh, and feel free to keep that calling card, Tsukauchi!” Nezu called before they left. “I’ll be sure to nab one for myself, I might even hang it in my office! Admiral Feesh would enjoy that.”

Tsuragamae shook his head and they followed him past the hustle and bustle of the hospital halls. A swarm of reporters had gathered outside, and their cacophony of voices grew louder as soon as Tsuragamae stepped outside. Tsuragamae squared his shoulders and approached, wary of the other officers having to push them back.

Tsukauchi and Tamakawa headed towards the car.

The chief was about to speak, but another voice interrupted.

“Hey, hey you!”

Tsukauchi turned towards Demizu Mika, who had juttied her microphone over the police tape.

“Yeah, you!” She wriggled against the officer holding her back.
“You’re Detective Tsukauchi, right!? You’re the lead detective that’s after Joker, aren’t you!? Do you have a moment to answer our questions!?”

Tsukauchi held back a shiver as the vulture's eyes pinned him to the spot.

“No comment.” Tamakawa grabbed him by the arm and led him away. “Let’s just get out of here, yeah?”

Tsukauchi grimaced.

Tsuragamae was left with their outrage as they finally reached the car. He froze when he felt eyes digging into his back, boring through his head with burning intensity. Tamakawa didn’t seem to notice as he went into the car to start it, but Tsukauchi glanced back at the reporters.

There was a tall man hanging at the back of the group. Part of his black hair hung over one side of his face, and his mismatched pupils scrutinized Tsukauchi from head to toe. His deceptively easy smile put Tsukauchi on edge. The man simply smirked at him before blending into the rampant crowd.

“Hey, Tsukauchi!” Tamakawa rolled down the window and raised a brow at him. “You getting in or what?”

“Y-yeah.” Tsukauchi shook his head and got in.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes. “Just tired.”

Tamakawa hummed and they left the hospital behind.

Natsuo was glad that the dorm lounge was empty, so that his classmates wouldn’t have to see him pace endless circles, muttering under his breath. A few of them came in to study earlier, but his stormy expression scared them off. He didn’t even notice.

He was about to throw his phone if that flaming ass hat sent *one* more text, but at least he’d been quiet for a while. Fuyumi’s frantic calls went on for the last twenty minutes. He set it on silent. It wasn’t until Fuyumi formed a new chat room that he stopped burrowing into the carpet. Natsuo snorted as he read the chat room’s name.

‘Roki Sibb

[Fuyumi]

NATSUO! ANSWER YOUR PHONE!

Joker is okay!!

Natsuo froze. At first he thought his quirk was responsible for spreading ice through his veins or for the goosebumps popping up on his arms. He clicked on the article Fuyumi sent. Relief crashed into him. A grin slowly stretched from ear to ear as he sank into one of the lounge chairs to read it.

[Natsuo]

NO WAY!!

He really did this?

[Shoto]

He did.

He also has a Spotlight account now.

[Fuyumi]

I know!

Wait...

I tried following him and I just got an error.

Did they take it down already?

[Shoto]

Refresh the page, it's back up.

[Fuyumi]

Oh, it is!

Natsuo left the article and checked Spotlight.

There it was, right at the front page. Joker and a cat was the first post, and now that photo was also the vigilante's profile picture. Natsuo snickered as he followed Joker, but like Fuyumi, he only got an error. His brows pinched as he refreshed the page, and he immediately followed Joker and set him as his personal #1 hero.

[Natsuo]

How many times have they tried to take it down?

[Shoto]

More than we can count.

They've been trying since it went live, but something keeps putting it back up.

He probably hacked the site.

[Natsuo]

Nicee!

I can't believe he has a cat!

How's dip shit taking this whole thing?

Is the house burned down yet?

[Fuyumi]

It's been.... quiet?

He's been shut in his office ever since you stormed out.

[Shoto]

I heard him on the phone with somebody.

But yeah, he's stayed in his office.

I thought Joker's reappearance would make him angry.

[Natsuo]

Well, let's not poke the sleeping dragon and all that.

[Fuyumi]

Yeah...

[Shoto]

Also

Shoto has changed his name to Peppermint

[Natsuo]

Uh, Shoto?

Why peppermint?

[Peppermint]

It was Joker's nickname for me when he rescued us from Stain.

Natsuo stared at his phone. The chat room was silent for several minutes, and he could almost *feel* Fuyumi's brain buffering alongside his. He snapped out of it and furiously typed.

[Natsuo]

HE WHAT

There's no way you can't share the story with us, little bro!!!

[Peppermint]

Well, I'm 'technically' not supposed to tell anyone.

[Fuyumi]

We're experts at keeping secrets, Shoto.

[Natsuo]

True that.

[Peppermint]

...

Alright.

Here's what really happened to Stain...

Natsuo felt a new rush of appreciation for Joker. Not only had he taken down a serial killer, but he'd never be able to repay the vigilante back for saving his little brother's life.

The siblings talked about their hero until the sun came up.

"There's no way that's *not* Akira and Morgana."

“I’ve had my suspicions ever since Emiyo-san brought Akira to the cafe during the raid. Now this only solidifies it. Don’t you feel the same, Ayumu?”

“Yeah. Do you think Hitoshi knows?”

“Hmm, possibly. He was awfully protective of Akira while he slept.”

“So... what do we do?”

“What else?” Risumi leaned into her husband’s side. “We’ll continue supporting him. It’s only because of that boy that we can continue as we are now. After all, he saved us from that monster.”

Risumi’s hand went to her side, where a jagged scar traced around her ribs and down across her stomach. Silver Falcon made sure to leave *lasting* damage when they didn’t pay his ‘protection’ fees on time. Hitoshi was only eleven at the time, and he hid underneath the counter and heard *everything* . She was glad that Silver Falcon only harmed her, and not her husband or son.

Ayumu’s face softened as he gently took Risumi’s hand to kiss it.

Risumi chuckled as that warm smile spread on her lips.

“And besides...” She said as her eyes gained an amused glint. “I think you owe that boy a proper apology.”

“I...” Ayumu stammered. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good.” She slipped from his grasp and winked at him. “That’s all I ask.”

Ayumu watched Risumi slink down the hallway. His eyes flicked back to his phone on the counter, and he tapped the screen to see Spotlight’s front page. Akira grinned at him as Joker, ‘Mona’ clung to his shoulder while Musutafu General was in the background. It was so easy to put two and two together once the hospital videos and

articles started pouring out, and many patients were spilling their appreciation to him online.

Ayumu sighed as he followed Joker.

“Oooh, he’s so cool! I knew he was okay! Ha, take that, heroes!” Spinner trudged down a dark alleyway, beaming at his phone. “I wonder how he’d react to my costume? But... there are so many comments on his post that a picture would be buried... and now he has a feline companion too?”

Spinner sighed as he pocketed his phone. The first rays of the sun were lighting up the sky, and so far the twilight hours in Tokyo have been quiet. He had been too excited to sleep, so he took to wandering through the city. If he was lucky, he would run into crime and be able to save people like his hero!

Ah, but that had yet to happen. He dusted off his long dark coat and adjusted his Joker mask.

“I wish I had a feline companion...”

“Mreeow.”

“Eeek!!”

He startled away from the trash bins and pressed his back to the wall. There, sitting on one of the garbage cans, was a cat. Or.... at least he *thought* it was a cat. It was a ragged creature of matted white fur splotched with black and brown. Its tail was just a tiny stub, and chunks of both ears were missing. The creature had a smooshed in face, and slowly blinked its massive eyes.

“Oh. My. God.” Spinner pulled himself from the wall. “You’re perfect!!”

“Mreow?”

Spinner lunged forward and picked up the poor creature, who had thrashed and yowled like a banshee. He simply threw his head back and laughed.

“Scratch me all you want! My scales overpower your tiny little claws!”

The creature went limp in his grasp, a low rumble gurgled from its throat as it stared at him, unimpressed.

“What do you say!? You want to be my partner in crime!?”

It sunk further in his hands, as if accepting its unwilling fate.

“Yess! Now, I just need a name for you!” Spinner lifted the cat higher, taking note of its tail. “How about... Stubbs?”

“Mmeerp.”

“Alright! Sir Stubbs it is!”

“Hisss! ”

“Er... Lady Stubbs?”

“Merp.”

“Sweet!” He tucked the ball of ragged fur under his arm, grinning.

“Spinner and Lady Stubbs, master vigilantes patrolling the back alleys of Tokyo! Of course, we do this in service of Joker, a true hero to society!!”

Suddenly, a scream echoed throughout the alley.

“Perfect! Let’s go, Lady Stubbs!” Spinner bolted down the alley.

“Crime waits for no man! Er... Lizard and cat!!”

“Mreeow!?”

Ooooh, we passed 200K words! I can hardly believe it!!

Also, you all better prepare yourselves for next chapter :D It'll be up on February 20th!

Suspicious Person

Chapter 40: Suspicious Person

Akira nodded and got to work, preparing the coffee as Risumi scooped the curry. She gave him a high five before he went out to the floor. It should have been like any other order. Everything should have been fine.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[Some_Gurl](#) here on AO3!

[sirblack4](#) on deviantart!

The Trickster's mindscape was quiet, but not still.

For Arsene, the stilted silence was like that of humans watching over loved ones on their death beds. It was a weight dangling from their hearts, causing them to stir restlessly like Byakko, who had circled Kohryu more times than he could count.

Alice and Black Frost huddled together by the dragon's snout, counting his slow, measured breaths.

Aside from occasional glares at each other, Ishtar and Titania floated on either side of his head, gently petting his smooth scales.

Seth feigned sleep as he curled up with his head tucked under his wing, but his tail endlessly twitched.

Cerberus pressed his nose to Kohryu's, the size difference dwarfing the Guard Dog of Hell. He whined at Kohryu's stillness, ears and tail drooping.

Arsene himself fluttered his wings and placed his hands on Kohryu's body, bowing his head in respect.

"Be at peace, Arsene."

Arsene glanced to his side.

Shiva had strung his divine instruments on his belt, all of his six hands were placed in a prayer position, with one pair held up to his forehead. The trio of cobras wrapped around his body were docile, lowering their heads as if they were mourning, too. Shiva opened his eyes and looked over to Arsene, who was contemplating.

"Despite everything, Kohryu *is* regaining his strength," Shiva nodded to Arsene's wing. "As are you and the Trickster."

Arsene shuffled his wing. His glossy black feathers had all grown back, but underneath was patchy scar tissue.

"I know." Arsene tipped his hat. "Kohryu will awaken soon. Of that, I have no doubt. It is the Trickster that I am more concerned about.... as well as some of the others here."

"You think the Trickster isn't ready to resume his duties at the cafe?" Shiva asked.

"It's not that. I *know* the Trickster is more than capable of returning to his daytime work." Arsene crossed his arms. "I'm more worried about the other humans. We've seen the evils that they are capable of in our world, but to imagine a Palace Ruler with some of the insane powers we've seen here?" Arsene shook his head. "I can't shake this trepidation, wondering if there's some maniacal beast lurking under the surface, just waiting for us to slip up."

Shiva pondered his words with a tilt of his head.

“While that is true, we’ve also experienced the opposite.” He said with a nod. “Humans who have aided our Trickster in his hour of need. Are you sure you’re not just worried because of your role as the Trickster’s Avian Father?”

Arsene jolted, his uneasiness shattered by Shiva’s words.

“Not you too.” Arsene’s wings sagged as he face-palmed.

“I only jest.” Shiva chuckled. “But aside from our Trickster, who else are you worried about? Though we are restless, nothing can stop us as long as we are together.”

Arsene swallowed back his grumbles as he looked to the darkest reaches of Ren’s psyche. Shiva followed his gaze.

“Ah, I see.” Shiva’s furrowed his brows. “Your lingering concern lies with the Master Of Strings?”

That persona persisted in staying as far away from everyone as possible. As if he felt their stare, Orpheus looked over his shoulder. He scoffed as he turned his back and crossed his arms.

“You see what I mean?” Arsene said with a sigh. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“Hmmm.” Shiva turned back to Arsene. “I believe he is just mourning.”

“Mourning?”

“Yes. How to put this...” Shiva gazed into the endless black abyss above them. “The longer we stay in this world, the more we come into ourselves. Memories are trickling back. I’m starting to remember other Wild Cards from the past. The memories are still fuzzy yet, but I am slowly regaining clarity.”

“So... he’s like me?”

Shiva nodded. “The true other self of another Wild Card.”

“How is that possible? Why is he *here* ?”

“We know how vast and strange the Velvet Room’s powers are.”

Shiva shrugged. “So it is not impossible. I do not remember the exact fate of his Wild Card, but it must have not been a happy ending.”

“I see.” Arsene shook his head. “Let’s give him all the time he needs.”

Orpheus ignored them. Everything was becoming *too* much, reminding him of when *he* was first bonded to his Wild Card, and how the other personas interacted with each other. He missed them.

Perhaps...

Perhaps he would never be able to see *his* Wild Card again, but that didn’t mean he should just sulk during this one’s predicaments. Maybe he should join them? Make sure that this Wild Card’s fate didn’t end in tragedy as well?

The Master Of Strings looked to Arsene, who stared back with a tilt of his head. Arsene extended his hand towards him, the message clear despite the distance, Shiva watched and waited beside him. Orpheus suppressed a shiver as he turned his back on them once again.

....Maybe he wasn’t ready to join them *quite* yet.

Tsukauchi groaned as he felt around for his phone, peeling his face from the pillow to blearily look at the screen.

[Eraser]

I heard from the rat that they're forcing you to take time off.

Want to meet at that cafe later?

It's close enough to U.A. to spend my lunch break there.

[Detective]

Sure, I'll meet you there at noon?

[Eraser]

Got it.

Tsukauchi yawned and rubbed his eyes, before collapsing face first into his pillow. It took moments for him to start snoring.

He forgot how good it felt to sleep in his own bed.

"You were a nurse at Musutafu General, right? What do you think of Joker healing your patients?"

"I'm grateful. There were just... too many. We were all so exhausted, some of us pulling eighteen or more hour shifts everyday. It wouldn't be much longer before somebody collapsed or made a serious medical error." The dark haired woman bowed deeply to the camera. "I'll thank Joker from the bottom of my heart! He not only saved our patients, but he rescued us too!"

Tensei turned to the next news channel.

“-nd another patient from Musutafu General commented on Joker’s Spotlight account, one of many that have been flooding his first post.” The screen changed to a grinning Joker and his cat. “It reads, ‘I’ll follow Joker’s progress for the rest of my days. Even if I had access to the best healing quirks, they’d do nothing against my poor back, and the injuries I sustained from the raid would have put me out of work. Somehow, both old and new wounds have been cured. I’ll be forever thankful for that young hero.’ Another one claims-”

Tensei smiled as he flipped to the next.

“Oh my gosh, this one is adorable!” The talk show hostess glanced at her partner. *“What do you think?”*

“Hmm...” The man leaned forward as the picture of a black and white cat was thrown on screen. *“That one can’t be Mona either. Mona doesn’t have any white spots on his forehead, at least that’s what we can see from Joker’s Spotlight photo.”*

“Aww, you’re right! Before we go on to the next ones, be sure to send in your photos of cats around Musutafu! Who knows, you might just take a picture of the famous Mona!!”

Tensei muted the TV as he heard footsteps behind him.

“Morning, Tenya!” Tensei stood up, but frowned at his brother’s sullen appearance. “What’s wrong? Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

Tenya’s brows pinched together as he stared down at his phone.

“Joker did it again.”

“Yep! Everyone’s talking about it. I’m honestly glad that he turned up okay. My sidekicks and I were getting pretty worried.” Tensei blinked as his brother glowered at his phone. “Why the long face?”

“I don’t know how to feel about him!” Tenya tightened his grip, and his phone creaked ominously. “He’s on the wrong side of the law! B-but ever since he healed you, I don’t know what to believe anymore. A vigilante who’s somehow selfless, helping so many people that not even the heroes could save! Which side am I supposed to be on!?”

“Oh, Tenya.” Tensei poked his brother in the forehead. “You gotta lighten up a bit!”

Tenya blinked rapidly. “What?”

“The world shouldn’t be just black and white, little brother.” Tensei sighed and put his hands on his hips. “There are many shades of gray, Tenya. Maybe Joker teeters back and forth a bit, but I think he’s genuinely trying to make the world better. Vigilantes have helped me out a lot in the past, and I know that Joker helped you in the same way as they helped me. Manual didn’t hide things from me.”

“You...” Tenya stared at him with wide eyes. “Really?”

“Really. You don’t have to understand it right now, but you might one day.” Tensei glanced back at the TV, where they were showing more photos of cats. “Besides, if Joker wasn’t around, then I would never be able to...”

Tensei cut himself off, but Tenya winced.

“Boys, breakfast is ready!” Their mother called from the kitchen.

“Come on.” Tensei gingerly nudged his brother. “You need to eat before school.”

“Yes, I’ll be there in a second!”

Tensei chuckled before he trailed towards the kitchen.

Tenya looked down at his phone, which was open to Joker’s Spotlight account. There was just something so *familiar* about Joker now, but he just couldn’t place it. Whenever he thought he was close

to figuring something out, his thoughts turned... slippery, as if a word was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't speak.

"Tenya! Hurry up or I'll eat all of the tempura!"

"C-coming!!"

Tenya threw his phone in his pocket and raced to the kitchen.

He'd find out more about Joker *after* final exams. For now, he should just focus on his studies and wait for the hype around Joker to die down.

"I will be but a wing beat away should you need me, Trickster."

Akira glanced up at Yatagarasu. *"I'll be fine. You guys don't need to worry so much."*

"It is our sole duty to worry about you, Trickster." Yatagarasu said as he veered off towards U.A. *"Any one of us would do anything to protect you, just ask Bird Dad."*

Arsene grumbled in his psyche as Yatagarasu's smugness flowed from their bond.

Akira bit the inside of his cheek. People would stare if he seemingly burst out laughing over nothing. The streets had been lively, bathed in the early morning light. Despite the recent disaster, people were smiling and laughing, ambling along their daily routines as they picked up broken bits of the city.

"Hey, Kurusu-kun!"

Akira snapped out of his reverie, blinking at the usual crowd waiting outside the Blue Lotus Cafe. A familiar voice had called out to him, and approached with a gentle smile.

"Emiyo-san." Akira nodded to her. "Is everything okay?"

“What? I’m fine.” She leaned in and whispered. “I wanted to ask how you were. Risumi and Ayumu didn’t tell me much after we dropped you off after... you-know-what.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it. But you know that me and the other regulars will stick up for you, right?” She cracked her knuckles as her smile turned wicked. “If somebody hurt you in that alley...”

“Nobody hurt me.” He shook his head. “It was just... an accident. That’s all.”

“Hmmm. An ‘accident’, huh?” She studied for several seconds, eyes glistened over with some unknown emotion, but she relented. “Okay, if you say so. Just remember what I said, alright?”

Akira nodded before he beelined for the door, waving at Haru-san before going inside. Akira took a deep breath as the bell jingled overhead, relaxing at the familiar sights and scents of the cafe. A knot in his heart unraveled and he could breathe easy.

Neither Risumi nor Ayumu were in the front, but Hitoshi sat in one of the booths, idly scrolling through his phone.

“Hey.” He looked up as Akira approached. “I take it you’re feeling better, if the latest internet craze is anything to go by.”

“Yup. I take it you enjoyed the show?” Akira smirked.

“Heh, you should have seen how crazy my Herocord server got. I think they lost their minds over Mona.” Hitoshi blinked down at his phone. “That Spotlight account is all anybody is talking about on the forums, aside from those patients. How do you keep pulling off awesome shit like this?”

“I’ve had a lot of practice.” Akira winked at him. “You want your usual coffee before school?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

Akira chuckled as he went behind the counter. His hands naturally flowed into the movements as he ground the roasted beans and poured the goose neck kettle over the filter. Hitoshi usually liked it sweeter, so he added some sugar and cream. He smiled when he rounded the counter, steaming cup of coffee in hand.

“Here you go, the first cup of the day.”

“Sweet.” Hitoshi took a sip, cursing under his breath as he burned his tongue.

“Don’t drink it so fast.”

“Eh, it’s totally worth it.” Hitoshi set the cup down and looked up at Akira.

“By the way,” Akira looked around the cafe. “Where are your parents?”

“Finishing up in the kitchen.” Hitoshi nodded towards the kitchen door. “Mom was excited about trying that new curry recipe you sent her. Something about adding yogurt to it this time?”

“Oh.” Akira smirked as he adjusted his glasses. “Nice.”

“So, I’ve been doing some thinking ever since I dropped you off.”

“Really?” Akira shoved his hands in his pockets and blinked. “What about?”

Hitoshi eyed the kitchen door, then clasped his hands together on the table.

“W-well....” Hitoshi fidgeted as he looked down into his coffee. “I still want to help you, but I’d understand if you or Arsene are still mad at me for what happened in the alley. Is there anything I can do to fix that?”

“Hmph. If he really wants to prove himself, then let him be our ticket in.”

Akira furrowed his brow at Arsene’s words. Be their ticket in? Then, it struck. He glanced over Hitoshi’s uniform, and then to the bag sitting at the end of the booth. That size was *perfect* .

“You go to U.A.”

“Wow.” Hitoshi said dryly. “What gave it away?”

Akira shook his head. “I’ll have to discuss it with Morgana, but there might be something that you could do for us.”

“Wait,” Hitoshi perked up, his eyes going wide. “*Really* ?”

“Really. I’ll tell you more if Morgana agrees with it.”

“Okay.” Hitoshi blinked a few more times. “Cool.”

“Kurusu?” Risumi walked out, holding a hefty pot of curry. “Oh, I thought that was you. We’re almost ready to open.”

Akira nodded as he left Hitoshi to his thoughts. “Is that the new curry I smell?”

“Yep!” Risumi beamed as she arranged it in the glass display. “I followed your recipe to the letter. I think it’s the best one yet!”

Akira grinned. “That was one of Boss’s favorites. I’m sure people will love it.”

“Coming through.” Ayumu emerged from the kitchen, arms loaded with trays of baked goods. He froze when he saw Akira. “Oh, you’re

here.”

“Yeah?”

They stared at one another. Nobody moved. Risumi exchanged a knowing glance with her husband, and they both pinned him with odd looks. The way they studied him raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“Is something wrong?” Akira blinked as he shuffled on his feet. “Do I have something on my face?”

Ayumu’s face twisted as if he just sucked on a lemon. “You-”

“Nope!” Risumi nudged her husband, whose jaw shut with a literal *snap*. “Why don’t you go flip the sign? I’m sure people are eager to get a taste of our food after all the chaos.”

His eyes flicked in between them. “... Alright.”

He stepped around the counter and made for the door. Hitoshi had watched the exchange with the enthusiasm of a bored feline, nursing his coffee.

“That was odd.”

“They have seen the Trickster in a new light, Arsene, what with caring for his injuries.” Shiva whispered. *“It is not surprising that they would act strange for a while.”*

“Hmm, perhaps.”

“I get the sensation that they feel protective over him.” Ishtar said.

Alice giggled. *“Ooh, maybe they’ll be the next aunt and uncle!?”*

“Well, the Trickster is certainly one to forge familial bonds.” Byakko shook his furry head. *“Be it blood related or not.”*

"But I am still the best aunt, right?" Titania smirked at Alice, despite Ishtar's glare. *"No human could ever replace me!"*

"Eh, maybe?"

"What do you mean by 'maybe'!?"

Akira tuned them out as he flipped the sign. The cafe was a buzz of activity as people poured in and lined up in front of the counter, and Risumi took on the crowd with fierce energy. Akira was about to join her, but paused when Haru-san hobbled in with a cane.

"Haru-san?" Akira approached and gently put a hand to her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Oh," She beamed at him with a hearty chuckle. "I'm fine, kiddo. These bones aren't as young as they used to be, and they're very sensitive to the weather."

"So, the sudden typhoon...?"

"Yep." Haru-san nodded. "They still hurt from that storm, but I wouldn't miss my daily cup of tea for anything. I've dearly missed this place!"

"Why don't you go sit down and I'll bring it over to you?"

"Thank you." She patted his arm as her eyes sparkled. "You're such a sweet boy."

He huffed in amusement as they parted ways, and he darted behind the counter to prepare her drink. Risumi gave him a subtle nod of approval as she battled the influx of people, curry, coffee, and delicious pastries flying from the shelves.

Akira preferred coffee over tea, but watching Tobita over the past few days gave him a better idea on how to make a proper cup. He carefully monitored the water temperature as he steeped the leaves.

"Why don't you try pouring it like he did?" Arsene hinted with amusement. *"It would be a marvelous crowd-pleaser!"*

"Agreed. We've seen Tobita do it enough times." Akira smirked. *"Here I go!"*

He held the cup out with a flamboyant flourish, and people's gazes drifted over to him as he raised the kettle sky high with his other arm. Risumi smirked as the golden liquid hit the cup, splashing in a great wave, but not a drop had escaped. The crowd gasped as he finished pouring, a few clapping and leaving tips in the jar on the counter.

He smiled as he set the kettle aside. He scooped up Haru-san's drink and she thanked him with a wink. Akira joined Risumi at the counter, and they fell into a practiced rhythm, dancing around each other as they worked in tandem to battle the flow of people. Ayumu occasionally restocked the freshly baked treats.

They breathed a sigh of relief once the line dwindled, and the cafe was filled with idle chatter and the clatter of dishes. Delicate sugar and spices were a constant scent in this cafe, now.

"Good job, Kurusu!" Risumi held up her hand. "Especially with Haru-san's tea! You're full of surprises."

Akira matched her grin, and gave her a high five.

"Oh, this woman is already terrifying when she wants to be." Arsene said. *"Imagine her power after a Baton Pass."*

Akira turned away and covered his mouth with his hand, his shoulders shaking.

"Kurusu?" Risumi suddenly looked alarmed. "Are you alright? Are you still not feeling well?"

"I'm fine." He pulled on a mask of composure, and shook his head. "I just remembered a joke I heard, that's all."

“If you say so...” Risumi put her hands on her hips and playfully glared at him. “But just tell me if you need a break, the back office is always open for that. Your health comes first! Is that clear, young man?”

Akira gave her a two finger salute. “Crystal.”

“Good.” Risumi snorted and shook her head. “As long as you understand.”

They turned when the bell jingled and the next customer trudged to the counter.

“Akane....?” Risumi blinked as she took in the man’s rugged appearance. “Are you alright? You look....”

“Tired?” A hint of a smile appeared on his face. “I’m alright. Can I have my usual?”

“A cappuccino with a dash of cinnamon?” Akira said.

“Hey, you remembered!” Akane grinned, despite the exhaustion. “Would it be too much trouble to ask for an extra shot or two of espresso?”

“Not at all.” Risumi nodded at Akira, and he got to work. “But why do you look so tired? Is there something wrong?”

“Work.” Akane pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’re still understaffed from Commissioner Inu’s arrest, and they’ve been having us pull double shifts because of Joker’s latest stunt. A few unlucky people had to pull triple.”

“You’re a police officer?” Akira asked over the rock sinking into his stomach.

“Yep, third generation.” Akane nodded. “My quirk allows me to detect explosives, so it comes in handy in this line of work. I was present

when we tried to arrest Joker during that live interview. I still have glitter stuck on my uniform!”

“Oh.”

“I just wish they didn’t push you so hard.” Risumi said, frowning.

“It’s fine. Actually....” Akane checked over his shoulder, nodding when nobody else was behind him. He leaned in and whispered. “Everyone has been in an uproar because of what Joker did for that hospital. They’re having us scour the city for him, but...”

“But...?” Risumi whispered.

“I honestly hope we don’t find him.” Akane sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Joker does good work, despite what the HC thinks about him.”

“I see.” Risumi glanced at Akira for a split second, then gestured to the glass display. “Why don’t you take some extra treats to the station? Ayumu just brought out freshly baked cinnamon rolls! It’ll be on us.”

“Really? Thanks! I’m sure everyone would appreciate it.”

Akira finished the drink to go, with three extra shots of espresso, and they watched as the man left with a box of baked goods tucked under his arm.

“We’ll have to be wary of that one.” Arsene growled. “Especially if he’s an officer of the law.”

“Perhaps we could gain his trust?” Vasuki hissed. “Thine might never know when such a connection will come into play.”

“Or...” Seth snapped his jaws together. *“I could devour him!”*

“Seth!” Titania shouted, aghast. “You don’t know where that man’s been! What if you catch some disease?”

"Well, unlike some of us, I can cure any ailment that might befall him."

"You want to say that to my face, harlot!?"

"I just did, your majesty." Ishtar's tone oozed with sarcasm. *"I'm just stating the facts, that's all."*

"Enough, you two!" Arsene sighed. *"How is the Trickster supposed to concentrate with all of this noise?"*

Akira refrained from rolling his eyes as their argument faded to the back of his mind. He felt eyes on him, and he glanced over to Risumi. She was studying him with a furrowed brow, an unknowable gleam came into her eyes.

"What?"

"Are you going to be okay with Akane coming here?" She asked gently as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "I haven't forgotten what you said that day."

"It'll be fine." Akira swallowed thickly. "Akane's not like... *them*."

"Alright." She nodded as her hand fell. "Just remember that you're safe here, dear. I have your back, no matter what happens."

Akira didn't reply, but he felt as if he was missing something. The thought was tossed aside as the bell rang again, and they stared at yet another familiar face.

Uraraka sheepishly smiled when she saw him, her hands wringing the straps of her bag as she hovered near the entrance.

"Oh, it's her." Risumi winked at him. "Go ahead, just like we talked about."

"Are you sure?"

“It’s no trouble. Besides, our little cafe owes you a lot for introducing your curry, so doing you a favor is no big deal.”

Akira scratched the back of his neck. “Thanks.”

Uraraka settled into an open booth as he prepared the dishes. She stared at him, wide eyed, as he rounded the counter and placed a steaming plate of curry and a cup of cinnamon hot chocolate in front of her.

“Huh? Wh-what’s this?”

“Breakfast, if you want it.”

“Breakfast? But I didn’t order it!” She placed her hands in her lap and ducked her head. “A-and I don’t have any money to pay for it, either...”

“The bill’s already covered.”

Her head snapped up, her hazel eyes wide beyond belief. She bit her lip as she studied him.

“Kurusu-kun, what’s this about?” She shook her head. “I came because I was curious about your text to meet here before school, but now I’m just confused.”

“Alright.” Akira sank into the opposite booth. “I’ll explain. You can tell me to shove off if you think I’m overstepping, though.”

The earned him a small chuckle. “Okay?”

He leaned forward to look her in the eye. “You don’t really get to eat that often, do you?”

“Wh-what?” Uraraka jolted, face paling. “Wh-what would g-give you that idea?”

“When we ate dinner at Midoriya’s.” Akira swallowed thickly, his heart lurching. “I used to have a friend that was the literal definition of a starving artist. He’d forgo proper meals for days at a time, and he threw any scrap of cash at getting new art supplies, instead of food. You reminded me of him when you hesitated to take seconds. It was exactly like him, and he kept quiet about it because he didn’t want us to worry.”

“Oh.” Uraraka’s eyes softened, and she tugged at the end of her sleeve. “And... where is he now?”

“I...” Akira shook his head. “He’s gone, too.”

She gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s alright.” Akira tried to smile, but the sadness in it made her heart hurt. “That’s why I wanted to do this for you. If you ever needed breakfast before school, or if you have to skip on any meal, then please come here and I’ll serve what’s in front of you. No questions asked. The bill will be covered, so you don’t have to worry about money.”

She opened and closed her mouth several times. “Just... why?”

“Why?” He blinked, then shook his head with a chuckle. “Because I miss him. If only I could’ve helped him out more like I can help you now, then maybe I wouldn’t feel so guilty about him not being here.”

“You...” Her eyes filmed over with tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” He reached into his pocket and handed her a striped handkerchief. “I’m sorry my reason for helping you is pretty selfish.”

She slammed her hands on the table and shot up, the dishes clattering. “It’s not selfish!!”

The cafe went silent as all eyes turned towards her. Uraraka's face turned beet red as she slowly sank into the booth, and quiet chatter resumed after a few moments. She wiped her eyes with the handkerchief and chuckled.

"You're so weird, Kurusu-kun."

"Huh? Why am I weird?"

"You've been through so much, and yet you're so kind to people. It's unbelievable." She shook her head and smiled. "We haven't known each other long, but this is honestly the nicest thing that anybody has done for me. Thank you."

"So... are you accepting my offer?"

She scooped up a spoonful of curry and shoved it in her mouth.

"Mhm!"

Akira smirked. "You have curry sauce all over your lips."

She flinched and wiped her mouth.

"I should get back to work. You can keep that handkerchief if you want." Akira stood, his smirk growing. "Just do me a favor and don't tell Ashido about it? I only have so many of them, you know. I have a feeling she'd take them all."

"Deal!"

He laughed as he left her in peace.

Risumi had a huge smile as he rejoined her at the counter.

"I think it went well."

They stared at Uraraka, who was positively beaming as she inhaled the curry and sipped on her drink.

“Yeah.” He adjusted his glasses. “I’m glad it did.”

“Well, it seems like the morning rush is dying down.” She said as she watched a cafe brimming with life. “But we still have the rest of the day yet. Can I count on you?”

“You can leave it to me!”

He had missed working here after all of that chaos. After everything, this place felt *safe* . He could be himself, and indulge in one of his trades without fear of persecution.

If only this safety net didn’t snap within a handful of hours.

“Did you hear on the news?”

“Yeah, man! It’s been *everywhere!* Just when we think Joker can’t get much cooler, he does something like this!”

“I want a cat like Mona...”

“My aunt was hospitalized during the raid, so Joker healed her too! She says that she’ll even bring the calling card by our house after she gets discharged!”

“Lucky! I want a calling card from him!”

“Right? Who even needs doctors when Joker can just heal an entire hospital?”

Bakugo grit his teeth together as the incessant train chatter drilled in his ears.

“I just hope he knows what he’s doing.” An elderly woman said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” The middle aged man beside her asked.

A few ears tuned in to eavesdrop, and Bakugo was no different.

“Just think about it.” She said with a sigh. “I appreciate what Joker did for those people, and he has marvelous powers that even the heroes can’t comprehend. But when this settles down I think people will demand that he heal them or other sick family members.”

“Okay, but what’s your point?”

“People might resent him if he doesn’t heal their loved ones. I hope they realize that he is only one person, and that they don’t hate him for having a limit.”

“That bastard deserves more hate.” Bakugo muttered under his breath.

A girl with pointed ears suddenly glared at him. “What was that, brat?”

He glared back. She wore an unfamiliar school uniform, but it was decked out with bright red Joker pins, and the bag she tightly clutched had Joker stickers and key chains dangling from it.

“None of your damn business!” He snarled.

“Wait a minute. Oh, I recognize *you* .” The girl smirked and crossed her arms. “You’re that one villainous kid from the Sports Festival. Are you jealous that Joker is a better hero than you’ll ever be? Is that why you said he *deserves* more hate?”

Bakugo froze as people stared at him. The train was doused in silence, but he couldn’t tell over the thundering heartbeats pounding in his ears. His scalp prickled and goosebumps broke out across his body, but he couldn’t yell back or punch her in her smug face, as it would only prove her point. Thankfully, the train stopped and the doors opened.

“I’ll prove that I’m not a damn villain!” He shouted before he fled the train.

The crowd around him parted when they saw his dark scowl, a vein popping in his forehead as he marched through the station. He furiously wiped the burn from his eyes and swallowed the thick lump in his throat. He'd show them!

"Bakugo, wait up!"

Ashido and Kirishima ran up to him.

"Hey man, did you hear about Jo-"

Bakugo whirled and grabbed Kirishima's collar.

"Not. One. Word. About. Joker." He hissed through gritted teeth.

"Uh..." Kirishima blinked several times, frowning. "Alright, dude! No talk about you-know-who! Got it!"

"Good."

Bakugo released him, turning on his heel to leave the station. Behind him, Ashido and Kirishima exchanged uneasy glances, then raced to catch up with him.

"Soo..." Ashido said amidst the tense silence. "Final exams! I'm totally not ready for them! Who even has time to study!?"

"Right?" Kirishima glanced in between Ashido and Bakugo. "Hey dude, do you think you can help me study?"

"Fine. Whatever." Bakugo shoved his hands in his pockets. "But I'm not gonna go easy on you, you hear!? I'll kick your ass if you fail!"

"Yeah!!" Kirishima shouted. "Bring it on! I even have a good place where we can study!"

Bakugo rolled his eyes as they came up to the U.A. gates.

“Hey, you better not be talking about the Blue Lotus!” Ashido shouted as she stepped through the threshold with Kirishima. “I might pop in just to see Kurusu! But... my mom would get mad if I don’t at least *try* to study. She wasn’t very happy about my last test scores...”

Bakugo stepped into the school grounds, grunting as a sharp pain pierced his skull. He clutched his head as he stumbled, his vision wavering. Bakugo slowly breathed out as the ringing in his ears faded, and he looked up at the school. The entire world shifted like heat waves all around him, and for a split second, the sky flickered a murderous red.

Bakugo scrubbed at his eyes and everything was normal when he looked back up.

Did he just imagine it?

“Bakugo! You alright, dude?” Kirishima called.

“I’m *fine!*” He shoved past them and called over his shoulder. “Let’s just get to class! I’m blaming you losers if we’re late!”

“H-hey, wait for us!”

“Don’t leave us behind!!”

They scrambled after him, oblivious to the migraine that would plague him all day.

“Your report?”

“Y-yes, sir!” The doctor bowed his head to All For One. “It’s just as we predicted! Joker truly has magnificent powers! And the possibility of his feline companion having similar powers is higher than I originally believed.”

“Indeed.” All For One chuckled. “What of the riots in Tokyo?”

“Ah, well...” The doctor rubbed his hands together. “Most people have calmed down since Joker’s resurgence, so we’ll have to be more careful when it comes to obtaining fresh materials for the Nomu. Our operations continue as normal for other regions. It’s nothing that Giran and Kurogiri can’t handle, of course!”

“Hmm,” All For One grinned. “And our newest addition? Has Giran gotten through to him yet?”

“Yes! He seems interested, especially in Joker. He shouldn’t take much longer to get here.”

“Good, bring him straight to me when he arrives. If that’s all, then you can return to your work.”

“Yes! Thank you very much!!”

The doctor bowed his head and left his master in peace. The thick door screeched closed, and he was alone amidst the sea of beeping machines. All For One slowly turned his chair, so that he was facing the myriad of screens. Most were tuned into news stations talking about the vigilante.

“Hmm, what an enigma. Doesn’t he see the rift he’s creating in society? No matter how far I extend my reach, there is no information about this boy, either. It’s like he never existed.” All For One leaned back in his chair as he tried to put the pieces of this exquisite puzzle together. “His quirk really is like no other that I’ve seen. It’s almost otherworldly.”

If he had eyes, they would’ve widened in realization.

“Items which had no ties with quirks, and yet their affects are almost magical. Hmm, magic?”

‘Hmph, my healing magic is the best in the stock.’

“Did you say magic? Don’t you mean a quirk?”

“I-” Something had cut the woman off. *“Yes, that is what I meant. My abilities are powerful, but it is Joker who commands them. My eternal vow stands with him, and him alone.”*

“Why did she imply that it was the work of magic? Why get so defensive when he called it a quirk?” His finger tapped against the arm of his chair. “Strange readings at U.A. A suave vigilante that has taken the public by storm, almost as if he has experience with such things. Yet that should be impossible without records. Yaldabaoth. A false, evil god should have no connection to any of this. The pieces are all in front of me, but how to they connect?”

Joker was an interesting enigma. Enigmas *must* be eliminated at all cost. Either the mysterious boy would bend his knee, or he would be eradicated completely and All For One would have a wonderful new power. Perhaps Joker would make a nice pet Nomu for Tomura.

Speaking of his protege, Kurogiri was still cleaning up the mess from the boy’s latest tantrum over Joker.

Himiko Toga sat on the bar and kicked her legs, grinning as she harassed Kurogiri.

The only other one in the bar was Dabi, who lurked in the farthest corner away from the other two.

“A push here, a little nudge there, and the Enigma will be one step closer to checkmate.” All For One grinned from ear to ear. “Yes, I’ll have to speak with Giran and have Dabi do a job for me.”

He leaned back in his chair, his chest bubbling with renewed excitement.

“Ah, it’s been a while since I’ve had so much fun.”

“-Crime rate has fallen drastically in Musutafu since the aftermath of the raid. Some experts believe that the show of Joker’s

overwhelming power is the root cause, while others believe it is the influx of top heroes who are scouting the city for him.”

Demizu Mika shuffled her papers as she went to the next topic.

“In other news, the Hero Commission has made no official statement on the raid or the mass healing from Musutafu General. We reached out to them for comments, but we have yet to receive a reply. We’ll have more on these groundbreaking details, as they emerge.”

“Aand... we’re off the air!”

The studio was a whirlwind of activity as the cameras shut off and the crew broke for lunch.

She sighed as she leaned back into the chair. She stared at the papers in front of her, fingers brushing the calling card she lifted from a police officer earlier that night.

“Joker...” She skimmed the card once more.

Crime rate was down, but she knew that the smarter villains would work in the shadows. They were more frightening than the rampaging lunatics that normal daytime heroes would take care of. Would Joker be able to handle these types of criminals, or was he all just for show? Her journalistic instincts told her the former. Whatever might happen, she was prepared to tell the world about it.

“Hey, Demizu-san!” Her agent approached, a stern woman of short stature. “Don’t dawdle, or somebody will take your bento from the break room again!”

“C-coming!”

She shuffled the papers and stuck the calling card within her jacket pocket, before racing off towards the break room.

If Joker could heal so many people, then maybe there would be some hope for her son after all.

Akira stirred multiple pots of curry as Ayumu darted between stoves, taking out fresh batches of sugary treats before throwing in the next.

“I honestly didn’t think that this many people would come today.” Akira said to fill in the silence.

“We put an ad in the paper, but I’m surprised too.” Ayumu wiped sweat from his forehead as he shut the stove. “I like to think that food brings people together, and good food is what they need after everything this city just went through.”

“Oh, right.”

Akira turned back towards the curry, a knot in his stomach churning.

“Hey, kid.”

Akira glanced over his shoulder. Ayumu stared at him with an unusually soft expression. He shook his head and heaved a sigh.

“You know it’s not your fault, right?”

“Not my fault..?” Akira furrowed his brow.

“Is that curry finished yet?” Risumi popped her head in the kitchen. “We’re running short up here!”

“Coming!”

Akira snatched up some pot holders, grunting as he took one of the heavy dishes out front, Ayumu was behind him with another and they placed them in the display. The cafe was bustling with the lunch crowd.

“I’ll restock the display, too.” Ayumu said as he ducked back into the kitchen.

“What do you need me to do?”

“I’ll handle the line.” Risumi smiled as she handed the next customer their coffee. “You take other orders out to the tables. Understood?”

“Yes!”

“Great!” She gestured towards a loaded tray. “That order goes to table eleven. Hop to it, Kurusu!”

“On it!”

He swept up the tray and delivered it to the table, smiling as he handed out their plates. The blue skinned girl at the table blushed as he set the curry in front of her, stammering out her thanks. He chuckled, and her face turned crimson.

Risumi shook her head as he went behind the counter for the next order, giving him a high five as he went back out into the fray. They did this song and dance for the next several minutes, until the chaotic line was almost depleted and most of the tables were served.

“Alright, last one.” Risumi looked down list on the counter. “Two orders of the Leblanc Special with the house blend to table sixteen.”

Akira nodded and got to work, preparing the coffee as Risumi scooped the curry. She gave him a high five before he went out to the floor. It should have been like any other order. Everything *should have been fine* . Akira looked up at sixteen, one of the few tables tucked beside a window, where one could relax back and watch people out on the streets.

A cold spike of terror stopped him dead in his tracks.

Leaning back against the cushions, were Detective Tsukauchi and Eraserhead. They talked softly back and forth, but the ringing in Akira’s ears drowned out all sound. His heart pounded and a cold sweat broke out across his body.

“It’s them!!” Titania hissed. *“What are they doing here!?”*

"No... do they know the Trickster's identity?" Byakko growled.

"But," Alice shook her head. *"They shouldn't know anything!"*

"Remain calm." The Caped Warrior commanded. *"Let's not rush into this blindly!"*

"Hmm?" Yatagarasu took to the sky. *"What's going on? Is something _"*

A harrowing scream of rage cut him off. The others cried out as power *exploded* from Arsene in a cataclysmic sea of cursed energy, chains creaking and groaning around him. The essence of something darker lingered below the surface, like a sealed demon lord clawing its way to freedom.

Pain stabbed through Akira's head and he fought against the wave of dizziness that made the world go wobbly.

"How dare they tread in our domain!?" Arsene howled as he splayed his wings and leapt forth. *"I'll show them the error of their ways!!"*

"Arsene, no!" Shiva shouted as he lunged for Arsene's arm. *"You must calm down!"*

Arsene whipped back around, his facial markings boiling over with volcanic rage. *"Let me go!"*

"No!" Shiva said. *"Think through this clearly!"*

"I am thinking clearly!" Arsene beat his wings, sending more lancing pain through Akira's head as Shiva was blown back. *"Clearly enough that I know they need to pay for Kohryu!!"*

Yatagarasu screeched as he was ripped from reality. He tumbled and rolled into a pathetic heap in the mindscape, unmoving.

"Yatagrasu!" Alice skid to a stop and gently picked him up. *"Are you okay!?"*

"I-I'm fine..." He warbled.

Arsene never noticed, instead lunging towards freedom, his wings and claws calling for blood. His body coursed with the full power of a Maeigaon.

"Arsene, no!" Akira forced back the flood with just his willpower alone, but the dam was cracking.

"Trickster, let me out!" Arsene howled as he beat his wings. *"Let me exact justice!"*

"No! Not here!" Sweat trickled down Akira's brow as Arsene screamed. *"Not... here!"*

Akira was frozen as he battled against his other self.

Any breath, any twitch of his fingers or a slight change in posture, and he would lose control over Arsene. The air became heavier as the cracks deepened, and Arsene's cursed power escaped into the real world. A sense of dread trickled through the cafe and people shivered at the change in temperature. The shadows churned as if they had a mind of their own.

Meanwhile, Aizawa was on high alert. The atmosphere had changed so suddenly and every fiber of his being told him to *run*. It was as if he were a helpless rabbit, but a moment away from being snapped up by a voracious wolf. His hand went up to his scarf as he looked out across the cafe.

There, standing in the center holding a tray, was a familiar boy, his blazing golden eyes were glowing as bright as the sun. His pupils were pinpricks behind his glasses. The source of the raw *killing intent* flowed from the barista.

And those eyes....

They seemed so familiar and yet he couldn't place them, laced with pain and pure *fear* .

Suddenly, an unknowable piece of himself clicked into place, as if some hidden part was always there, and yet it had just broken free. An invisible veil had been ripped away. Now, the truth was obvious. Aizawa jolted to the edge of his seat.

"*Joker* ." He whispered under his breath.

"What?" Tsukauchi's head snapped towards him, eyes wide. "What are you-"

Tsukauchi battled against the shivers as he followed Aizawa's gaze. The man went as white as a ghost, hissing as he put a hand on his temple.

The rest of the world fizzled out as the three of them were locked in a staring contest. They waited with bated breath, but nobody moved. Not Aizawa or Tsukauchi, and certainly not Akira.

But Akira was losing his battle.

He hadn't felt such pain since he first awakened to Arsene, and now trying to hold the persona back was tearing him apart at the seams.

Arsene's influence wriggled through the widening cracks, his fury was nigh unstoppable. He was about to burst into the real world, dark magic and deadly claws howling for recompense, when the flood was stemmed by golden scales.

"Arsene!" A voice of thunder rolled through the mindscape. "Calm yourself! This is not how the Trickster's true other self should act."

Arsene jumped back as he was surrounded in a sea of glittering gold.

“Kohryu!?” Arsene’s wrath ebbed away with relief. “How are you... no, are you alright!?”

“I am as well as I can be at this moment.” The great dragon’s snort ruffled Arsene’s feathers. “However, my rest was disturbed by... this. What madness has consumed you, Arsene?”

Kohryu protectively coiled his body around the other personas, as if to shield them from Arsene’s wrath. Shiva was on his knees, shaking his head as if dazed. He saw the glint of fear in Alice’s eyes, huddling Yatagarasu to her chest, before Kohryu’s body blocked his view.

A cold sea of shame swirled in Arsene’s heart.

“Release the Trickster, Arsene.” Kohryu’s blood red eyes were filled with sorrow. “You are doing more harm than good. Can you not see how much pain he is in? How your powers ooze into reality? Cease this at once!”

“I...” Arsene’s power wilted, his wings drooping. “But what about those men? They deserve every ounce of pain for harming you and the Trickster! They-”

“I have forgiven them.”

“You-” Arsene stiffened. “You *what* ?”

“I forgave them.” Kohryu reiterated, and one of his whiskers brushed Arsene’s arm. “Remember your own words at that warehouse, Arsene. ‘An enemy who knows how to turn your emotions against you will be your downfall.’ Are your emotions not out of control right now? You need to soothe your wrath for the Trickster’s sake. Allow me to be his mask, so that this situation can be salvaged.”

“I don’t understand you sometimes, Old Boy.” Arsene muttered. “Fine. I shall fall back, for *now* .”

Arsene's rage dwindled like the last dying embers in a campfire, and he faded to the depths of Akira's mindscape.

The world spun as Arsene's overbearing presence vanished, and Akira had full control of himself once more. He summoned every iota of willpower to keep calm as the heavy air lifted. The cafe's ambience returned to normal, with many brushing the odd feeling off.

"Trickster."

"Kohryu!? Are you... what just happened?"

*"There's no time to explain. " Kohryu's presence grounded Akira.
"Let's hurry and serve them, so that their suspicion doesn't grow."*

It felt like he'd been standing here for an eternity, when in reality it had been but a few seconds. His knuckles were white and the tray creaked as he clutched it for dear life. His heart pounded as Aizawa and Tsukauchi gaped at him.

His composure was like a taught string, so close to snapping.

Finally, the spell was broken and he stepped forward. Table sixteen was so dead silent that the clatter of dishes was akin to claws raking a chalkboard. The two men stared blankly, and Akira smiled bright despite the churning sea of emotions choking him.

Despite his sweating palms, his composure *could not* snap.

"Enjoy the food, gentlemen."

He tucked the tray under his arm and left, his footsteps as quiet as a phantom's. Their gazes dug into his back as he walked to the counter. Risumi gaped at him as he put the tray away.

"Kurusu," She looked in between him and table sixteen. *"What just happened? Are you alright?"*

His composure *couldn't snap* .

“What are you talking about?” He laughed as he plastered on a bright grin. “Of course I am. Is it okay if I go on break now?”

Risumi paled.

It was just a little white lie. The same ones he told Sojiro after Sae helped him escape that interrogation room, full of bruises and cracked bones, his veins pumped with drugs. Nothing smiles and a little makeup couldn't hide. Why should this be any different?

“I...” She adjusted her glasses with a deep frown. “Go ahead. The office is unlocked.”

“Thanks!”

He left the bustling cafe behind. The silence of the hallway leading to the office was unnaturally loud. Akira opened the office door with a shaky hand, and it shut behind him with a soft *thump* . The office was the same as ever, with a small couch and coffee table in the corner. Ayumu's desk was lined with knick knacks.

He stood within the too quiet room until...

His composure *snapped*.

Akira collapsed against the wall and slowly slid to the ground, grasping his hair. The heavy lump in his throat suffocated him as he tried to breathe, and came out as wheezing gasps. How could they *not* know who he is after that? Arsene had only been a hair's breadth away from materializing in the real world!

What should he do? Should he run? But if he ran and they called in reinforcements to burst into the cafe after him....

No.

No.

He should stay and fight. He wouldn't allow Risumi or Ayumu to get hurt because of him! But... but they wouldn't ever forgive him if their cafe was destroyed. It would be *his* fault. It was *always his* fault! *His* fault that his friends were stranded who knows where, his fault for being weak and not finishing Yaldabaoth in time, *his fault* for sticking his nose in this world's business and allowing so many people to get hurt!

"Ren." Kohryu brushed his anxiety away in one sweeping breath.
"Calm yourself. I promise that you are safe."

"Kohryu." Tension drained from Akira's shoulders and his hands fell from his hair. *"Why would you think I'm safe? They saw me! They know who I am!"*

"Perhaps they do." Kohryu's power settled further in Akira's bones, crushing his dread. *"But remember Kaito and Detective Tsukauchi's words. Those two men never wished you harm. They were not the ones to set all of those other heroes upon you, nor are they the type to take any drastic action that would lead to your demise."*

"Wait, how would you know all of that? Haven't you been sleeping?"

"I am thou, thou art I." Kohryu's chuckle was like the earth breaking.
"I may have been resting, but your knowledge is my own."

"But... what about you? How do you feel about them?"

"As I told Arsene, I have forgiven them."

"You- How!?" Akira took off his glasses and scrubbed his eyes. *"How can you forgive them so easily after all of the pain we went through!?"*

"It comes with age, little one." The ancient dragon nodded. *"I will not force you, but as your mask I hope that you will find it within yourself to forgive them, in due time. Confidants might feel different in this*

world, but you would not have forged such things if you didn't feel a deep connection with someone, no?"

"That's..." Akira massaged his forehead. *"That's beside the point!"*

"Is it? How so?"

Akira had no refuting words, so he shook his head wildly. *"How are the others? I felt Yatagarasu being forced back because of Arsene."*

"I am... alright." Yatagarasu croaked from atop Alice's shoulder. *"Nothing that I cannot brush off."*

Shiva shook his head. *"I'll be fine, too."*

"And Arsene?"

...

"... Arsene?"

"Give him time." Kohryu said. *"Like yourself, there are many emotions he must sort through."*

"I guess..."

Akira jumped when there was a sudden knock on the door.

"Our time has run short, but remember my words, Trickster."

Kohryu fell silent, but his presence encased Akira like a warm blanket. The door opened, and Ayumu glanced around the office, frowning when he saw Akira sitting on the floor.

"Hey," Ayumu closed the door. "Risumi told me what happened. Are you alright?"

“I’m fine.” Akira stood and put his glasses back on. “Why would you ask?”

“Maybe because you were on the floor at the verge of a panic attack? I know what they look like.”

Akira avoided his eyes. “I said I’m fine.”

“Alright, if you say so.” Ayumu reached into his pocket and held something out for Akira. “Here, those guys didn’t stay long, but they left a hefty tip for you.”

“They did?”

Akira thumbed through the bills. 5000 yen, almost triple the price of the meal itself.

“Did you know them?”

“... No.”

“Hmm, a pretty generous tip from complete strangers, then.” Ayumu shrugged and walked past Akira to sit at his desk. “But I won’t pry.”

Akira glanced at his only escape. “... Does Risumi need help?”

“Nah, the lunch rush is pretty much over. She can handle the rest.” Ayumu leaned back in his chair and stared at Akira. “Besides, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something, and now would be a good time. Go ahead and sit.”

Akira shuffled on his feet, awkwardly clutching the small wad of bills. He sank into one of the chairs and waited. The man heaved a heavy sigh and leaned forward.

“I want to apologize.”

Akira furrowed his brow. “What for?”

"I won't sugar coat it." Ayumu shook his head. "I treated you like shit when you first started working here."

"It's fine." Akira shrugged and stared down at his lap. "I'm used to people treating me like that."

"No, it's not. Kurusu, you know that you don't deserve any of that, right?" The man scratched the back of his head when Akira didn't answer. "Look, I know how you feel, and the way I treated you, hell, nearly landing you out of a job, was pretty damn hypocritical of me."

Akira looked up at him. "Hypocritical?"

"Yep." Ayumu folded his hands together and nodded. "This society loves flashy, physical based quirks, but people get scared when a quirk can mess with your mind. They treat you as.... less than human. They assume the worst because of something you had no control over. Risumi and I have faced a lot of bullshit to get where we are today, but it's even worse with Hitoshi's generation."

"Because of his brainwashing quirk?"

"Right." Ayumu's eyes hardened. "He doesn't talk to us about it, but we can see when he has a bad day. I think one of the reasons why he looks up to you so much is because you've treated him with respect, something that people like us don't get very often."

Akira bit the inside of his cheek.

"I treated you the same way that my peers have treated me for years, just because you were labeled as quirkless." Ayumu glared down at his desk. "I acted like the very people I loathed for so long, and that's why I said I was being hypocritical. I understand if you don't want my apology, though."

Akira was quiet for a moment, before he stood.

"I accept your apology." He said with a tiny smile. "Most people don't even get that far."

"Really?" Ayumu blinked rapidly, then smirked. "I'm actually relieved. I didn't think you would forgive me that easy, and I honestly wouldn't have blamed you."

Akira stiffened. "Forgive that easily...?"

"What?"

"Nothing." Akira glanced over at the door. "I think I took a long enough break. I don't want Risumi to get mad at me."

"Alright. Yeah, she's scary when she's angry." Ayumu chuckled. "Oh, and Kurusu?"

Akira paused with the door half open, looking over his shoulder with a raised brow. Ayumu leaned forward, his expression suddenly serious.

"You do good work out there, kid. Keep it up."

Akira tilted his head. "What, serving coffee and curry?"

"Yeah, sure." Ayumu's face twisted in amusement. "Serving coffee and curry."

Ayumu waved him off, and he left the office more confused than not. He took two steps down the hall and stopped. It wouldn't be hard for him to slip out through the kitchen, *unnoticed*. The alleyways around here were like a maze, and thanks to Yatagarasu's hard work, he had memorized most of them.

"Allow me to survey the area, Trickster."

"Are you sure? I felt how strained our bond was when Arsene did... that."

"Hmph!" Yatagarasu proudly puffed out his chest feathers. "It's nothing a little fresh air can't cure!"

"... Alright then."

Akira crept through the kitchen like a ghost.

"I believe that we are safe enough for you to continue working."
Kohryu said. *"But it never hurts to be cautious."*

"Grandpa..." Alice said, frowning.

"I would usually believe in your judgement, Kohryu." Titania whispered. *"But I admit that your trust in these humans would put the Trickster in grave danger. I don't agree with it."*

"Hmph, for once you and I see eye to eye." Ishtar muttered.

Byakko growled. *"Let's listen to Kohryu's reasoning first, before we judge."*

"And if Titania is right?" Vasuki reared his head and hissed. *"I would rather drown them in a sea of unending filth than risk putting the Trickster in harms way!"*

"Or free-hee-ze them in a glacier, ho!!"

"Wait. Unless..." Ishtar looked up at Kohryu, eyes narrowed. *"Do you trust those men because one of them is the Hierophant Arcana?"*

"That is correct. Eraserhead is the one who wields it."

Akira froze at the door leading to the alley.

"You're not serious." He said with a scowl. *"He's nothing like Sojiro!"*

"No, he is not Sojiro, but that doesn't mean that Sojiro is the only one who can be the Hierophant. We are in another world, Trickster, and new bonds have been forged. I know you feel them, too."

Akira shook his head as he threw the door open. He looked up and down the desolate alleyway, his anger flaring as he kicked a can down the alleyway, the metal grating against the concrete. Sadness emanated from Kohryu as he paced in quick circles.

“Damnit.” He muttered as he held out his arm, and Yatagarasu materialized.

The bird shook off the lingering embers, feathers frayed.

Akira’s anger simmered down as he carefully smoothed Yatagarasu’s feathers, with the bird happily warbling and shaking his tail feathers.

“Maybe you should rest.” Akira said with one last pat to the bird’s head. “You look rough.”

“No, I won’t quit in your hour of need! I shall take to the sky once more!” Yatagarasu flared his wings. “But... what shall you do?”

“I...” Akira huffed as he weighed his options. “I’ll continue working, but you let me know if you see anybody acting strange around the Blue Lotus. Morgana and I put escape plans in place for a reason.”

“Got it. Leave it to me, Trickster!”

Yatagarasu leapt and beat his wings, disappearing over the rooftops within seconds. Akira adjusted his glasses and went back inside, smiling at Risumi when he returned to the front. He knew she was watching him from the corner of her eye, but he easily fell back into the motions, albeit with shaky hands.

Still, if they tried anything, he would be ready this time.

Meanwhile, two men walked down the busy street.

Neither of them had said anything for the past twenty minutes, not even to express their surprise at the food quality of that cafe. No, the *real* reason for their stilted conversation was because of the barista. They walked side by side, street by street, until they reached Tsukauchi's apartment.

Tsukauchi calmly unlocked the door and they went inside. He tossed his keys on the side table as Aizawa trailed into the kitchen, dead silent as he collapsed in the nearest chair. Tsukauchi joined him and placed his hands on the table. They looked at each other with wide eyes.

"You don't think-"

"No way."

"But you felt that when you saw him too, right?" Tsukauchi asked. "Like... like something shifted in the world? And his eyes were glowing gold, just like Joker's."

"Yeah. And that pure killing intent was overwhelming... but it looked as if he was in pain or trying to hold something back. He was scared."

"... I've never seen a kid so afraid of us before."

"But Joker having a job *that* close to U.A. would be-" Aizawa shot up from his chair, eyes growing wider. "No, that's *exactly* like something Joker would do. He's been under our noses the whole time!"

"God damnit." Tsukauchi hid his face in his hands. "What do we do now?"

"You know what'll happen if the Hero Commission knew where he was. It'll be the raid disaster all over again! If he gets captured this time, and that's a big *if*, then without Nezu's program, he would be...." Aizawa shook his head. "That's a fate worse than death."

“And if we don’t tell anybody?”

“*What ?*”

“Think about it, Aizawa.” Tsukauchi furiously paced around the kitchen. “This could be our chance to get close to him, on *his* terms. No other heroes, no threat to his immediate safety. It would be between the two of us and the barista of that cafe.”

“That... could work, but we need more information.”

“You said your students go there. Do you think they would have information?”

Aizawa flinched. “No, that would be impossible. There’s no way my students would keep something like this from me.”

“I know.” Tsukauchi said softly. “But the possibility is still there.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them.” Aizawa sighed. He was too tired for this. “I don’t like suspecting my own kids.”

“I wouldn’t ask them about it directly, so I have another idea.” Tsukauchi said. “Akane goes there almost every day, we could get a background check and I could ask Akane to keep an eye on him. He’s good at that sort of thing and he knows how to be subtle.”

“We won’t tell Akane who the kid is, right?”

“Right. We should keep this to ourselves for the time being.” Tsukauchi took a deep breath and placed his hands on his hips. “Does that sound like a plan?”

“Yeah, for now.” Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose. “I just can’t believe it. After *everything* he pulled, he still has the gall to work daytime shifts as a *barista*, and practically in the *shadow of a hero school* to boot.”

“It sounds ridiculous when you put it that way.”

Aizawa glared at him, but it had no real heat. “Because this whole situation *is* ridiculous!”

“We’re going to need so much coffee for this.” Tsukauchi sighed as he looked at his coffee maker with a grimace. “But I’ll never see normal coffee in the same way ever again.”

“After Joker’s coffee was practically the Nectar of the Gods? I don’t think so either, but we’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Or maybe visit the cafe more often?” Tsukauchi asked. “We can show Joker that we mean no harm that way.”

Aizawa slowly tilted his head to the side.

“Okay, a part of me is saying that you want to get closer to the kid and show him we’re harmless,” Aizawa narrowed his eyes. “... And the other part is telling me that you just want more of his coffee. The curry wasn’t bad, either.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong?” Tsukauchi rubbed the back of his head. “That was the *best* coffee I’ve ever had. You can’t tell me that you don’t feel the same way.”

Aizawa turned his back to Tsukauchi and buried his face in his capture weapon.

“Oh, *definitely* .” Aizawa muttered. “But we can’t rush into this blindly. We’ll have to be extremely careful from here on out.”

“Because there’s still the chance that he’ll run?”

“Exactly.”

“And that would put us back to square one.” Tsukauchi massaged his forehead. “Why does everything with Joker have to be so complicated?”

“... Like trying to get a feral cat to trust you.” Aizawa said with a nod.

Tsukauchi looked at him, exasperated. “Joker is *not* a cat!”

“It was a figure of speech, Tsukauchi.” Aizawa idly scratched at his stubble. “But you can’t deny the comparison.”

Tsukauchi only shook his head and sighed.

They had a plan, now they just needed patience and the luck of the gods on their side to pull it off.

Next chapter will be up on March 6th!

EDIT: Like I said with a few of the lovely commenters, nobody in the MHA universe is going to get a persona. There's something else going on here ;)

Edit #2: Here's also a list of the revealed personas and their arcana - Arsene (Fool), Seth (Tower), Cerberus (Chariot), Yatagarasu (Sun/Councillor), Alice (Death), Kohryu (Hierophant), Titania (Empress), Ishtar (Lovers), Byakko (Temperance), Vasuki (Hanged Man), Black Frost (Fool), Shiva (Judgement), and Orpheus (Fool).

There are still a few personas that haven't been revealed yet. Did I slightly expand the stock to squeeze in a few more favorite personas in this story? Absolutely. Do I regret it? Absolutely not ;D

Alleycat

Chapter 41: Alleycat

“You don’t have to worry. I know how to be stealthy!”

“For my sake, I hope so.” Hitoshi said.

I would like to thank my betas Lofti Lofi, Gundoru, and Mystik_Owl for helping out with this chapter!

Fanart!

[OhToSeeWithoutMyEyes](#) here on AO3!

[Amaris](#) On twitter!

Morgana’s nose twitched.

“Don’t you *dare* sneeze.” Aiba threw her hands up, the brush in her hands splattering dye on the table. “You’ll mess it up even more!”

“I’m... trying not to!” Morgana wrinkled his nose. “Are you finished yet?”

“Just need to get one more spot!” Aiba painted his chin and combed it over. “There! All done!”

“*Finally* .” Morgana turned a small circle and looked at Akira. “Well? Do I look any different?”

“You look like a normal black cat. As long as you don’t talk, then I don’t think anyone will care. Maybe I should teach you how to meow?”

Morgana deadpanned, “Ha ha, very funny.”

“I’m back!” Tobita walked in, clutching a small box. “They still had them in stock!”

“Er... what is that?” Morgana asked warily.

“Colored contacts.” He opened it.

“What, for *cats* ?” Akira asked as he peeked over the man’s shoulder. “I never expected that.”

“You can find anything in a world of quirks! These ones are for humans with feline mutations, but they should work. It’s better to erase every similarity, no?”

“Ehhh....” Morgana’s tail sagged. “I guess. Just be careful when you put them in, okay!? I have sensitive eyes, you know!”

“No worries, Morgana!” Tobita beamed. “Now, just hold still....”

The deed was done, and Morgana’s blue eyes were now a startling green.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad.” Morgana said, blinking rapidly.

“There’s just one more thing.”

“What now?” Morgana asked Aiba.

She dug in her pockets and held out a new collar, grinning brightly.

“Is.... is that supposed to be for me?” Morgana groaned. “Why is it bright pink!? Are those hearts all over it!?”

“W-well...” Aiba’s cheeks turned red and her shoulders came up to her ears. “Don’t be mad at me, okay!? B-but when we first met.... I kind of thought you were a girl?”

Morgana’s eye twitched. “You WHAT!?”

“Oh, boy.” Akira face palmed.

“How could you ever think that I was a girl!? I’m obviously male!” Morgana turned to Akira. “I don’t have to wear that, right?”

Akira sighed. “Like Tobita said, we should erase every similarity. I think it’s a good idea.”

“Fine.” Morgana hung his head. “Just put it on before I change my mind.”

Aiba stepped up and unlatched his yellow collar and slipped on the pink one. She handed it to Akira, who held it close to his chest.

“I’ll take good care of it, okay?”

“You better!” Morgana shook his head. “Can I see how I look?”

Aiba nodded and held up a small hand mirror.

Morgana’s white patches have been dyed pitch black, his eyes forest green. Now, with the pink collar on, he seemed to be a completely different feline.

“Just remember that this stuff is washable, so you need to be careful,” She said.

“I know. Don’t you dare doubt my skills! I’ll pull this mission off without a hitch. Just you wait and see!”

“I’m not doubting you!” Aiba huffed.

Morgana stuck his nose in the air. “Good.”

“There’s still time before Hitoshi gets here.” Akira said as he checked his phone. “How’s Mercurius? Is he stronger since our visit to the hospital?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Morgana grinned. “Watch this!”

Morgana closed his eyes and breathed in. The air swirled and glowed with magic, and a twisting green pillar of flame ignited behind him. With his staff raised, Mercurius emerged, powerful, physical, *whole*. Akira only had a moment to admire him alongside Tobita and Aiba before power welled inside his chest. He gasped at the second burst of flame, azure this time, from which Arsene arose. Joker could only look on, stupefied, as the mythical beings approached one another, staring.

Arsene looked Mercurius up and down, before extending his clawed hand.

Mercurius clasped Arsene’s open hand, and they shook. With that, they both disappeared as if they were never there.

“... Are you serious?” Joker said after a few moments of silence and then facepalmed. “Arsene hasn’t talked to me since the incident at the cafe, and then he comes out to give Mercurius a *hand shake* ?”

“I’m not sure what that was either.” Morgana shook his head. “Maybe they came to an agreement of some sort?”

“You still didn’t transform.”

“No.” Morgana looked at his paws with a frown. “I still don’t know why I stay in this form, either.”

Aiba blinked at Joker. “Transform...?”

“Okay, what the *hell* did we just walk in on?” A familiar voice droned.

They turned to see that Kaito and Hitoshi had entered the lounge, just as shell shocked as everyone else.

“Who knows.” Joker sighed as his costume faded away. “I thought you weren’t supposed to be here for another twenty minutes?”

Hitoshi shrugged. “I couldn’t sit still, so I came early. Besides, it’ll take longer to get to school from here.”

“You made sure that you weren’t followed, right?” Akira asked.

“Yeah.” Hitoshi crossed his arms. “My bedroom window looks out over the front of the store, and I didn’t see anyone watching the cafe either. Are you sure that Eraserhead and that detective knew who you were?”

“Positive.” Akira frowned as he looked at the floor. “You should have seen their faces. There was no mistaking that they pieced it together.”

“And that’s why I’m going to the school today, to check on Eraserhead and see if they’re planning anything. I’ll get a better layout around the school, too. You’re sure that this will work?” Morgana hopped down from the table and padded over to Hitoshi. “I won’t tip off the gate security or anything?”

“Eh, it should be fine,” Hitoshi said. “You see other cats wandering around campus all the time. Besides, you’re so small that I doubt the scanner would even pick you up. You’ll be fine as long as you don’t pull off anything like... *that* .”

Hitoshi glanced over to where the personas were.

“You don’t have to worry. I know how to be stealthy!”

“For my sake, I hope so.” Hitoshi said.

“You’ll be late to school if you don’t stop gabbing.” Aiba said with crossed arms.

“Right.” Hitoshi knelt down and held his bag open for Morgana, who peered into it curiously.

“Ooh! It really is like your old bag, Akira.” Morgana hopped in and huddled down. “And it’s even clean!”

Akira said nothing as he pushed away a sprig of jealousy.

Hitoshi zipped his bag closed, leaving just enough to give Morgana air. He stood and shuffled the new weight around his shoulder.

“We’ll be back after school.” Hitoshi waved as he turned on his heel. “See ya.”

Kaito watched as Hitoshi stepped around him, and they all heard the jingle of the door bell. He glanced back at Akira.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“It’s fine.” Akira rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “This is good for him. He’s been wanting to do something like this anyway, and I don’t want him to feel like he’s useless again.”

Kaito exchanged glances with Aiba and Tobita.

“W-well!” Aiba stomped in front of him and placed her hands on her hips. “Just because Morgana is gone today, doesn’t mean that I’ll let you sulk around, mister!”

Akira blinked. “Huh?”

“I never forgot about the apology curry!” She glared up at him, smirking. “You better get cooking Akira, because you have a lot of it to make!”

“Eh?” Akira looked at Kaito and Tobita.

“She’s right.” Kaito said with a tiny smile. “You have nothing else to do today, right?”

“You have no excuse not to since you’ve recovered!” Tobita grinned as he stroked his beard. “Besides, I’ve been wanting to properly

taste your cooking!"

"Traitors." Akira muttered. "Fine. It shouldn't take that long to make the first batch."

Akira trailed to the kitchen and got to work, oblivious to Aiba's tiny victory dance.

They watched Tobita like a hawk once the food was plated and they sat around the table.

Akira laughed as the man took the first bite, eyes blown wide in disbelief.

Aiba took a video to show Morgana later.

"Name: Kurusu Akira. Age: 16. Status: Quirkless. Living with an elderly relative with no stated address. Previous guardian killed in a villain attack...?" Tsukauchi rubbed at his temple. "This is unbelievable."

Tsukauchi stared at the word *Quirkless* .

"My quirk is pretty simple. It's called Polygraph, so I'll always know if you tell the truth or not."

"Well." Joker leaned back in the chair, the cuffs jangling against the table. "I have nothing fancy like that."

"Don't lie to us." Tamakawa had snapped. "There have been several people that witnessed the power of those creatures you control, and you even healed one of the injured during the incident! You can't sit here and tell us that you don't have a quirk."

"I'm not a liar." Joker tilted his head and smirked. "It wasn't the work of what you people call quirks."

Joker *hadn't* lied.

If his power wasn't a quirk, then what did he see it as? If it wasn't a quirk, then Aizawa's Erasure or the quirk suppressant cuffs wouldn't have taken his powers away. Then again, he had *told the truth* . What did all of this mean? Just what the hell was this kid?

If he's labeled as 'quirkless', then Tsukauchi was glad that he and Eraser decided to keep this whole thing quiet. The Hero Commission would waste no time bursting down the cafe doors and slapping cuffs on a *quirkless teenager*, but that would cause another public outrage that they couldn't handle right now.

They couldn't use this file, especially if his hunch was right and it was fake. They would have to get Joker's age from somewhere else, possibly from *Joker* himself. Perhaps he should look into elderly gentlemen in Musutafu with a teenaged charge. His head hurt at the thought of all the extra paperwork.

He set down the file and rubbed his forehead. "Damnit."

"Sir?" Tsukauchi looked up to Akane, who shifted on his feet. "Can I ask what this is about? Kurusu is a good kid, and I can't imagine why you asked me to do a background check on him. Is he in trouble?"

"It's... complicated." Tsukauchi said slowly. "And part of an ongoing investigation."

"Oh." Akane looked over his shoulder to the door, then he turned back to Tsukauchi. "Is this about what happened to him recently?"

"What?" Tsukauchi's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"A concerned regular at the cafe came to me a couple of days ago." Akane shook his head, his eyes turning thoughtful. "She said she found him unconscious in an alley when the typhoon hit, bleeding heavily from his eyes and mouth."

Ice shot through Tsukauchi's veins.

That would match up to the backlash that Eraserhead felt, but the ongoing theory of Joker's backlash being *much* worse lined up.

"Tell me everything you know about this incident."

"R-right." Akane blinked rapidly at Tsukauchi's sudden seriousness. "She and her nephews brought him to the Blue Lotus cafe, and the owners looked after him from then on. From her tone, I gather that his injuries were pretty serious. He insisted it was just an accident when she asked about it, but she came to me because she had doubts." His frown deepened into a scowl. "I know we can't do anything unless he comes forward, but it still leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"I... see."

Tsukauchi steepled his fingers together and looked down at the file.

This only made a complicated situation even more so. Joker would *definitely* disappear if Tsukauchi questioned the cafe owners or the concerned regular. They were balancing on a delicate tightrope. One wrong move and they would lose their footing and fall, and he wouldn't risk it with no safety net to catch them.

"Kurusu... might be in danger." He looked at Akane, who went as pale as a ghost. "Can I ask that you keep an eye on him? Whatever happens, Kurusu *can't* know about any of this. Your discretion is vital to the investigation. Understood?"

Akane stood straight and saluted. "Yes, sir!"

"Thank you, Akane. I owe you one." Tsukauchi gathered the papers together and closed the folder. "If there's nothing else, then you're dismissed."

Akane nodded, before he turned to leave.

Tsukauchi leaned back into his chair and deflated with a long sigh.

“Now for the hard part.” Tsukauchi muttered as he grabbed his phone. “Updating Eraser.”

“Well, here goes nothing.” Hitoshi mumbled as he stared up at U.A.’s gate.

His bag wriggled as Morgana peeked out, blinking curiously.

A sea of students filed into the school, chatting and laughing among themselves without a care in the world. The morning sun glinted off of U.A.’s massive main building, a beacon of hope for any who gazed upon it. Hitoshi only felt mounting dread.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and followed the crowd, taking two steps into the school before it all went wrong.

“MRreeooOw!?” Hitoshi stopped dead in his tracks and looked at his shifting bag. “MeeeeowWW!”

“Oi, what are you doing!?” Hitoshi whispered when others began to stare.

“Moooooew!?”

He sheepishly grinned as other students gave him dirty looks, and he rushed into the main building, holding his squirming bag tightly to his chest to keep the cat quiet. He raced down the hall to the nearest bathroom. He checked the stalls to make sure it was empty, before he threw his bag on the counter and ripped it open.

“What is your problem!?” He cried. “I thought you knew how to be stealthy! That wasn’t stealthy!”

Morgana blinked rapidly, as if dazed. He had a bug eyed look and his fur was puffed up, his tail nearly as large as a raccoon’s.

“Morgana?” Hitoshi’s anger drained away. “Are you okay?”

“Huh?” Morgana shook his head wildly and then studied the bathroom. “Is this... the school?”

“Uh... yeah?” Hitoshi narrowed his eyes. “We walked onto the grounds and you went crazy. Why were you freaking out all of a sudden?”

Morgana hopped out of the bag, wobbling slightly.

“This place.... no, it *can't* be.” Morgana looked in the mirror, tilting his head. “I still can't go into the Metaverse. My appearance is the same, so it's not a Palace. Then why does it feel like one? No... it doesn't feel like a complete Palace. Maybe a Treasure? I wasn't sure last time, but its undeniable now that it's stronger. But why would a Treasure have the same feeling as a Palace? What the heck is going on here?”

“Do you mind explaining what the hell you're talking about?”

“You.” Morgana whirled around to Hitoshi. “Has anything strange happened at the school lately?”

“Uh...” Hitoshi's eyes darted around the room. “Strange how?”

“Like the scenery suddenly changing or warping into something else. Seeing things in the shadows. People changing personalities. Have you felt any heavy, negative emotions?”

Hitoshi stared at him as if he sprouted another head. “No?”

“I see.” Morgana sighed as he looked in the mirror, and his eye caught something. “Hey, can you help me up to that vent?”

Hitoshi looked up at the grate above them. “Why? Would you just tell me what's going on?”

“That's just it,” Morgana said. “I *don't* know whats going on, and this mission just got a whole lot more complicated than I thought it would be. I'm changing up the plan.”

“Okay,” Hitoshi said, “so what now?”

“I need to get a feel of this place without being spotted. The vents would work perfectly for that!”

“Then what should I do?”

“You need to act normal. Go to your classes and pretend that nothing’s wrong.”

Hitoshi frowned. “But I want to help out.”

“Hitoshi...” Morgana eyes softened. “I understand, but this is a delicate situation. You’ve helped out a ton just by getting me here. Akira and I really appreciate your help, but I should take it from here. You wouldn’t want anybody to notice you acting strange either, especially the heroes.”

Hitoshi scratched the back of his head. “*Fine* . Just keep a lookout, okay? The last thing we need is somebody walking in when I’m unscrewing the grate.”

“Perfect!” Morgana bounced on his paws. “Oh, but do you have a tool or something to help you?”

“I brought this.” Hitoshi reached into his pockets and grabbed a small multi-tool. “My dad gave this to me ages ago. Who knew it would come in handy today?”

Morgana smirked. “Nice! Now get to work before the first bell rings!”

“Alright, sheesh.” Hitoshi rolled his eyes and climbed one the counter. “Who knew you were a slave driver.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Hitoshi flipped open the multi-tool and unscrewed the bottom half the vent. It screeched as he held it open. Hitoshi wrinkled his nose as the old scent of dust stung it.

“Okay, it’s op- hey!”

Morgana had climbed up Hitoshi’s body, his tiny little claws piercing through his uniform, before he bounced from Hitoshi’s head and into the vent.

“Really?” Hitoshi muttered as he rubbed his head. “Was that necessary?”

“Maybe.” Morgana snickered. “Hey, can I borrow that multi-tool?”

“Can you even *use* it?”

“I’ve picked locks before. Of course I can use it!”

Hitoshi glanced in between Morgana’s paws and the multi-tool in his other hand.

“Alright, just be careful with it, okay?”

“I will!” Morgana said as the first bell rang. “Now hurry up and get to class! But remember, act natural!”

“Yeah, tell anyone to ‘act natural’ and they do the opposite.” Hitoshi set the tool in the vent and closed it. “No pressure.”

“Just go before you’re late!” Morgana’s voice echoed from the vent. “I’ll find you after school, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Hitoshi grunted as he hopped down from the counter. “Just do me a favor and don’t do anything too dramatic?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to!?” Morgana cried. “I’m not like Akira!”

Hitoshi snorted as he gathered up his things and left.

Morgana frowned when he was alone in the dark vent. He sat down and curled his tail around himself, glancing down to the stripes of light glinting from Hitoshi's multi-tool.

"Ren..." He whispered. "Just what have we gotten ourselves into?"

"Come, you can think on this later."

"Mercurius!" Morgana breathed a sigh of relief as Mercurius' presence settled within him. *"How are you feeling?"*

"I've recovered most of my strength. Curious, it seems Arsene's words about this world's cognition were correct. I'm thankful to him."

"I'm glad!" Morgana picked up the tool. "Are you ready for this? We're by ourselves for this mission."

"Naturally." Mercurius' bird-song laughter soothed Morgana's unease. "Nothing can stop us with our combined power! Now, use our wind like you've been practicing."

Morgana closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. He tapped into the well of magic flowing through his veins, and it only took moments for a gentle breeze to start flowing through the vents, hallways, and classrooms, filling out Morgana's mind like a map. If he controlled it just right, it wouldn't feel any different to normal AC pumping through the building.

"Woah." Morgana's eyes flew open. *"The vent system here is a labyrinth! This... this might take a while to comb through."*

"Then let's set off. We have most of the day to explore, so let's make use of our time."

"Right!" Morgana silently marched down the vent. *"Mission, START!!"*

“How did you burn them AGAIN!? I made sure you followed the steps and they still turned into charcoal!”

“I told you *several* times that I can’t cook,” Kaito muttered.

“My main concern is that the fire alarm didn’t go off,” Tobita said. “Perhaps it needs new batteries again?”

“Step Grandpa drains the batteries too fast!” Alice said with a playful twirl.

“I’ll replace them again, but I’m *done* cooking for today.”

“Good!” Aiba said as she threw the charcoal bits into the trash. “At this rate, we won’t have ANY cookies!”

Kaito grumbled under his breath as he changed the batteries for the fourth time this month, and then he plopped down on the couch beside Akira, arms crossed and face set in a pout.

“I told them it was hopeless,” Akira said with a subtle smirk. “Not even my lessons got through to you.”

“Yeah, and yet they didn’t listen.” Kaito shook his head.

“But you’ve lived so many lives, right?” Akira glanced over to Aiba, who was letting Alice stir butter and brown sugar together. “You’d think at least one of them would be decent at cooking.”

“Yeah, that’s what I don’t get.” Kaito huffed as he leaned back, glaring at the ceiling. “A few of them were even on the *professional* level. I think it’s a curse thrown at me by a bored god or something.”

“Huh.” Akira clutched his chin in thought, his smirk growing. “A grinning goddess cursed you.”

Kaito flinched. “*What?* ”

“Nothing.” Akira chuckled. “I’m only messing with you.”

“Whatever,” Kaito huffed and rolled his eyes. “Did you make your decision yet?”

“No,” Akira’s grin fell, “I know it’s dangerous to work there, but...”

Kaito’s eyes softened. “But you don’t want to leave the Blue Lotus.”

Akira nodded. “Aiba updated the encryption on my phone and we got rid of that old P.O. box since we weren’t using it anyway. She made sure that my name isn’t listed in the registration here, either. We covered the rest of our tracks, and now the only link to me is the Blue Lotus.”

“I know you’re sour towards Eraserhead, but-

“But nothing. This isn’t just about Eraserhead.” Akira hissed, claspings his hands tightly together. “You don’t get it. Arsene... he was ready to do *anything* to hurt those two. If Kohryu wasn’t able to stop him, then he would’ve broken free and hurt the other patrons, possibly destroyed the cafe. I’m not thinking about leaving for my own safety, but for the Shinsous’ too. I would never forgive myself if they got hurt because of me.”

“Has Arsene talked about it yet?”

“No.” Akira’s lips soured. “I’ve been trying to talk to him but he’s being stubborn.”

Kaito leaned forward and stared at Akira. He glanced over to the others, who were too busy to eavesdrop, though Alice was watching from the corner of her eye.

“He is your other self, right? Maybe he’s acting this way because your own emotions haven’t been as stable.” Akira gaped at Kaito, who shrugged. “You can’t say that that’s not part of it.”

“... I guess.”

“The key to dealing with teenagers is patience. You’ve given me plenty of practice.”

“Hey!” Akira said with a glare.

“Just be patient with him and he’ll come around eventually.” Kaito stood and stared at Akira with a thoughtful frown. “Don’t rush your decision about the Blue Lotus, either. It’s important to you, and I would hate to see you lose it.”

With that, Kaito left to go to the front desk. Akira’s heart sank.

“Hate to see me lose it, huh?” He muttered under his breath. “As if we won’t already lose everything here.”

Alice, with a hand full of cookie dough, paused to look over at Akira with a tilt of her head.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine.” He said. *“Are you having fun?”*

Alice smiled. *“Yup! I can’t wait for you to taste them, big brother!”*

“I’m sure they’ll be delicious.”

She beamed and got back to work, dividing the fresh dough with Aiba as Tobita prepared the baking sheets and cleaned the dishes.

Akira lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Alice’s bond was different from the others. Despite mastering it, her power was still a force to be reckoned with, and thus, it drained him over time. Akira chalked it up to her being the Ultimate persona for the Death Arcana. He didn’t mind it though, since she was having fun.

Akira took a deep breath and closed his eyes, concentrating on his inner selves. He sensed the other bonds floating around in his psyche, noting Kohryu’s frayed shimenawa before locking onto the rattle of distant chains.

“Arsene.”

...

"Arsene, I know you can hear me."

"Will you stop being stubborn? This is important!"

"Alright, fine. I'll talk and you better listen." The others were as silent as the grave as he gathered his thoughts. "What happened at the cafe was wrong and dangerous. We can't do things like that, Arsene. It put us all at risk! We've seen what happens when.... when someone is consumed by revenge."

An old wound over Akira's heart twinged, and he rubbed at the spot.

"We can't be like that. We just can't."

Ear ringing silence. Nothing disturbed the blackened void as Akira waited, eyes firmly shut. Not the clang of dishes and *ding* of a timer, and certainly not his own pounding heart. Finally, Arsene emerged. At only a fraction of his strength, he appeared as a mere whisper in Akira's mind.

"... I understand."

And like that, he was gone again.

"Well, at least it's something."

Akira released the breath he didn't know he was holding and opened his eyes.

Alice stood in front of him, swaying her hips. He nodded at her and she smiled, holding out the plate of fresh chocolate chip cookies. Tobita and Aiba were busy throwing the second batch in the oven.

"Be sure to give some to Kaito." He plucked one off the plate. "He'll be grouchy if we don't share."

“Okay!” She curtsied before she ran off to the front.

Akira took a bite and chewed thoughtfully.

“I knew they would be delicious.”

He grinned at Alice’s rush of appreciation.

Tokoyami’s pen flew over the page.

At this rate, he would have his math homework done before break was over. He sighed contently as he finished one problem, and moved onto the last. This one was easy, he just had to-

“AAARGH!! There it is again!!”

Tokoyami glared at the jagged black line cutting across his notebook. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out through his nose, gently closing his math book and setting it aside. Of course, none of his classmates heard his other self’s outcry, all chatting and whispering among themselves.

“Dark Shadow! What is your problem?”

“Fumi!” The presence in his mind shifted like a water ripple. *“There’s something in the air!”*

“What are you talking about?” Tokoyami looked out across the classroom. *“I don’t feel anything.”*

“No, listen! This strange feeling’s been going off and on all day! It feels like.... like...” Dark Shadow bounced back and forth. *“Oh! Like TV static!”*

“... TV static?”

“Yeah! Like that same feeling in your mouth when you drink flavored water! All buzzing and humming across my body. Speaking of which,

I hate that stuff! Not even the apple flavor tastes good, Fumi, so why do you even drink it!?"

Tokoyami face palmed. *"You're making no sense."*

"I don't know how else to explain it! There's just something weird in the air, that's all!"

"Then why does nobody else sense anything strange? Maybe you're imagining things."

"RAAAUGH! I don't know!!"

Tokoyami shook his head and ignored Dark Shadow's inane ramblings.

"Aoyama, may I ask what you are reading?"

Tokoyami glanced at Momo as she approached Aoyama, who had been enraptured with a small book.

"Oh, this?" Aoyama's eyes twinkled as he held up the cover. "It is the story of the famous Gentlemen Thief, Arsene! My grandmother read this to me almost every night back home! And I thought... well, something about Joker reminded me of these stories. I just couldn't help myself."

"Oh!" Momo smiled. "That's by Maurice Leblanc, right? My mother loved old tales like that, too!"

"You are familiar with it!?" Aoyama's twinkles intensified. "Magnifique! Perhaps we can trade out favorites?"

Tokoyami narrowed his eyes.

"Arsene?" He whispered as he looked down at his desk. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

"AAAURGH! Fumi, the TV static is back again!!"

Tokoyami facepalmed. He would never be able to think straight with his irate partner jumbling all of his thoughts around. Instead, he studied his other classmates, frowning at the familiar theme floating between everyone. Red and black. It was on their bags, their clothes. Hanging from the charms on their phones.

He once overheard Midoriya and Todoroki talking in hushed whispers one time at lunch. He couldn't make out exactly what they were talking about, but the distinct name 'Joker' had reached his ears. The vigilante had infected everyone's thoughts like a plague.

Tokoyami glowered at his desk as Dark Shadow screeched again.

"What a mad banquet of darkness."

Ectoplasm stopped as he felt a chill up his spine.

He glanced over his shoulder, but there was nobody there. The students were already in their next class, and he needed to be there before the late bell rang. However, he couldn't get rid of this sinking feeling in his gut. His instincts told him that he was being watched, and yet the hallway was barren.

He reached up to the communicator in his ear.

"Status report."

"Clones 7 and 13, all clear in the gardens."

"Clone 24, all clear in the cafeteria."

"Clones 18, 9, 12, and 27 reporting in. All gyms clear."

"Clones 2 and 30 reporting. Ground around the main building show no suspicious activity."

Everyone else reported in with an all clear.

“Got it. Keep me updated.” He let his arm fall with a sigh. “Maybe I’m just tired.”

He heard a creak overhead, but relaxed when it was just the air conditioner starting up. He swore under his breath when the late bell rang, running to his next class.

Satisfied, the shadow in the vent moved on.

“Hey, Shouta! Why have you been so grumpy today?”

“I’m not grumpy.” The caterpillar on the couch shifted. “I’m just tired.”

“But you’re always tired!” Present Mic put his hands on his hips and leaned over Aizawa. “You got *especially* grumpy after you took a call this morning! Ooh, was it a date!? Oh no, it went badly, didn’t it!? SHOUTA, YOU-”

Present mic was cut off as the caterpillar shot up and wrapped a silver scarf around his mouth. His eyes gleamed crimson.

“You’re being too loud. I’ll lock you in a closet if you wake me up one more time. Understand?”

Present Mic nodded frantically, and he was released. He dramatically gasped for breath as someone else in the room cackled, but Morgana couldn’t see who it was.

“Just leave me alone.” Caterpillar Aizawa plopped down on the couch and turned his back to them. “I need time to think.”

“Oh, you should’ve said so!”

Morgana watched the teachers lounge for a few more minutes, but only caught the awkward silence and the shuffling of papers.

“Strange.” Morgana crept past the vent. *“We’ve been exploring for three hours and the teachers haven’t so much as mentioned Joker.”*

"Hmm, indeed. It was Eraserhead and that detective who encountered the Trickster, right?"

"Right. Ren said it would be impossible for them not to know his identity. So why haven't they talked about him yet? I thought the security here would skyrocket and that they would get together to plan something." Morgana paused at a fork in the vent. *"This doesn't make any sense."*

"Unless Eraserhead kept the information close to his chest."

Morgana's tail twitched. *"But why would he do that?"*

"I know not the answers, only the possibilities."

Morgana sighed. He chose the left side of the vent and ventured forth. They traveled through the darkness until the next couple of vents, and Morgana listened in on a classroom full of students.

"I've been meaning to ask Monoma," A boy with black hair and a headband said. "But the teachers asked you to change your hero name, right? Have you decided on a new one yet?"

"No!" Another blond boy huffed. "I already told them that I won't change it."

"Monoma!" A girl with red hair and jade green eyes cried. "You should really think about it! Why would you stay with the name Phantom Thief?"

Morgana's ears pricked up and he leaned closer to the vent.

"W-well, it's just..."

"And I noticed you put another split in the tailcoat of your hero costume." The red haired girl put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Just like Joker."

Monoma's other classmates turned towards him.

“You should know why!” Monoma waved his hand. “You heard Joker during his interview! He stated that 1-A isn’t all that! He told the entire world that our class doesn’t get enough credit, that we could surpass 1-A someday!! How can I not support him after that!?”

“Monoma...” The girl facepalmed.

“He’s right though.” Another girl with dark green hair muttered. “Joker’s words placed us in the public eye, and now we’re getting just as much attention as 1-A. I still have people coming up to me on the train ride to school.”

Monoma grinned. “See!?”

“Does everyone feel this way?” Red asked, frowning when most uttered their agreement. “But... but Joker, he’s-”

The next bell rang, cutting her off.

Monoma stood up and patted her on the shoulder. “Just admit it, Class Rep. You admire Joker just like the rest of us.”

Morgana chuckled. The other students exited the room, joining the sea of students in the hallways. By Morgana’s calculations, it should be lunch time.

“He has captured the hearts of other hero classes.”

“I’m honestly not surprised.” Morgana said as he continued down the vent, “But I’m getting a bad feeling about all of this. This place definitely feels like a Palace, but I’m not seeing any evidence of it being one either. No shadows, no outright distortions. The students are normal... at least for this world’s standards. My appearance stayed the same, too!”

“But you sense a Treasure, do you not?”

“I do, but its... fuzzy, almost as if it’s behind a veil or something. It’s not a Treasure like we encountered previously.”

“Hmm, quite a conundrum.”

“Tell me about it.” Morgana grumbled.

He took a breath to get his bearings. His magic told him he was on the third floor of the school. Judging by the vast room nearby, they were close to the cafeteria. His curiosity got the better of him and he followed the crowd, who were oblivious to the little intruder above their heads.

Morgana peeked past the next vent.

Hundreds of students all milled about in the spacious cafeteria, and Morgana’s mouth watered at the delicious scents wafting in. He spotted the unkempt fluff of purple hair in the crowd.

Hitoshi was sitting alone in the far corner, eyes scanning the room as he ate. Morgana sent a gentle wind to tussle the top of his hair, and Hitoshi’s eyes darted up. He gave a subtle smirk before resuming his meal.

There was a sudden loud *pop*, and Morgana snickered when he saw that Monoma boy harassing some of the 1-A students.

“There’s nothing for us here. Let’s move on.”

“Right.”

They left the craziness behind. Beyond the cafeteria, there were a bunch of smaller rooms clustered together. Nobody was occupying them. Offices, maybe? He just passed over an empty room when Mercurius spoke.

“We’re getting nowhere by wandering blindly. Do you think the Ruler would know something?”

“The... Ruler?”

“The leader of this place. I know not what humans call him.”

"Oh, do you mean the school principal?"

"Yes."

"We could check out his office!" Morgana quickened his steps. *"If he's not in there, that is. I hope he stepped out for lunch."*

He stalked past several vents, taking a moment to squint at various name tags on the desks, passing them all one by one. He froze at the last vent, gaping at a familiar red plush sitting on an armchair. The golden plaque on the desk read Principal Nezu.

"No way." He muttered over the metal instrument in his jaws.

Morgana, with some luck and apt usage of his tiny paws, he was able to unscrew the bottom of the vent. He set the tool aside, pushing it away until the shadows hid it.

"I'll come back for you in a second."

He pushed the vent open with his head and plopped out, landing on all fours.

This office was different than the rest. Tall windows allowed sunlight to spill in, providing a dizzying view of the school grounds. Various knick knacks and thick tomes lined the bookshelves, and there was a table with a couch and armchairs around it.

Pride sprouted in his heart when he saw their latest calling card on the wall, encased in a gleaming gold frame.

"I thought they would've gotten rid of this a long time ago." Morgana jumped onto the back of the armchair and sniffed the red fish. *"They put a bow tie on it?"*

"To think that the Ruler of a hero school would be a Phanboy."

"Oh man, I can't wait to tell Ren! How do you think they would react if they knew this fish was a prize from a claw game in another world?"

"Who knows." Mercurius chuckled. "But let's not get distracted."

"Right..."

He hopped from the chair to the desk. Everything on the desk was neat. *Too* neat. Pencils and pens were lined up like soldiers. Paperwork sat in perfect, untouched piles. There wasn't a speck of dust in sight. It was like a carefully constructed puzzle.

Morgana swallowed as an urge came over him, his paw slowly reaching for the pens to push them off the desk.

"Magician!"

"Ahh!" Morgana jumped back, his back foot bumping the name tag. *"Don't startle me like that!"*

He felt Mercurius shake his head. *"Don't disturb anything. This sort of organization is on another level. Any changes would be noticed."*

"You're right. I'll be careful."

He carefully stepped over the pens as if they were landmines, stopping at the pile of paperwork in the center of the desk. Curious, Morgana nudged the top file open with the tip of his claw, careful not to mess anything up.

"Permissions for a summer camp...?"

"There's a hero group called the Wild Wild Pussy Cats? This world grows stranger every day."

Morgana snorted as he shut the file. Interesting, but not what they were looking for. He padded over to the computer and stared at the screen.

"It needs a password." Morgana glanced to the thick textbooks on the shelves. *"You don't think there's a hint-"*

Suddenly, the air outside the office became disturbed. Someone was coming.

“Magician, hide!”

Morgana’s fur stood on end from the sudden spike of panic. He had just jumped down when the door knob jiggled, throwing himself underneath the desk. Someone hummed a random tune as the door shut with a solid *click*, their oddly paced footsteps trailing closer.

“Why, good afternoon Admiral Feesh!” A high pitched voice said.
“Slow lunch hour, I take it? Oh? Did you happen to nudge my name tag? No worries, I shall set it straight!”

Morgana pressed himself back as a snow white... thing sat in the office chair and scooted into the desk, the long white tail swaying back and forth. They had read the files. Morgana *knew* that Principal Nezu was listed as an animal with a quirk, but seeing him in person was a whole other ordeal.

“Crap, what are we going to do?”

“Stay calm, and wait for him to leave.”

“I guess we have no-”

Morgana’s eyes latched onto the way Nezu’s tail moved.

“... Magician?”

Morgana crouched down, his heart suddenly pounding in excitement as the tail bobbed back and forth. His pupils expanded into large pools and he prepared to strike.

“Magician, NO-!!”

He pounced.

Nezu cried out from the sharp pain. He pushed away from the desk, but his alarm faded when he saw the small black feline attached to his tail.

“Oh my!” Nezu said with a smile. “How did you get under there, little one?”

Morgana looked up at him, his pupils shrinking into small slits before he darted back under the desk.

“There’s no need to be afraid!” Nezu hopped down from his chair and knelt down. “You can come out! Don’t worry, I don’t bite!”

Nezu held out his paw.

“Magician, you must act like a normal feline.”

“D-do I have to?”

“Is there any other choice?”

Morgana stared with his hackles raised, but Nezu was patient. Slowly, he peeled himself away from the desk, head lowered as he sniffed Nezu’s paw. Morgana pressed his ears flat onto his head and looked up at the principal with big, watery eyes.

“M-meow?”

Mercurius chuckled. *“Perhaps you should have taken the Trickster’s lessons.”*

“Shush! I’m demanding sushi for this!”

“See? I’m not so bad!” Nezu scratched behind Morgana’s ears, and his throat hummed with loud purrs.

“Mreow!”

“Is it okay if I pick you up?” Nezu asked.

Morgana blinked at him. “Meow.”

“Oh, but where are my manners!? Am I a dog? A bear? A mouse? No, I am the principal of U.A.!” Nezu scooped up Morgana with a grin. “My name is Nezu! But... what’s yours?”

Nezu inspected the collar as Morgana continued purring.

“Oh dear. Your collar doesn’t have a name on it. Is your owner a student here? Did you get separated from them?”

“M-meow!”

“Ah, I see. Well, no worries! Lunch will be over momentarily, so I’ll make an announcement after classes end for the day.” Nezu looked around his office. “In the meantime, you can relax here! It’s not much, but would you like a tour?”

Morgana’s eyes sparkled. “Mreow!”

“Very well!” Nezu chuckled as he rounded his desk. “This here is Admiral Feesh! He is quite special to me!”

Morgana scrambled out of his arms and balanced on Nezu’s tiny shoulders. “Mreeow?”

“Indeed!” Nezu straightened Admiral Feesh’s bow tie and patted his head. “He has quite a story attached to him! It was a present from a very special vigilante! Well, nobody else views it as a present, and they wanted to lock him up in evidence! How cruel is that?”

“M....meow?”

“Anyway, I took it upon myself to look after it. Maybe return it when I finally meet Joker! I’m hoping that that day won’t be too far off from now.” Morgana stiffened, but Nezu didn’t notice as he whirled around. “Oh! And how could I forget the latest addition!? You see that calling card there?”

“Meow!”

“It’s from the Musutafu General Hospital! I had the pleasure of viewing the footage myself, and I swiped a card specifically to hang it up in my office! The first of many, perhaps? The detectives won’t allow me to have Joker’s first calling card, which is a shame. I would love to have the whole collection! Perhaps I should have a friendly chat with the chief about it.”

“Mreow...”

“The rest of my office isn’t much, just a few books and boring files here and there. We use the couch and table over there for personal meetings with me. I would offer you some tea, but I don’t think cats can drink tea. You wouldn’t happen to know how to play chess, would you?”

Morgana sagged over his shoulder. “M-meow...”

“I didn’t think so.” Nezu gently stroked Morgana under the chin and set him on the couch. “Well, that’s all there is to my office! Feel free to relax here until your owner comes!”

“Well, he certainly is.... interesting.” Mercurius whispered.

Morgana curled up on the couch as the principal went back to his desk.

“I can’t believe we got caught. It’s all my fault, too. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Don’t let it get to you. I doubt we’d find any useful information today. All we can do now is wait.”

“Yeah...”

Morgana closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, listening to Nezu as he pleasantly hummed to himself.

“Morgana, where are you?”

Hitoshi meandered through the halls after the last bell rang. He had already waited in the same bathroom for ten minutes after classes ended, but his nerves got the best of him. He clutched his bag, his eyes occasionally glancing to the vents above. There hadn't been any puffs of air since lunch.

“Shinsou Hitoshi.”

Hitoshi jumped and whirled around to Eraserhead giving him a dead eyed stare.

“Y-yes?”

“I've been wanting to talk to you.” The hero slowly blinked as he turned around. “Follow me.”

“Why? Am I in trouble?”

“No.” Eraserhead glanced over his shoulder. “Why would you think you're in trouble?”

Hitoshi looked away. “N-no reason.”

“Hmm.” The hero sighed. “We're going to the principal's office to discuss your progress in the Sports Festival. That's all.”

Hitoshi's jaw dropped. “Really?”

Eraserhead nodded, and started walking without him. Hitoshi stood there, dumbfounded for several seconds, before shaking his head and catching up. They walked in silence until they reached the principal's office. Eraserhead knocked once.

“Come in!”

They walked into the office and Hitoshi grunted as a small shape crashed into his chest. He blinked rapidly as he looked down.

“Morg-” Hitoshi cut himself off with Morgana’s glare. “Morrigan! I’ve been searching for you everywhere!”

“Ah, so this cat is yours?”

“Y-yeah.” Hitoshi glanced at Principal Nezu.

“Is that why you thought you were in trouble?” Eraserhead asked. “Because you brought a cat to school?”

“W-well.” Hitoshi hugged Morgana tighter. “I took my eyes off of her for a second during lunch, and then she was gone. I didn’t mean for her to get away from me like this.”

Hitoshi bit his lip as Morgana’s claws stabbed through his uniform.

“Well, it happens!” Nezu said with a grin. “Perhaps she was interested in the other cats around the school grounds? But be sure not to let her get away again. Certain areas of the school wouldn’t be safe for a small feline, and I would hate to think of what might happen if she wandered into them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Eraserhead reached a hand out. He should’ve known it was a mistake, by the way mischievous stars appeared in its green eyes. There was a flash of fangs and he flinched at the sharp pain stabbing his hand.

“M-Morrigan!” Hitoshi backed away, glaring at the cat. “I’m sorry! I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

“No, it’s my fault.” Eraserhead stared at the small puncture marks in his hand. “I should’ve asked first.”

Morgana triumphantly raised his nose in the air, ignoring Hitoshi's scowl.

"Well, well." Nezu chuckled as he gestured towards a plush couch. "As entertaining as this has been, let's get down to business, shall we? Shinsou, would you like some tea?"

"No thanks. I like coffee better."

Hitoshi decided not to ask about the red fish before sinking into the couch with Morgana still in his arms. Eraserhead sank into one of the other armchairs, and Nezu hopped up on the last one.

"I'm sure you're curious as to why you've been called here!" Nezu said.

"A little?" Hitoshi glanced over towards the door. "Eraserhead told me that it was something about the Sports Festival?"

"Indeed! Now I'm sure you have other things to do, so we'll keep this short!" Nezu nodded at Eraserhead, who gestured to a file on the table.

"We're impressed with how far you made it in the Sports Festival, being the only student in general education to reach the one on one battles." Eraserhead leaned forward and pushed the file towards Hitoshi. "So, with your parents' permission, I would like to start training you personally. Depending on your progress, you would be able to join the hero course at the start of your second year."

Hitoshi's brain short circuited, and his jaw practically hit the floor.

Morgana went rigid.

"I-I.... you..." Hitoshi glanced in between Nezu and Eraserhead. "Are you serious?"

"Quite so!" Nezu chirped. "Unless it is something that you don't want?"

“No!” Hitoshi shot up, his heart pounding and his eyes wide. “I-I’ve always dreamed of being a hero! I just.... just... why me? I thought my performance in the Sports Festival wasn’t all that great...”

“You showed a lot of smarts and cunning, not just in the obstacle course, but in the cavalry battle too.” Eraserhead peered into him with a knowing gleam in his eyes. “That sort of thing shouldn’t be overlooked. I know your quirk wasn’t suitable for the entrance exams, but such a power would be invaluable in our line of work.”

“You don’t have to make your decision right away,” Principal Nezu said. “But please take the time to think about this carefully. Your decision will affect the rest of your school years and your career as a potential hero, after all! The file there has all the information you need.”

“Including a meal plan as well as an exercise regime to do over the summer, then I would train you when school resumes. You better stick to it if you want to be a hero.” Eraserhead pinned him to the spot with a glare. “I’ll kick you out if I feel that you’re not taking this seriously. I don’t waste my time.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Well, that is everything we needed to talk about! You may go home for the day, Shinsou.”

Hitoshi nodded, still dazed.

Morgana climbed onto his shoulder as he snatched the file and left. They had walked down several hallways before Hitoshi stopped. He held out the file with wide eyes.

“Me, a *hero* ?” Hitoshi whispered reverently. “I almost can’t believe it...”

Morgana frowned, remaining silent the rest of the way home.

Nezu leaned back into his chair with a contented sigh.

“That went better than expected!” Nezu said, but he frowned when Aizawa leaned back into his chair with a long sigh. “However, I thought that you would be more excited to take on a personal student. Is there something bothering you? You’ve been awfully.... quiet today.”

“I’ve just been thinking, that’s all.”

“Oh? What about?”

“A lot of things.” Aizawa sank into his capture weapon.

“My ears are open if you wanted to voice your concerns.”

Aizawa was quiet for a long time, pinning Nezu with a strange look in his eye. He opened and closed his mouth several times, before deciding to just spit it out.

“Nezu, do you think the system is wrong? The hero rankings, the fame, even the Hero Commission itself?”

“I know you don’t enjoy the glamour of being in the spotlight, but this isn’t like you.” Nezu’s ears twitched and his beady eyes sharpened. “What brought this up all of a sudden?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about Joker and his... circumstances.” Nezu leaned forward as he waited for Aizawa to continue. “What we did at the raid, it wasn’t right. Who in their right mind sends an army after a *kid* ? I can’t get Mona’s words out of my head, and Joker sounded *broken* when he called out to him. Even before that, he was so afraid of heroes and authority figures in general. Maybe Joker wouldn’t have run away from us if we went about his situation at the USJ differently.”

“Did you happen to figure something out?”

“No.” Aizawa glanced at the corner of the room.

“... I see.” Nezu frowned as he hopped down from the chair. “There are many flaws in a society like ours, Aizawa. I’ve experienced first hand what vile things humans are capable of, but the system will stay the same unless we make some hard changes. Some people will fight tooth and nail to keep things the way they are, but others....”

“Like Joker?”

“Exactly! Others, *especially* Joker, will fight to change society. Perhaps that is Joker’s true goal.” Nezu wandered over to his desk and prepared some tea. “He is already changing peoples’ views, is he not? He has captured the public’s hearts with his wit and charm, not to mention the outstanding powers he holds in the palm of his hand. There is already a change in the air. I personally can’t wait to see Joker’s progress!”

Aizawa sighed and he had a sudden craving for caffeine.

“Although....” Aizawa glanced at Nezu’s back. He couldn’t see, but he felt the mouse’s manic grin. “If I were to find some new, concrete evidence about Joker or his whereabouts, then I would neglect informing the Hero Commission. They have been too reckless in their endeavor to gain power. A softer approach is the best route right now. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Aizawa shuddered as Nezu whirled around, grinning from ear to ear.

“Would you like some tea, Aizawa?”

“No.” Aizawa stood up. “I should get back. I have too many papers to grade.”

“Hmm, then I won’t hold you up any longer! Best of luck to you, Aizawa.”

Nezu watched as Aizawa darted out of the room. He set his instruments on his desk and poured a steaming cup of green tea, taking a sip as he leaned back in the chair.

“What an interesting conversation.” Nezu said as he swirled his tea. “So, Aizawa figured something out about Joker? I wonder what it could be?”

He set down the cup with a *clink*, but something caught his eye. It was a little black smudge on one of his paws. Strange, he was always so careful with his fur. He frowned as he held up his paw to inspect it. He doesn't remember spilling ink or food. And he was sure that he washed his paws after lunch.

Perhaps it was something to do with that cat-

“The cat.... the *cat!* ” Nezu fell back into his chair and cackled. “Of course! How else would a normal cat get into my office!? It wasn't an accident at all, was it? Ah, but it was with that boy. Is he an ally to Joker and Mona? An unwilling accomplice? A close friend? Shinsou Hitoshi, what *interesting* colleagues you have!”

Nezu lunged at his computer, typing frantically.

If Aizawa can conduct his own secret investigation, then nothing was stopping Nezu from starting one, either.

Ideal And The Real

Chapter 42: Ideal And The Real

“That’s not what we meant.” Joker frowned.

“What we mean is that we’re not from here.” Morgana looked at Joker, and then to the others, eyes burning bright. “As in, we’re not from this world.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[Amaris](#) on twitter!

“Welcome back.” Kaito frowned as Hitoshi trudged into the Raven’s Nest. “You look exhausted, kid.”

“Thanks.” Hitoshi shrugged as he set the wriggling bag on the front desk. “It’s been a long day.”

The others trailed in from the lounge as Hitoshi unzipped the bag.

“Ahh, so much better!” Morgana said as he stretched out his spine. “It gets stuffy in that bag.”

“I’m not sorry.” Hitoshi droned.

Morgana huffed and Akira scratched underneath his chin.

“How did it go?” He asked.

Morgana and Hitoshi stiffened and exchanged quick glances.

“I would say that today was...” Hitoshi narrowed his eyes,
“*Interesting?* ”

“Interesting how?” Aiba asked.

“Ask Morgana.” Hitoshi said dryly. “We barely got into the school when he went crazy.”

“H-hey!” Morgana flicked his tail. “I didn’t go crazy! And besides, everything turned out fine!”

“Yeah, fine enough that you somehow ended up in Nezu’s office and now he knows you were in the school?”

“How did that happen?” Akira leaned against Kaito’s desk and crossed his arms.

“There was a change in plans-”

Hitoshi scoffed. “Which you still didn’t explain to me, by the way.”

“I...” Morgana glanced around the room as everyone stared at him. He shared a heavy look with Akira. “I won’t sugar coat it. Akira, I think it’s time that we told them .”

Akira stilled as the others looked on in confusion.

“Why do you say that?” He asked, his tone carefully neutral.

“Because I think U.A. might be a Palace.”

“*What ?*” Akira jolted, eyes wide. “How do you know?”

“It had the presence of one.” Morgana shook his head. “I definitely sensed a Treasure too, but it feels... *off* . I’ve been thinking hard about it all day, and my best guess is that it’s not a complete Palace.”

“That should be impossible.” Akira grabbed his phone and swiped through the apps. “The Nav’s not even here.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t access the Metaverse while I was at the school, and my form stayed the same, too.”

They jumped when somebody cleared their throat.

“Do you mind sharing with the rest of the class?” Hitoshi gestured to Morgana. “You’re using those words again and I still don’t know what they mean. Are you going to keep us hanging, or are you going to explain?”

Akira bit the inside of his lip as he exchanged glances with Morgana.

“Whatever is happening,” Kaito leaned forward. “You can share it with us. If something is going on at U.A. that concerns you two, then let us help out.”

“Agreed!” Tobita put a hand to his heart. “You don’t have to bear this burden alone!”

Aiba nodded frantically.

Akira and Morgana looked at one another, an entire conversation flashing between them. Trying to brush things off would only make them more suspicious. Outright lying wouldn’t fix this, either. Akira’s shoulders slumped.

“Morgana.”

Morgana flinched. “... Is it time?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright then.” Morgana hopped up on Akira’s shoulder, eyes solemn.

“Wait.” Aiba asked with a pinched brow. “Time for what?”

“I’m ready.” Akira locked eyes with Kaito. “I want to share our story.”

Kaito’s eyes widened, and he nodded.

“Let’s go to the lounge.” Akira stepped turned his back as their concerned stares prickled up his spine. “You’ll need to sit down for this.”

Kaito’s chair creaked as he stood, the grating sound snapped them out of their shock.

Aiba tugged at her hair as she ventured into the lounge first, with the others trailing behind her.

Akira took one couch, elbows resting on his knees with his hands clasped together. Morgana sat by his side, the tip of his tail twitching.

Kaito leaned against the opposite couch as the others took their seats.

“First, there’s something you should know about our powers.” Akira didn’t miss a beat. “They’re not quirks.”

“Huh?” Hitoshi tilted his head. “What do you mean they’re not quirks?”

Morgana sighed. “It’s just that. We don’t call our powers quirks because they *aren’t* quirks. They’re called Personas. They are the manifestation of our Will of Rebellion. In another sense, they are us as much as we are them.”

Kaito perked up. “I am thou, thou art I.”

“Exactly.” Akira nodded as he closed his eyes, and a bright flash consumed the lounge. Joker flexed his blood red gloves as the others rubbed spots out of their eyes. “It’s the same for how my costume appears. This is the image of rebellion that I hold in my heart.”

“Oookay. You’ve officially lost me.” Hitoshi said, blinking rapidly.

“We could sit here and try to explain it all day,” Morgana glanced at Joker. “Maybe our Personas can do it better?”

Joker nodded as he gently tugged on those bonds, and the first persona emerged behind him, bathed in blue light. Kaito's eyes glinted as the others' faces fell in shock.

"I am thou, thou art I." Shiva danced with a serene expression.
"Where once we were nothing but weak Shadows-"

Shiva vanished, and Ishtar took his place with a motherly smile.
"Mere drops within the Sea Of Human Souls-"

Ishtar faded and allowed Byakko to appear. "The Trickster acquired vows to bring him freedom and new power-"

"We are Master's wings of rebellion-"

"We shall breaketh thy chains of captivity," Vasuki reared up after Cerberus, arms waving in hypnotic motions. "Set free the yoke of thy heart-"

Vasuki turned to embers, and the Ultimate Persona of Death rose up. Her hair wriggled as her dreadful aura oozed into the lounge, and Hitoshi wasn't the only one to break out in a nervous sweat. Alice curtsied despite their discomfort.

"He has awakened to the ultimate secrets of the Arcana, granting him infinite powers."

The final persona was too shrouded by the flames to see, but the Bubbly One's chirping giggles were like the final tolls of a bell. With that, the flames faded and the lounge returned to normal.

"You can pick your jaws up from the floor now." Morgana scanned the others. "Though, they probably just made things worse, huh?"

"Of course they had to be cryptic." Joker face palmed. "They were no help at all."

"Hey, Kaito." Morgana furrowed his brow as the man shook his head and placed a hand over the hidden medallion. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine.” He grumbled. “I just need a moment.”

“As amazing as they were...” Aiba’s soft voice drew their attention.
“Are you sure that these ‘personas’ aren’t just your quirk activating?
I’ve never heard of any powers *not* being a quirk.”

“I’m on the same boat. It looks like a mix of an emitter and a transformation type quirk, but its a strange combination, indeed.”
Tobita stroked his facial hair. “Though the way they described themselves was nothing short of intriguing.”

“No, they aren’t quirks because...” Morgana hesitated, but he continued with a nudge from Joker. “Because we aren’t from around here.”

“That’s pretty obvious.” Aiba said as she wrung her hands together. “I couldn’t find any information on you when you first came to Musutafu. Are you from Tokyo or some other city? Or did you move in from another country?”

“That’s not what we meant.” Joker frowned.

“What we mean is that we’re not from *here* .” Morgana looked at Joker, and then to the others, eyes burning bright. “As in, we’re not from *this world* .”

“I apologize.” Tobita blinked rapidly. “But I believe I misheard you.”

“M-me too?” Hitoshi said as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Aiba’s jaw had dropped.

Kaito adjusted his glasses, his expression unreadable.

“You didn’t hear wrong.” Joker’s eyes were like tempered steel.
“It’s... a long story.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Kaito said slowly. “So take your time.”

“Alright.” Joker swallowed as his hands curled into fists. “Let me start from the very beginning. Something happened one night in my hometown...”

And so, they spilled everything about their world. The Metaverse. How they awakened to their personas. Mementos. Palaces and their Rulers. Treasure. The teammates that meant everything to them. Morgana added bits and pieces to the story, all in a condensed version of the tale he told Sae in that interrogation room. Joker ducked his head as he recounted his time in that dark underground room.

Morgana teared up and put a paw on his arm, and that gave him enough strength to finish.

“S-so...” Hitoshi’s voice was barely a whisper. “That’s when those police drugged and beat you?”

“My capture was part of a plan to uncover a conspiracy against us.” Joker gravely nodded. “I was close to losing my life, but it was worth it in the end.”

Aiba was as white as a sheet, while Tobita looked as if he was about to be sick.

Kaito rubbed at his wrists where the handcuffs chaffed, having experienced it himself.

Joker’s mouth was bone dry by the time they took down Shido, and what lay inside the depths of Mementos. Morgana was teary eyed as they relived getting erased from existence, the betrayal of ‘Igor’, and Yaldabaoth’s last stand.

“We were so close to defeating him.” Joker looked down at his clenched fist, almost feeling the chill of Arsene’s chains in his grip. “If only I didn’t hesitate-”

“Hey, none of that.” Morgana put a paw on his hand, and then he looked at the others, who had been eerily quiet. “He took us off guard. We weren’t prepared when those portals opened, and he used our confusion to separate us. Our friends were all thrown into different worlds, and we ended up here. We’re stranded with no way home, and no way of knowing if our friends are alright.”

“And the rest is history.” Joker muttered. “You know what happened from the USJ onwards.”

The air was stifling, and Joker could barely breathe through the tension.

Aiba and Tobita traded worried glances before they pinned Joker with a look that made his stomach churn. Hitoshi’s mouth had dropped open several minutes ago. Kaito was the only one not looking at them like they were crazy, instead he was focused on the floor, his expression knotted into thoughtful contemplation.

Joker pet Morgana as seconds ticked by.

“Isn’t anyone going to say anything?” Joker asked over his pounding heart. “Stop staring at us like that.”

“Akira.” Aiba’s eyes flashed with... pity? “Are you sure that this Yaldabaoth wasn’t a villain with a memory alteration quirk? Did he hold you hostage somewhere?”

“I-” Joker blinked. “Wait, what?”

“Perhaps it was a combination of memory alteration and illusion?” Tobita wasn’t looking at Joker anymore. “How cruel, to twist their minds so far from reality. I wonder if these ‘Palace Rulers’ were in on the ruse.”

Betrayal pierced Joker’s heart like a blade, and his costume trickled away in dull embers.

“The police had to be in on it, too.” Aiba looked at Akira’s ashen face. “Maybe they drugged you after you tried to escape? It would make sense, we know that the police aren’t trustworthy! This villain had to pay them off!”

“*What!?*” Morgana screeched. “We’re not lying! We really came from another world!”

“And we weren’t tricked by some *villain* .” Akira’s heart thundered in his ears as their faces held obvious doubt.

“Akira, Morgana.” Aiba shook her head. “I think you’re just confused.”

Morgana was on all fours and practically hissing. “We’re *not* confused! We’re telling the truth!”

“Please remain calm.” Tobita’s smile was strained, and he held his hands up. “If we work together, perhaps we might be able to apprehend this villain and learn the truth.”

“We *are* telling the truth!” Akira shot to his feet. “Why won’t you believe us!?”

Akira looked at Hitoshi, eyes pleading, but he flinched and looked away.

“M-my quirk is brainwashing, a-and while I don’t know if it could do something like erasing memories, it’s possible that there are other quirks that can.” Hitoshi sunk further into the cushion. “It wouldn’t surprise me if there was a villain like that somewhere.”

“You can’t be serious.” Akira scowled. “I thought you guys were on our side!”

“We are!” Aiba jumped to the edge of her seat. “But isn’t your story a little too out there? Personas? Metaverse? A *God of Control* ? It has to be the work of a mind altering quirk!”

Akira sank further into himself with each pointed word.

"Shall I show them the real power of a mind altering 'quirk'!?" Vasuki snarled, followed by many others.

Morgana's hackles raised and magic in his veins burned with rage. Mercurius himself seethed and he wished to show them the error of their ways via a maelstrom. However, they were all snapped out of it.

"Enough!" Kaito stood by Akira's side and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Can't you see that they're telling the truth?"

Akira felt a rush of appreciation towards this man, and the sheer relief softened the blow on his heart.

"Kaito..." The stiffness in Morgana's body drained away.

"W-what?" Aiba brows pinched together.

"How can you be so sure?" Tobita asked. "A tale like that is unbelievable."

"Because I just relived, not only bits and pieces of Akira life, but several of his Personas too." Kaito pushed up his glasses and released a long, heavy sigh. "Everything they've said is true. I saw these Palaces first hand. Through their eyes I've traveled through Mementos, fought these Palace Rulers... lived in a city that was Tokyo, but it wasn't *our* Tokyo. There were no quirks. No heroes. It truly was another reality, a world different than our own."

"But how can you tell if their memories are real?" Hitoshi asked.

"Because I have several lifetimes of experience with my own quirk to tell if their memory was tampered with." Kaito said. "Their memories are fully intact."

"I... you..." Aiba stammered. "Are you really saying that it's true?"

"Yes." Kaito stated. "Akira and his teammates faced a god who merged realities and banished them from their own world. It's true."

“That’s how we ended up in the USJ in the first place.” Morgana said as he finally calmed down.

Aiba furrowed her brows. “Is that why you want to investigate it?”

“Yeah.” Akira said. “The USJ might be our ticket back home.”

Hitoshi gripped his pant legs. “Why can’t you just stay here?”

“Yaldabaoth enslaved the public masses, warped reality and took control of the entire world.” Morgana said. “We can’t leave it in the hands of a twisted god like that! Not to mention reuniting with our teammates is our top priority.”

“What happens if you defeat this God of Control?” Tobita clutched his chin in thought.

“The Metaverse will cease to exist and our reality would return to normal.” Akira said with finality. “And we’ll lose our powers for good. The gates to the other worlds might close, too.”

Aiba flinched. “B-but that means we won’t be able to see you ever again?”

“Yes.” Akira grimaced. “Going back home means saying goodbye. Permanently.”

Akira scratched the back of his head. The atmosphere plummeted worse than when he told those 1-A kids he was quirkless. Their lingering doubt was still there, but it was slowly dwindling.

“It’s not like we have to say our goodbyes right now.” Morgana said gently. “But we wanted to share this for a while. It’s better to tell you now, than to not say anything and then disappearing under your noses. Having you think that we died or something is just cruel.”

“We’re nowhere close to getting into the USJ, anyway.” Akira said. “That’s months away if we’re lucky. Morgana, do you think you could get more information from U.A.-”

“I dunno if it’s smart to snoop around the school anymore.” Hitoshi crossed his arms and stared at Morgana. “Especially since you got caught by the principal.”

“How did that happen in the first place?” Akira asked.

“I split up with Hitoshi after I sensed a Treasure, so I scouted around in the vents. Mercurius said we should check out his office for clues, and that’s where I got caught.” Morgana cut off Akira when he opened his mouth. “Don’t worry! I acted as a normal cat and he doesn’t know a thing! Hopefully...”

“You don’t sound so confident.”

“Do you think Hitoshi and I would even be here if he figured me out?”

“Wait a sec.” Hitoshi said with wide eyes. “What about my multi-tool? Did Nezu confiscate it?”

“O-oh...” Morgana blinked rapidly as his ears drooped. “It might be in the vent in Nezu’s office?”

“Y-you- I told you to be careful with it!”

“I know, and I’m sorry! I would’ve gone back for it if I didn’t get caught.”

Hitoshi huffed as his expression turned stormy. “Whatever.”

“Morgana can always go back into the vents and get it, right?” Aiba said as she patted Hitoshi’s arm.

“Like I said,” Hitoshi’s scowl lightened. “I wouldn’t push our luck. He’s not the principal of the top hero school in the country for shits and giggles. He let you go once, but he’ll get suspicious if he finds you wandering around again.”

“Yeah.” Akira adjusted his glasses. “Once is chance, twice is coincidence, and a third time would be a pattern. It’s too dangerous.”

“Well, not only that.” Hitoshi glanced at Morgana, who blinked back. “There have been talks about upgrading security again.”

“What?” Aiba flinched. “Why?”

Hitoshi shrugged. “The teachers were in a flurry about something a couple of days ago. I heard they hired a team of tech heroes to upgrade their software over the summer, and Ectoplasm’s clones are patrolling all over the grounds. I’m sure there’s more going on, but they’re keeping things quiet so that they don’t freak us out.”

Aiba winced and looked at Akira with guilt. “Which means that my virus probably won’t work. Not without having to start all over from scratch, and it’d be impossible to get in without knowing how much they’ve changed up the security.”

Akira shook his head. “Would it be possible to break into the school over the summer? Since there wouldn’t be any students-”

“No way!” Hitoshi eyes were wide. “That place is a fortress.”

Aiba nodded. “If an alarm goes off, then it’ll summon every hero in Musutafu. There’s no way you’d fend them off without it being a total disaster!”

“We need to be stealthy to investigate the USJ properly.” Morgana sighed. “Damnit. We’ll never make it home at this rate.”

Akira grimaced. “Why can’t this school be a castle?”

“If I never see that perverted castle again in this lifetime, then it’ll still be too soon.” Kaito grumbled.

Silence pervaded the lounge as they digested the information. Akira exchanged a long look with Morgana as the mood continued to sour.

“H-hey, let’s look on the bright side! Today isn’t all bad news!” Morgana looked at Hitoshi. “Are you going to tell them about joining the hero class?”

“Oh.” Hitoshi sighed. “Right.”

“You’re going to join the hero class?” Tobita asked with wide eyes.

“N-not right away!” Hitoshi scratched the back of his head. “I need to talk to my parents and have them sign a permission slip, then do an exercise regime over the summer before they would even train me. I could join the hero class by my second year.”

“Congratulations.” Akira smiled. “You must be excited.”

“I...” Hitoshi’s shoulders sagged and he couldn’t meet Akira’s eyes. “I don’t know if I’ll go through with it.”

“Why?” Akira said. “I thought being a hero was a dream of yours?”

“I-it is!” Hitoshi shook his head wildly. “B-but if I go through with it then... then wouldn’t I be betraying you? If I became a hero, then we would be on the opposite sides of the law.”

Akira, Aiba, and Tobita exchanged glances with one another.

“Who said that you would be betraying us?” Morgana asked.

Hitoshi gaped at Morgana. “Huh?”

“We’d still be friends if you joined the hero class.” Akira smirked. “And besides, it’s not like you would turn us in, right?”

“Yeah, but-”

“Some heroes willingly work with vigilantes.” Kaito glanced at Akira before he looked over to Hitoshi. “It gives them an advantage that other heroes won’t have.”

“Exactly! You have the chance to become a hero at the top school in the country!” Tobita’s eyes were bright as he placed a hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder. “Young man, you have an opportunity that shouldn’t be wasted.”

“Gentle...” Aiba whispered.

“Are you saying that because you never got to be a hero?” Morgana asked, and it earned him a glare from Akira.

“That is part of it.” He said slowly.

“You were going to be a hero?” Hitoshi asked reverently.

“Yes.” Tobita smiled, but his eyes were filled with sadness. “But I failed in training more times than I could count. My grades were less than stellar, too. I got expelled because I interfered with another hero’s rescue attempt. However, I might never be a hero, but I continued on as Gentle Criminal!”

“Maybe we could show you a thing or two that the heroes won’t.” Akira said. “Morgana and I are teaching Aiba and Tobita how to be better gentlemen thieves, anyway.”

“You...” Hitoshi gaped at him. “You’d do that?”

“I said I would think about it in that alley, right?” Akira smirked. “And you proved that we can trust you.”

“What do we have to lose?” Morgana said. “Besides, we should make the most of your training while Akira and I are still here. You’ll be by yourselves when we go home, so you better take these lessons seriously!”

And just like that, the mood plummeted.

“R-right.” Aiba curled into herself. “If your story really *is* true, then we’ll have to say goodbye...”

Aiba stifled a sob. Suddenly, she bolted from the couch and ran to her cubicle.

“Manami!” Tobita cried as he shot to his feet. He threw a shaky smile at Akira. “I’ll go talk with her.”

They watched Tobita disappear down the hallway.

“Way to go, Morgana.” Akira muttered.

“It’s not my fault!” He bounced on his paws. “I’m just saying that we won’t be here forever! I’d rather be honest than try to beat around the bush.”

Akira sighed as he looked between Hitoshi and Kaito. “How do you feel about everything we discussed?”

“I... I think I need some time to come to terms with it?” Hitoshi stood from the couch and hung his head. “But if it’s true, then it’s selfish for us to demand that you stay when your entire world is at stake. So, I want to make the most of your time here.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“You don’t have to worry.” Hitoshi grimaced. “I should be.”

Akira scratched the back of his head. “Thanks, Hitoshi.”

“Whatever.” Hitoshi sniffled. “You can make it up to me with endless coffee and curry at the Blue Lotus.”

“About that,” Akira avoided his eyes, “I might have to quit.”

“What?” Panic flickered on Hitoshi’s face. “Why?”

“Because of Eraserhead.” Akira glanced over at Kaito, who frowned. “He saw through me at the Blue Lotus, and the timing is odd. Do you think that he would be using you to get to me?”

“I... that’s... but he didn’t seem to have an ulterior motive?” Hitoshi ran a hand through his hair. “I never thought of it that way.”

“I don’t know.” Morgana shook his head. “I think your job is worth keeping.”

“What makes you say that?” Akira asked with a frown.

“Where else can we keep such a close eye on U.A. without being inconspicuous? It took you ages just to get a job anywhere near the school, so we’d lose a vital part of our strategy if you quit.”

“But it’ll be all over if Tsukauchi and Eraserhead decide to do something. The Shinsous’ might get in serious trouble, too.”

“I snuck through the whole school and I didn’t hear any of the teachers say your name *once*, nor did I hear anything about invading the Blue Lotus.” Morgana scratched his ear before he continued. “Mercurius believes that Eraserhead kept everything a secret. He and that detective are keeping your identity hidden for a reason. I agree with Hitoshi. Eraserhead was being genuine when he offered to train him.”

“And you know that my parents would be heartbroken, right? They love having you there. The regulars would be sad, too.” Hitoshi offered a small smile. “I would hate to lose my best friend over a hero.”

Akira huffed. “You’re really trying to pull my heart strings, aren’t you?”

Hitoshi blinked slowly. “Is it working?”

Akira fidgeted, but didn’t answer.

“I could go along tomorrow and watch your back.” Morgana said. “We should get a feel for the situation as a whole, before we make a decision.”

“Uh, no pets in the cafe.” Hitoshi shook his head. “My parents wouldn’t allow it.”

“W-well, not inside!” Morgana cried. “I could scout around the building. Nobody would be able to sneak up on us with my wind

powers.”

“Yatagarasu could back you up.” Akira frowned.

“So... is that a yes?” Hitoshi asked, eyes hopeful.

“Fine.” Akira muttered. “We’ll see what happens tomorrow, but if I get the sense that the Blue Lotus might be in danger because of me, then I’ll *have* to quit.”

“Yes!” Hitoshi beamed. “Thank the curry and coffee gods.”

Akira smirked. “I’ll buy you a new multi-tool to replace the one Morgana lost, too.”

Morgana sputtered, but it got a dry laugh out of Hitoshi.

“I’d appreciate it.” Hitoshi frowned when he checked his phone. “I better get going, though. I didn’t notice the time and mom’s been texting me.”

Akira glanced at the clock. It was past nine already.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Hitoshi asked, voice laced with fragile hope.

“Sure. Bright and early.”

Hitoshi grinned before he swept up his things and left. They heard the distant ring of the bell a moment later.

Akira’s shoulders sank and he fell back onto the couch.

“I’m so tired.” He said as he massaged his forehead. “Telling them everything was exhausting.”

“Yeah.” Morgana rubbed against him. “That was harder than I thought it would be.”

“At least it didn’t take eighty hours this time.”

Kaito frowned. "Time was really warped in that room."

"What do you mean?" Morgana asked.

Akira looked at him, "Getting drugged up to the gills really messes with your sense of time, and explaining a portion of that story to Sae felt like an eternity."

"Akira..." Morgana's eyes softened.

"It's fine." Akira shook his head. "I'm *fine* ."

"I-if you say so." Morgana's ears flattened.

"There is one thing I still don't understand." They glanced at Kaito. "That same room where your Personas were born. You went there voluntarily?"

Akira nodded. "The Velvet Room is a place between dream and reality. I only went there when I needed to fuse stronger Personas, and I could leave whenever I wanted. Well, until I found out the truth about *that* Igor."

"But... how did you deal with that pain of those that were executed? Not just the accident with Alice, but Shiva, Byakko, and Ishtar, too?" Kaito suppressed shivers. "It was *excruciating* . I know you felt them dying over and over ."

Morgana's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

"What choice did I have?" Akira avoided his partner's eyes with a shrug. "I *had* to get stronger to protect my friends and help people. Besides, it's not like fusing was the only method to get Personas."

"Like with Cerberus?" Kaito raised a brow. "Living as a Shadow and serving a megalomaniac on a giant cruise ship is one of my more memorable lives, now. Cerberus was nameless once, but he was really happy to be adopted by you."

“Adopted?” Akira chuckled. “I guess that’s one way to put it.”

Cerberus’ sudden embarrassment was testament enough, and the others cooed at him.

“Anyway, thanks for sticking up for us.” Akira’s smile fell. “Although, I don’t think they actually believe us yet.”

“Let’s give them time to think.” Morgana said. “They’ll have to accept the truth eventually.”

“Don’t mention it. You two...” Kaito shuffled on his feet, looking between them and the floor. “Look, no matter what happens from here on out, I want you to know that I’m glad I was able to meet you. Other worlds and tyrannical gods be damned.”

“Huh?” Akira sat ramrod straight and blinked at him.

“You heard me.” The man’s voice trembled. “You’re an absolute pain in the ass sometimes, but I would’ve been much worse off if you never darkened my doorstep. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Oh?” Akira couldn’t help his sly grin. “Are you *tearing up*?”

“Of course not.” Kaito’s ears burned as he turned away. “That would be ridiculous.”

“You are!” Akira shot to his feet and patted him on the shoulder. “Hey Morgana, I didn’t know that our step grandpa could get emotional-”

Akira never saw it coming, and Seth wasn’t fast enough to negate the damage. Kaito’s mighty chop struck like lightning. Akira’s vision blurred and he was suddenly face first into the couch cushions, and the quiet click of a door signaled Kaito’s swift retreat.

“Ouch...” Akira whined. “He really packs a punch.”

“You deserved that.”

“What, no compassion for the injured, Morgana?”

“Injury? What injury?” Morgana snickered. “The only damage I see is to your pride.”

Akira grabbed the nearest pillow and chucked it at him, but the not-cat dodged it with a smug grin. He shook his head and sank back into the cushions, his smile slowly fading. Morgana stood at attention, his tail swishing back and forth in case Akira threw another pillow. He relaxed when Akira glanced at him, all mirth lost.

“... Do you think we dragged our mess to this world? What do we do if U.A. really turns into a Palace and we can't go into the Metaverse to get rid of it?”

“I don't know. We simply don't have enough intel to act, and going back to poke around might be too risky for the time being.” Morgana shook his head. “The best we can do is keep a close eye on U.A. until a safe route to the USJ opens up. Until then, let's focus on our search for those missing people. Saving them is the least we can do with the rest of our time here.”

“You're right.”

“Of course I'm right!” Morgana raised his nose. “I'm *always* right!”

“Yeah.” Akira closed his eyes, the fatigue tugging his consciousness away. “Sure you are.”

“You're going to get cramps if you fall asleep all contorted like that.” Morgana said with a hint of amusement. “At least lay out over the couch.”

“Fiiine.” He muttered. “But what about you? Are those contacts getting uncomfortable?”

“Oh, I'll ask Tobita to help me out. You just get some sleep.”

Akira stretched out over the cushions with Morgana splayed out over his chest, putting his glasses and phone on the table.

He dozed on and off the the next few hours. The final time he was half awake was when someone threw a blanket over him, the quite clatter of teacups was nearby. Soft, familiar voices washed over him, but he couldn't be bothered listening in as he drifted off.

He never felt Aiba squeeze his hand before she turned in for the night.

"I'm home..."

"Welcome back." Risumi smiled when her son trudged into the apartment. "Were you hanging out with a friend?"

"Yeah." He set his bag aside and wandered into the kitchen. "Sorry that I didn't text you earlier. We got to talking and time just flew by."

"It's alright." She reached over and ruffled his hair. "Just let us know next time, okay? We were really worried."

Hitoshi nodded.

"Did you eat supper?" Ayumu asked from the table, where he nursed a cup of coffee.

"No."

Ayumu nodded. "We just had some left over curry. I'll warm it up for you."

"Thanks..." He sank into the closest chair, eyes downcast.

His parents frowned and exchanged a look.

"What's wrong?" Risumi sat next to him and put a hand to his shoulder. "You look like a kicked puppy. Do you want to talk about

it?”

“I...” Hitoshi swallowed the lump that had choked him on the way home.

A few minutes pass, a battle waging within Hitoshi’s eyes. Ayumu paused as he got the cold plate of curry from the fridge and placed it on the counter, sharing a deep frown with Risumi. Hitoshi curled into himself, speaking as if his tongue were lead.

“What would you do if you learned that you’d never be able to see or talk to someone you cared about ever again?”

Risumi flinched. “What?”

“A-and the worst part is that I told them that I was going to be *okay* with it. I had to be.” Hitoshi ducked his head so they wouldn’t see his tears. “But I couldn’t get it out of my head on the way home! H-how am I supposed to be okay with them just vanishing out of my life one day?”

“Hitoshi, look at me.” Risumi scanned her son’s face, tears pricking at her eyes when she saw Hitoshi’s. “Where is this coming from?”

Hitoshi shook his head.

Risumi glanced at her husband. Ayumu approached and put a hand on Hitoshi’s head.

“I would talk to them about it, hiding your feelings might make it worse.” He said.

“No.” Hitoshi muttered. “It would just make them feel guilty about everything. I can’t do that to them.”

“Alright.” Ayumu ruffled his son’s hair. “If you can’t talk about it, then spend all the time you can with them. Make new memories that’ll last you your whole life.”

“He’s right.” Risumi nodded. “Make the most of your time while you can. Even if this person is gone, it doesn’t mean that the bond you shared with them will vanish.”

Hitoshi put a hand over his heart. “Will that make it hurt less?”

“It... does not.” Risumi wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. “People say it will get easier with time, though.”

“Does it?”

Risumi and Ayumu exchanged glances, an entire conversation flashing within the span of a single blink.

“That pain never truly goes away.” Risumi swallowed thickly. “But remember that they’ll always be with you if you keep their memory alive. And whatever happens between you and this person, just know that we are proud of you.”

Hitoshi pulled back and scrubbed at his eyes. “Proud?”

“Yup. Proud.” She cupped his face and smiled. “Not everyone would have the courage to stick with this person until the end. They must mean a lot to you, just like you mean a lot to them. Right?”

“R-right.”

“And Hitoshi...” They looked up to Ayumu. “You aren’t alone in this. We’ll be here to talk, okay? Let us help you if you feel like it’s too much.”

“I-I will.” Risumi dropped her hands as he scrubbed away the rest of the tears. “Sorry, I promise that I’m okay. I just couldn’t hold that back.”

“Don’t be sorry, sweetheart.” Risumi planted a kiss on her son’s forehead. “You shouldn’t have to hide things from us.”

“Th-there’s something else.” Hitoshi winced. “I got called to the principal’s office today.”

“About what?” Risumi said. “Did you get in trouble?”

“N-no! It’s just...” Hitoshi rushed to grab his bag, and handed his mother the file. “Here, you’ll have to look through these.”

“What’s this?” Risumi said as she flipped it open, eyes scanning over paperwork.

Ayumu peeked at the top. “Transferring to the hero class?”

“Yeah.” Hitoshi’s ears burned as he ducked his head. “They were impressed by my performance in the Sports Festival, s-so with your permission I’ll be able to train under a teacher. If I do it right, then I should be able to transfer by my second year.”

“Is this something you really want?” Risumi asked, and he couldn’t look his mother in the eye.

“Yes!”

“It’ll be a lot of hard work.” Ayumu crossed his arms. “Being a hero isn’t something you can do on a whim.”

“I know.” Hitoshi’s hands curled into fists. “I’m prepared for it. I... I know I never told you before, but it’s my dream to be a hero! But, I understand if you don’t want to-” His head snapped up at the click of a pen. “Wait, you’re actually signing it? You don’t hate me for it?”

“*Hate* you?” Risumi gaped at him like a deer in the headlights. “Why do you think we’d hate you?”

“W-well, I didn’t know if you hated heroes since...” Hitoshi glanced at his mother’s stomach, where he *knew* that wretched injury marred her skin. “I’ll never be like *him* .”

Hitoshi squawked when he was suddenly in head lock.

“We know that, squirt.” Ayumu said as he ruffled Hitoshi’s hair. “We’d never hate you for wanting to be a hero.”

“I’m not a squirt!”

“I know.” Ayumu let him go with a smirk. “You’re growing up too fast, squirt.”

“Why don’t you eat while we fill this out?” Risumi giggled as Hitoshi huffed. “And then we can watch a movie afterwards? It’s been a while since we’ve had a movie night, just the three of us.”

“Can I pick?”

“Of course.” Risumi said as Hitoshi darted into the living room. “The Studio Ghibli movies are on the top shelf!”

Their smiles fell when Hitoshi’s back was to them.

Ayumu leaned over and whispered. “Earlier, do you think he was talking about Kurusu?”

“I don’t know.” She said as she read over the paperwork, frowning. “Let’s just play this by ear, okay? Hitoshi isn’t the only one who needs our help.”

Ayumu nodded gravely.

“Got one!” Hitoshi raced back to the kitchen and held out the movie case.

“Spirited Away?” Risumi said. “Your old favorite.”

“How many times have we watched this when you were little?” Ayumu gently took the movie case, his face softening. “I’ll bet at least 500 times.”

“I-I didn’t watch it *that* much!” Hitoshi said despite his red face.

“Actually, we’ve seen Spirited Away about 876 times. Howl’s Moving Castle is in second place at 833. Kiki’s Delivery Service and Ponyo are tied for third place. Shall I go on?”

Father and son gaped at her.

“You... you actually kept count?” Ayumu asked. “*How ?*”

Risumi smirked. With a wink, she went back to the paperwork.

“S-so, Hitoshi...” Ayumu tried to ignore his wife’s growing amusement. “Dinner?”

“R-right. I’m starving.”

Hitoshi wolfed down the curry as Risumi and Ayumu finished the paperwork. Afterwards they settled on the couch, with Hitoshi sitting comfortably between his parents. Blankets, pillows, and other snacks were piled all around them.

Hitoshi fell asleep by the third movie, nestled in the warmth of loving parents.

“What happens if you defeat this God of Control?”

“The Metaverse will cease to exist and reality would return to normal.” The Trickster had said. *“And we’ll lose our powers for good.”*

These words haunted Arsene.

He looked to the others from the edge of the Trickster’s psyche. The Old Boy didn’t have the strength yet to fly, so his body was coiled about itself, and the other personas listened carefully as he shared some old story.

If they were to go back home and defeat Yaldabaoth, then would all of them disappear?

Would the Trickster miss them? Alice's giggles, Black Frost's mischievous nature, Titania's and Ishtar's constant bickering, Yatagarasu's wise words. The protective nature of Byakko and Cerberus, among many others. They would all be gone.

Defeating Yaldabaoth and going back home was their ultimate goal, and yet...

Arsene clutched his chest, where a pang of worry struck his heart.

He knows it was an inevitable fate, but he wished that it didn't hurt so much. Suddenly, there was a soft hand gripping his arm, startling him out of his thoughts.

Orpheus pulled his hand back as if it burned.

"Apologies." Arsene tipped his hat. "You just startled me, but no harm done."

"Don't be mad."

Arsene froze. Orpheus' melodic voice was quiet and scratchy from misuse, but he had finally *spoke* for the first time.

"I'm not angry at you-"

"Not me." Orpheus whispered. "Your Wild Card."

Arsene stiffened. "I'm not... *mad* at him. I just needed some time alone to think."

Orpheus stared at him for a long while, and Arsene saw the deep, harrowing wisdom within his eyes. Something stirred in Arsene's heart, a deepened bond shared only by their true other selves. Orpheus must have felt it too, as the smallest of smiles broke out on his face.

"I had to make sure." Orpheus said as he floated away.

Arsene ran a clawed hand down his mask as he turned Orpheus' words in his mind.

"I'm not mad at him." Arsene reiterated to himself. "I would never dream of it."

Arsene stilled as he looked at Orpheus.

Was Orpheus upset with his Wild Card? Is that why he asked?

Arsene shivered at the mere thought of it.

"-ickster..."

Consciousness fluttered back to Akira as a gentle voice sang to him.

"Trickster...?"

He rolled over and pulled the blanket over his head.

"Five more minutes, Morgana." He muttered sleepily.

"Trickster!"

Akira's eyes snapped open and he was on his feet. The blanket tangled around his legs as he frantically looked around the lounge.

"Akira? What's wrong?" Morgana trotted over from the kitchen, where Tobita made tea. "Are you okay?"

"I... I thought I heard..." He scratched his head, but the voice went silent. "It's nothing. I must've been half asleep, that's all."

"If you say so." Morgana, donning his black and green disguise, peered into him. "You looked really tired, so we let you sleep in."

"Thanks. I needed it." Akira yawned and then glanced up at the clock.

“Would you like some tea?” Tobita asked with a smile, but they could see the lingering shock of last night’s revelations in his eyes. “It’s just green tea this time.”

“No, but thanks for the offer.” Akira sighed as he picked up the blanket and tossed it on the couch. “I’ll get some coffee at the Blue Lotus.”

Tobita nodded and resumed watch over the teapot.

Morgana rubbed against his legs as he walked past, getting fresh clothes from his cubicle and going into the bathroom to change and brush his teeth. He paused outside of Aiba’s cubicle. Akira raised his hand to knock, but stopped when he heard her snuffle. He left her alone with a heavy heart, and swiped his bag before returning to the lounge.

Morgana clambered in, and Akira felt calm with the familiar weight.

“We’ll see you guys later?”

“Of course.” Tobita’s brow scrunched together. “Are we still going out tonight?”

“Yeah, since we wanted meet up with Giran.” Akira frowned. “If Aiba’s still up for it, that is. We’d appreciate the backup.”

“Ah, I’ll have a chat with her.” Tobita’s eyes shone with kindness. “She’ll come around.”

He and Morgana exchanged a look before they walked out. Kaito nodded at them as they left the Raven’s Nest, the streets already abuzz with the regular morning commute. Akira flowed through the sea of people, the sights and sounds of Musutafu were all but familiar to them now.

Still, there was a change to the air.

It was in peoples' faces. Contained within faint whispers shared between friends. Shown to the whole world with saccharine smiles and the flash of cameras. Akira walked with his head down to avoid the topic of their discussions.

Heroes.

They swam alongside the tide of people like circling sharks. There were more brightly colored costumes than Akira remembered, a few he recognized from that fateful morning of the raid.

"Hmph, how dare they tread on our territory like roaches. " Seth growled.

"Their numbers have grown since the raid." Ishtar sneered. *"It is as Seth said, they really are roaches."*

"Most of them are being treated like outcasts." Byakko grumbled. *"They see how people are uncomfortable in their presence, and yet they act as if they're supposed to be here. Lay low, Trickster, we don't want to fall into their net."*

Akira grit his teeth as he passed another crowd waiting for pictures. He didn't let his guard down until they were a block away from the Blue Lotus, glancing over his shoulder before ducking into an alleyway. Morgana hopped out of his bag and stretched out over the nearest dumpster.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Morgana asked, his eerily green eyes were sharp.

"I'd ask you the same thing." Akira shuffled on his feet. "We don't know what'll happen today."

"And that's exactly why I'll patrol around the Blue Lotus. Mercurius and I won't let any heroes get the drop on us!"

Akira smirked. As if on cue, the majestic bird burst into reality in a flurry of embers. Yatagarasu flapped his wings and soared over their heads.

“Shall we go? I am ready for whatever this day may bring!”

He walked out of the alley with one last nod to Morgana. The rest of the walk was peaceful as a gentle breeze kicked up, but he knew better than to think it was a normal wind. He flowed through the usual crowd until he reached the Blue Lotus, waving at Uraraka and Haru-san before he went inside.

The familiar scents relaxed him, and he greeted Hitoshi as he sat in his usual booth. He didn’t comment on Hitoshi’s strained smile, or how the bags under his eyes were deeper than usual.

“Coffee?”

“You know it.”

Akira chuckled as he went behind the counter, his hands flowing with familiar motions.

“No, you idiot!” Bakugo smacked Kirishima with a rolled up paper and shoved the textbook under his nose. “How many times do I have to tell you? You have to follow *this* formula!”

“Oh!” Kirishima chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry! I always forget which one is which? They all look the same to me.”

“Whatever, just do it over!”

“R-right!” Kirishima grinned as his pencil scribbled over paper.

Bakugo leaned back into the booth with a huff, his eyes scanning over the cafe. It had calmed down since they arrived a few hours ago to study, the quiet chatter was pleasant and there were no shortages

of snacks when they needed to recharge. Still, Bakugo sneered at the barista.

“Okay, I’m done with this one!” Kirishima looked up at him, but his sunny grin fell. He followed Bakugo’s gaze and his frown deepened. “Why are you glaring at him like that?”

“You wouldn’t get it.” Bakugo growled.

Kirishima stared at him for a long moment, brows furrowed. He set his pencil down with a sigh.

“I think I do.” Kirishima rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes flickering with guilt. “Do you know what I said after he told us he was quirkless?”

Bakugo narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I...” Kirishima looked over to Kurusu. “I told him I was *sorry* . A-and I said it like there was something *wrong* with him.”

“Isn’t there?”

“Bakugo.” Kirishima’s eyes drilled into him with unfamiliar anger. “No, there *isn’t* .”

Bakugo ignored Kirishima as his eyes slid over to Kurusu. The other customers were all so enamoured with a sweet smile that slid on like butter, or how he had told small jokes as he served their food. All they saw was a charismatic barista doing his job.

Bakugo knew better.

He *never* forgot that deadly aura from his first visit.

Nobody else noticed that his smile was too sickly sweet. Behind those fake glasses were eyes as sharp as a knife, and he had felt the loser’s dagger glare when he and Kirishima first walked in. It only lasted for half a second, but it was there. Or how he kept watching

the door when he thought nobody else was looking, steely eyes so full of fire it was as if he was ready to do or die at a moment's notice.

He was sure that Kurusu was a wolf masquerading in sheep's clothing.

Kurusu passed them to serve a nearby table, and Bakugo listened in while ignoring Kirishima's growing frown.

"Here you go, Akane-san." Kurusu placed a steaming plate on the table. "I can't believe you haven't tried our curry yet."

"Right?" The man rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish smile. "I haven't had time with work, but I managed to grab a few days off. Better late than never!"

"True. Enjoy the food. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Wait, Kurusu. I..." Kurusu blinked innocently as the man struggled for words. "Nevermind. I'll tell you what I think when I'm finished!"

Kurusu nodded before he walked to the front counter, his footsteps as light as a ghost's.

"Seriously, dude." Kirishima said. "Stop staring at him like that."

"There just has to be more to him, like he's hiding something." Bakugo grumbled. "That's all I'm saying."

"He's just been through a lot. Besides, we all have our secrets." Kirishima sighed. "Can you at least give him a chance? Please? He's really nice once you get to know him!"

Bakugo rolled his eyes, but Kurusu strolled to their table before he could say anything. He placed a plate of double chocolate brownies in front of Kirishima. The idiot's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Oh, thanks!"

“Don’t mention it.” There it was, that charming smile that made Bakugo’s teeth itch. “I figured you could use a snack since you’ve been studying for so long. Be sure to take proper breaks, okay?”

“We’ll take a break when this moron gets the answers right.”

“I’m getting better though!” Kirishima said over a mouth full of brownies. “I only got a few wrong this time!”

“I believe in you, Kirishima. Oh, and speaking of getting the answers wrong.” Kurusu glanced at Bakugo’s notebook with a smirk. “You should take another look at number nine, you didn’t do it right. Thirteen, too.”

Bakugo bristled as Kurusu walked away, but he saw that loser’s smirk grow before he turned his back.

“I DID NOT-!!” He glared at his notebook, and froze.

“Uh, you okay?” Kirishima swallowed as he watched the vein on Bakugo’s forehead grow. “You look kind of-”

“Shut up!” He said as he furiously erased the problems. “I’ll beat that loser at his own game! I’d like to see what his final scores are! I’ll blow him out of the water.”

“You wouldn’t really be able to?”

Bakugo glared at Kirishima. “And why not? It wouldn’t be that hard to find.”

“He already graduated high school.”

Bakugo’s palms sparked, and his pencil snapped in half.

“That’s it.” Bakugo slammed his textbook closed. “We’re done for the day.”

“Huh?” Kirishima’s watery puppy dog eyes came in full force. “Wait a minute! I still need help studying!”

“Fine. We’ll study tomorrow morning.”

“Yes!” Kirishima beamed at him. “It’s a deal, bro!”

Bakugo rolled his eyes as he tucked his things under his arm and stormed out of the cafe. He paused when he felt the hair on his neck raise, turning towards an alleyway. Sitting on the closest garbage bin was a cat with ebony black fur and seething green eyes. It was glaring right at him.

“What the hell are you looking at, you stupid cat!?” The cat jumped off the bin and disappeared into the shadows, and Bakugo scoffed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

A sudden gust of wind knocked his schoolwork from his arm, the crinkle of several pages floated away in the breeze. The surrounding crowd cleared out as he recollected them with a sour expression, muttering a string of curses under his breath. He stormed home with crumpled paper in hand.

A smug cat snickered in the nearby alleyway.

“What exactly is your plan with all of these?” Mitsuo set the photos on the desk, frowning. “These are all connected to Joker, right?”

“Yup. You should have seen the hospital. The heroes didn’t know what to do with all of those calling cards. I swiped a couple of them.” Taneo grinned at the picture of the exhausted detective. “I have plenty more pictures to add thanks to my quirk.”

Mitsuo hummed as she steepled her fingers together. “What is your goal here?”

“Well...” Taneo glanced at the photos. “I’d like to put together a special article of Joker’s exploits.”

“Oh?” Mitsuo’s eyes lit up. “How much time will it take?”

“You know as well as I do that Joker won’t stop here. I have a feeling that his return is only the beginning.” Taneo shook his head. “I’d like it to be a project spanning the next several months, both to dig up information on his previous achievements as well as documenting his future journey through vigilantism.”

“Does Joker know about any of this?”

“Th-that’s...” Taneo frowned. “Not yet. I don’t exactly have the guy’s real number.”

“... I see.” She leaned back into her chair and sighed. “While I would rather just wrangle Joker in for another sensational interview, I know that demanding such things might chase him away. He is our most valuable source, after all.”

Taneo eagerly leaned forward. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes-”

Taneo shot up from his chair, beaming. “Yes!! I’ll get started on it right away-”

“*Taneo* .” He froze as she leaned forward. “I will allow this project as long as you cover your tracks. *Don’t* get sloppy. The heroes haven’t discovered our role in the live interview, and I would rather not give them a reason to investigate us. You should get Joker’s opinion when you get the chance. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She waved her hand. “You can get started.”

He ran to his desk and dove head first into his work.

Minato and Yuma shivered at his manic grin, but he never noticed.

“Good work as usual, Kurusu.” Risumi said as she passed off the final coffee mug. “But you seemed a bit... tense today. Is everything alright?”

“Yep.” Akira smiled as he set the dried cup and rag aside. “It was just a regular, boring day.”

“Alright.” Risumi frowned, but the tension in her shoulders drained. “Go ahead and flip the sign.”

“On it.”

Akira rounded the counter. The dishes were clean, the empty tables had been wiped down, all of today’s customers left satisfied and happy. Well, except for Bakugo, but he didn’t count. Akira reached the door and was about to flip the sign, when he paused.

A girl blinked at him from the other side of the door.

He looked back at Risumi just as the girl turned away.

“Go ahead and let her in.” Risumi said with a gentle smile. “She’ll be our last customer for tonight.”

“Hey!” Akira held the door open. “You want to come inside?”

“Oh.” She tugged on the sleeve of her U.A. uniform. “But you were about to close, and I don’t wish to be a bother.”

“No bother at all.” He slid on his best grin. “Tonight is perfect for a nice cup of coffee in a quiet cafe, right?”

“I suppose so.” She chuckled, her dark eyes lighting up. “Thank you for allowing me inside.”

Akira watched as she trailed to the closest table. Her perfect posture, the high end bag she carried, how she made walking and sitting in a booth flow like a ballet dance. Her hair was smooth and shiny, swept up into an elegant ponytail. She *screamed* money. His heart twinged when he thought of Haru.

"Is something the matter?" She asked, hands placed primly in her lap.

"No, sorry." He scratched the back of his head. "What would you like?"

"Hmm." Her eagle sharp eyes glanced over to the chalkboard. "I'll take a house blend, please."

"Coming right up."

Risumi busied herself by wiping a mug he *knew* was already clean, humming a gentle tune as he got to work. He returned with the hot drink in hand.

"Here's your coffee."

"Thank you." Her hands delicately wrapped around the warm cup.
"Ah, it smells delightful."

Akira smiled. "Let me know if you want anything else."

He turned to walk away, ignoring how Risumi winked at him.

"Oh!"

"Is something wrong?" He looked over his shoulder, frowning. "I can make you a fresh cup if-"

"No, there's nothing wrong." She held up a hand. "In fact, this coffee is beyond superb. I think I recognize this brand."

"Oh?" Akira turned fully towards her. "Care to guess?"

“Hmm. It has soft acidity and a solid richness in flavor.” She took another sip and stared at Akira. “Is it a Honduran blend?”

“That’s correct.” Akira pushed up his glasses. “It’s called Honduran Strictly High Grown. The grade is determined by how high of an altitude it grows. Like you said, it has a soft acidity and a richness in flavor, but it also has a fruity aroma. I recommended this brand, and it’s been one of our more popular ones next to Jamaican Blue Mountain. We’ll also be getting a Kona blend later this week.”

“Wow.” She blinked several times. “You know your coffee!”

He shrugged. “I had a good teacher.”

“I see.” She chuckled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Out of curiosity, what’s the strangest coffee you’ve ever had?”

Akira tapped his chin. “Probably Black Ivory.”

“Really?” She perked up. “That is quite expensive. How was it?”

“The flavor itself was mellow, and it had it had some bitterness underneath.” Akira wrinkled his nose. “You could really taste the elephant, though. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Oh dear.” She shook her head. “I’ve had the opportunity to try Kopi Luwak, but I couldn’t bare drinking it after I read how cruel some of those companies treat the civets.”

“Yeah...”

“I apologize. I didn’t mean for the conversation to turn morose.” She glanced back to the counter. “By the way, I noticed that there is a ‘Leblanc Special’ on your menu. That wouldn’t happen to be named after Maurice Leblanc, would it?”

Immediately, Arsene hovered at the forefront of his mind.

“Actually, it is.” Akira noted Arsene’s excitement, as muted as it was. “Are you familiar with his work?”

“Oh, I love his stories!” She looked down into her coffee with a frown. “My mother and I used to read Arsene Lupin, Gentlemen Thief when I was younger. We grew distant these last few years, so stories of Arsene’s daring heists hold a special place in my heart.”

“He was a master of disguise too, right?”

“That’s correct!” Her eyes sparkled. “It always intrigues me how he can pull off his other characters flawlessly, almost as if he was a different person altogether. He’s the perfect example of a gentleman thief, at least in my eyes.”

“Well, she’s officially adopted.” Titania whispered. *“There’s no way you’re ignoring this one, right Arsene?”*

Arsene grumbled, but his mood had softened.

“Hey.” Akira frowned when her giddiness faded like a dead star. “What do you think Arsene would do if he felt cornered on a heist and there was no way out?”

Akira furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“My family is wealthy.” Her eyes flicked to her name brand bag. “I’m sure you’ve figured it out. I’ve been nothing but failure in their eyes, s-so they used a considerable amount of money to save face and a lot of people have suffered from it, including somebody that a lot of people look up to. They all got hurt because of *me* . When I asked, they simply brushed off my concerns and said that it was for my own good.” She sighed and placed her head in her hands. “I don’t know how to fix it.”

“It sounds like the adults are using you for their own gain.”

“Huh?” Her head whipped towards him. “I... suppose they are, but they are my family-”

“Just because they are family, doesn’t mean that they *own* you.” Akira’s hands balled into fists, and she paled at how his eyes became razor sharp. “They can’t do whatever they want. You are your own person. If you believe that they’re wrong, then stand up and fight for your own justice.”

“My own justice?” Her eyes widened.

“Isn’t that what Arsene would do?” Akira’s face softened. “He wouldn’t sit around and wait to be rescued, he would fight against that unfairness with everything he had.”

The girl’s face slackened with shock. After a moment, she collected herself.

“I... You’re right! Arsene has his own brand of justice, who’s to say that I can’t, either?” She squared her shoulders and sat a little taller. “Thank you. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Akira smirked. “Don’t mention it.”

Her phone pinged, and she frowned as she took it from her bag. She sighed as her eyes went to her empty coffee cup, flickering with sorrow.

“I didn’t realize it was this late already.” She pocketed her phone and placed the payment on the table. “Thank you for the coffee, and for the interesting conversation.”

“No problem.” He looked out the window as she left the booth. “Do you want me to walk you to the station? It’s pretty dark outside.”

“That’s not necessary. My driver will pick me up in a few minutes, so I’ll just wait outside.”

Akira nodded, then he turned to look over at Risumi. The woman had vanished. Strange, he didn't hear her leave. He shook his head and turned back to Yaoyorozu.

"Wait." She paused just as she reached for the door, blinking at him. "What kind of gentlemen would I be if I made a lady wait outside all by herself? Arsene would be disappointed in me otherwise."

He approached and held the door wide open for her, and she released an airy chuckle.

"You are very kind."

They stood together at the edge of the sidewalk, allowing the cool night air to flow over them. After another minute or two of comfortable silence, she turned to look at him.

"I must apologize."

Akira raised a brow. "For?"

"Ah, it's just..." She blinked rapidly as she clutched her bag. "I didn't mean to unload all of that back in the cafe. I apologize if it was too much."

"Don't worry about it." Akira said with a shrug.

"No. Thank you for listening." She peered into him for several seconds. "I mean it."

Akira tilted his head towards her, brows pinched.

"I don't know what it is, but you have this strange air about you. I felt like I could trust you with something so personal." Her eyes trailed to the dark sky above. "I've heard much from the other girls in my class, so I was curious about this cafe in general. I'm glad I came tonight."

"Let me guess. Ashido?"

“Well, she has been the most verbal. I’ve heard Midoriya and Kirishima say many good things as well.” Suddenly, her face turned red. “Oh, how rude of me! Here I am talking about you and I’ve never introduced myself or properly asked for your name!”

“Kurusu Akira.” He said with a grin. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Yaoyorozu Momo. You can just call me Momo.” She bowed her head. “Or Yaomomo as some of my classmates call me.”

Akira nodded. “Well, Momo, you can just call me Akira.”

She blinked rapidly. “Y-yes, I will do that.”

They heard the scrape of wheels on concrete as a limousine pulled up to the cafe. The driver got out and Akira didn’t miss how the man scanned from head to toe. He sneered as if he had just stepped into something repulsive.

Momo stepped between them with a gentle smile, as if to shield Akira from it.

“Thanks again for the coffee. I’ll be sure to stop by more often.”

Akira nodded. “The door is always open.”

She froze for a second, then her smile bloomed like a flower.

The driver masked his discontent as he opened the door for Momo. She slid in with the grace of an empress, and her smile was cut from view as the door closed. Akira waved as the limousine drove off, and he trailed back into the cafe.

Momo’s table was cleared and Risumi was washing the mug.

“Where did you go before?” Akira asked with a raised brow. “You just disappeared.”

“Oh, I was in the kitchen.” Risumi said nonchalantly. “Ayumu needed help putting the leftovers away.”

“Uh huh.” He said with a playful smirk. “Sure.”

“Do I sense sarcasm, dear?” She mimicked his smirk. “I would have no other reason to go into the kitchen so suddenly. You took care of that lovely customer just fine by yourself.”

Akira shook his head.

“Here.” Risumi nodded to a paper bag on the counter. “Take some leftovers home, sweetheart.”

“Thanks.” Akira swiped the bag. “The last batch didn’t last long.”

“Good. I’ll be happy as long as you and your father are eating enough.”

Akira jolted so hard that the bag dropped with an undignified *splat* . He hastily picked it up and chuckled, his voice in a slightly higher pitch.

“As much as I tease him, he’s not really my dad. We do call him step grandpa because of his white hair, though.”

“Is that so?” Risumi adjusted her glasses. “In that case, give your step grandfather my regards. You can go home for the day. I can handle the rest.”

Akira nodded as he hung his apron behind the counter and grabbed his bag. Risumi had been looking at him strangely all day, and that concern suddenly intensified as she put a hand to his shoulder. Akira stiffened as she peered into him, as if really looking at him for the first time.

“Are you sure you’re alright? You haven’t been ill lately, have you?”

“No? Do I not look alright?” Akira tilted his head and twirled a lock of his hair. “Don’t tell me I have a gray hair or something.”

“No, I just wanted to be sure. Have a good night, Kurusu.” She chuckled as her hand dropped. “Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

“I won’t. Promise!”

With one last wave, he stepped out with the ring of a bell. The bag of sugary goodness was tucked safely under his arm as he walked into the nearest alleyway, where the breeze was strongest. Morgana was already waiting, eyes scanning him from head to toe.

“Who was that girl?”

“Wow, good to see you too.” Akira smirked as Morgana rolled his eyes. “Another girl from 1-A. She’s friends with Midoriya and the others.”

“I see.” Morgana licked his paw, nose scrunching when he tasted the dye. “Well, today was pretty boring.”

“You didn’t sense anything?”

“Nope.” Morgana’s tail swished. “No strange people, nobody watching the cafe for an extended period of time. The heroes walked by without giving the place another glance. It was just a normal day as far as I could tell.”

Yatagarasu dove into the alley and graciously landed next to Morgana, chest feathers puffed.

“I concur with the Magician.” He nodded sharply. “There was no suspicious activity near the cafe, or within several surrounding blocks. I believe we are safe.”

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Akira paced in a small circle. “Last time they scrounged up an entire army within a few hours, and now there’s just... silence? What game are they trying to play?”

“Who knows.” Morgana shook his head. “Maybe Mercurius is right, and they really are keeping your identity secret.”

“But *why!* ?” He grimaced when Morgana and Yatagarasu flinched. “Sorry, this is all making me a bit paranoid.”

“We have every right to be.” Morgana said. “It wouldn’t hurt to stay on our toes, even if it looks like we’re in the clear.”

“Speculating might make the situation worse.” Yatagarasu said as he hopped to Akira’s shoulder. “Their reasons are their own, the only way to get a true answer is from the men themselves.”

“Yeah.” Morgana scoffed. “Like that’ll ever happen.”

At that moment Akira’s burner pinged.

[???

This is Giran.

I’ll be at the meeting spot in two hours.

You’re coming tonight, right?

{ERROR}

I’ll be there.

Akira tossed the phone into the bag. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah.” Morgana held up a blackened paw. “But I’ll have to wash this stuff off first.”

“Perks of wearing a disguise.”

Morgana rolled his eyes as he scrambled into Akira's bag and Yatarasu took off into the sky.

Akira headed to the Raven's Nest, eager for a quiet night over the rooftops.

I remember a few people asking a while ago if there will be an I-Island arc, and the answer would be no. As much as I enjoyed that movie, I-Island arcs in fics have always felt 'meh' for me personally. Instead, we'll have Joker and co. focused on the kidnappings and other villain/hero shenanigans, which will tie in to the Summer Camp and Kamino arcs.

I'm so excited :3

Next chapter is so fun~

Admiral Feesh's Day Out

Chapter 43: Admiral Feesh's Day Out

Hee Hooo!!

This is an April Fool's chapter that can be skipped if you want to ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Black Frost skipped down the sidewalk, clutching his favorite friend underneath his arm. The vibrant red scales of the plush stood out against his black and purple color scheme, and it drew many eyes. He stopped and bounced on his feet.

The surrounding crowd gave him strange or worried looks, but nobody had approached him. He stared back at a particularly large crowd and pumped his fist. Admiral Feesh was raised high with his other hand.

“Hee ho!!”

Suspicion dropped, and he was greeted with bright eyes and wide smiles.

“Hee ho!”

“Hee hoo!”

“HEE HOO!!”

Black Frost playfully twirled around before he continued his cheery walk down the busy mall district, the calls of his people echoing out

into the streets. It was a warm sunny day, and the influx of people taking advantage of such nice weather was too perfect of an opportunity to waste.

He stopped at every block and raised his fist into the air with a triumphant 'Hee ho!', civilians and heroes alike mimicking him until he reached his true destination. The mall. A shiny, vast building composed of sparkling glass and mirrors, an attraction that drew people from hundreds of miles like flies to honey. It was *the* perfect target. A large cobblestone plaza was decked with colors and streamers. Bricks were laid down in an intricate, flowing patten. A beautiful fountain lay at the center of it all, the muti-tiered construct spewing crystal clear waters.

Black Frost chuckled as he sped towards it.

He reached the fountain and peeked into the water. His own reflection stared back at him, mischievous and adorable all in one. Amusement flowed from the Trickster as Black Frost readied himself. He was watching nearby, and Black Frost promised a stunning performance! Admiral Feesh would be his partner in crime.

Black Frost leapt onto the fountain and held Admiral Feesh up towards the heavens.

"HEE HOOO!!"

Onlookers took pause.

"Hee ho!"

"What does he think he's doing?"

"Hee hoo!"

"Is this some sort of performance, hee ho?"

"Why does he have a stuffed fish?"

“Hee ho!” Black Frost bounced up to the second tier, ice sprouting from his feet. “Hee hoo!”

A small crowd gathered around the fountain. Men, women, and children alike marveled as ice spread across the plaza.

“Ooh, pretty!!”

“... Is this illegal?”

“Maybe. He’s using his quirk!”

“Who cares!? Look how adorable he is!”

“Hee ho? Isn’t that Joker’s catchphrase or something?”

“Hee ho!!” Black Frost leapt onto the next tier with a playful flip, “Hee ho!!”

The crowd cheered and their shouts attracted others. His audience expanded, their faces lighting up in wonder.

Black Frost tapped into his magic as he threw his hands up into the air.

The crowd gasped as a stream of ice crystals shot into the sky, painting the air with sparkling rainbows. Many got their phones and began recording as he danced around the fountain tiers, twirling and shooting prismatic streams in all directions.

He danced with Admiral Feesh and occasionally tossed him into the sky. Admiral Feesh’s acrobatics were a hit with the crowd.

Unfortunately, *somebody* had to ruin the fun.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to do that!” A hero with a billowing cape elbowed her way through, “I’m going to have to ask you to stop!”

Black Frost’s grin sharpened. “Catch me-hee, if you can-ho!”

“What did you just call me!?”

The hero's hands came to life with neon light, and she charged with an angry battle cry.

“Heeee...” Black Frost focused his magic, a veritable blizzard raged inside of him. “*Hooo !!*”

The temperature plummeted. Icy mist exploded across the plaza in a thick mist. The first flakes of snow fell on dainty winds. Many in the crowd shivered, but curiosity planted their feet as if they were trapped in ice. They watched with bated breath.. Streams of sunlight peeked through as it cleared, and highlighted the new addition to the plaza.

“H-hey! What is this!?” The female hero snapped. “I-I c-can't move!”

The drop of a pin would be heard with the sudden silence. Many had to crane their necks skywards.

A monumental sculpture carved in the shape of a ‘Hee Hoo!’ stood as tall as the mall itself. The ice was transparent turquoise in color, and sunlight bounced around and splashed a myriad of dazzling rainbows around the plaza. A perfect ice copy of the little fiend stood at the bottom of the sculpture, grinning at the hero now trapped within a glacial prison. It was no coincidence that she was trapped in a gigantic fish's mouth. The fiend was nowhere to be seen.

Laughter and cheers ignited around the district, and it didn't take long for footage to go viral.

“Can't you w-work any f-faster!?” She shouted through chattering teeth. “I-I'm losing feeling in my a-arms and legs!”

“We've been trying Valkyrie, but this ice just *won't melt!*”

Endeavor facepalmed.

He and his sidekicks have been trying for two hours. *Two hours* of constant flames and heatwaves from his sidekicks, or drilling and hacking away with tools, and not a chip of ice had broken free. The ice fiend's grin was taunting, the fish even more so, and Burnin took a swipe at it with an enraged shout. Of course, it did nothing.

A squad of police had taped off the surrounding area, but the crowd stuck around like glue, phones prepped and ready.

"Enough." Endeavor's boots crunched over unmelting snow. "Let me try something."

His sidekicks exchanged glances before they cowered away.

"H-hey," Valkyrie chuckled nervously. "You won't aim s-straight at me, right?"

"Don't move and you'll be fine." He grumbled.

"Like I can m-move anyway!"

Endeavor took a deep breath as he pulled at his flames. He took a battle stance as fire erupted between his fingers.

"Prominence Burn!!"

The jet of flames shot towards the center of the construct. He couldn't hear the crowd behind him as the fire roared in his ears and doused everyone in sweltering heat. Endeavor poured his strength into his quirk and the flames burned a bright blue. A minute passed, two, three. His body cried for him to stop, and the flames slowly died down.

Valkyrie's jaws wasn't the only to drop. "Are you kidding me!?"

Aside from a few tendrils of steam, the ice was unblemished. Endeavor sighed sharply as his side kicks cried out in frustration, a few of them clutching their heads with exaggerated groans.

A snowflake drifted on the breeze and landed right on his nose. He furiously wiped it away.

“Keep at it while I cool down.” Endeavor muttered.

Burnin firmly nodded. “You heard him! We’re not giving up yet!”

Endeavor stepped away as his sidekicks got to work, but a shout from the crowd drew his attention.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be in there!” An officer shouted. “Get back here!”

A different sort of chill crept up Endeavor’s spine as he recognized the little blond girl skipping towards towards him. Her sickly sweet smile was full of venom. She stopped in front of him and curtsied.

“Flameo, Hotman.” She said.

“S-sorry, sir!” The officer was panting as he ran up to them, “I’ll take her back.”

He made the mistake of putting a hand on her shoulder, and she lost her smile. Her head slowly swiveled to the officer, her too wide eyes piercing through his soul.

“Don’t touch me.”

The officer took startled back as her hair wriggled with dark power.

“Leave her to me.” Endeavor said over the ball of ice forming in his stomach. “I’ll take care of it.”

The officer nodded frantically and fled from the scene, and her too sweet smile returned.

“Who are you and what do you want?” He growled as he towered over her.

His shadow encased her entire body, but she wasn't fazed by it. In fact, she giggled.

"You're not scary. I've seen piggy banks scarier than you." She held out the notebook that was tucked under her arm. "I'm just a fan that wanted an autograph, Mr. Hero."

He swallowed thickly. The crowd watched watched the scene like hawks, and his sidekicks shifted uncomfortably. Pushing the girl away wasn't an option, and she *knew* that.

"... Fine."

He grabbed the notebook and scribbled his signature on the first page. With a scowl, he gave it back. The girl blinked at his extended arm, and her grin sharpened like a butcher knife. Her small hand reached past the notebook and latched onto his arm, right where his new scar was. Her fingers were like icicles, injecting a deathly chill into his veins.

"Make sure to be a good hero, Endeavor." She whispered as her eyes flashed dangerously. "My big brother is always watching."

She snatched the notebook and curtsied, before she skipped away back into the crowd. Endeavor watched as she vanished completely.

"Sir?" Burnin approached as he rubbed his arm. "Are you alright?"

"I'm *fine* ." He snapped. "Make sure the others are staying hydrated and keep tabs on Valkyrie's condition. We'll be stuck here for a while."

"Y-yes, sir!"

"We'll have to frame this somewhere in the Raven's Nest, probably beside that piggy bank everyone keeps throwing at us." Akira

grinned and patted the plush next to him. “And get this little guy back to Nezu’s office.”

Alice sat on his other side, swinging her legs off the edge of the rooftop.

“Did big brother have fun?”

“Oh, definitely. Black Frost did a good job.” Akira closed the notebook and set it aside. “I just wish I could’ve seen Endeavor’s face when you approached him, Alice. He was shaking in his boots!”

Morgana shook his head. “That would be too close for comfort.”

“I guess.” Akira shrugged as they watched the chaos below.

“Do you think the rest of the audience are enjoying themselves?” Alice asked with a tilt of her head. “There are a lot of big brothers and sisters reading this!”

“I hope so.” Morgana chuckled. “If even a single person laughed or smiled at this chapter, then I say it was worth it.”

“You’re right.” Akira grinned as he looked directly into your eyes. “Happy April Fool’s Day, hee ho! Mona, say it with me!”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes! You don’t want to upset the readers, do you?”

“Ugh, fine.” Morgana rolled his eyes. “But I’m only doing it for them once! Hee hooo!”

“That’s the spirit! C’mon, Buku!” Akira said. “You have to say it, too!”

Morgana scoffed. “Don’t drag the author into this!”

It’s fine, Morgana. I’d love to join in!

Hee ho!!

Alice clapped. "Hee hoo!"

"Hee hooo!"

HEE HOO!!

Later that evening, Principal Nezu walked into his office.

"Ah, there you are Admiral Feesh! I was wondering where you ran off to." He approached the stuffed animal, eyes widening. "Oh, what's this?"

There was a little calling card tucked into his bow tie. It read *'Admiral Feesh had a fun day out! Thanks for letting us borrow him, hee ho! ;)*
- Joker~'

"Hee ho!" Nezu cackled as he threw up his arms. "Hee hoooo!!"

Somewhere within the school, Aizawa felt a shiver down his back.

Obviously, this was a totally serious chapter that is in no way related to April Fools Day ;)) The piggy bank mentions are a thing from the discord server. I finally added it in guys!

In real seriousness though, this chapter was a delight to work on. We'll be returning to our regularly scheduled DTESH next. See you guys on Saturday!!

Dare

Chapter 44: Dare

Ryukyu gets rejected.

Hiya guys! This chapter was originally so long (15,500 words!) that it had to be split in two. Dare and Devil :3 I just wanted to thank the amazing betas again, because they worked hard to make this chapter so much better than it was before. The good news is that you guys will only have to wait a week for the other half ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“These are pretty cool.” Joker fiddled with his ear-piece and glanced at La Brava. “You made these yourself?”

“Y-yeah.” La Brava dug her shoe into the gravel. “I made a highly encrypted network just for us, so we can communicate even if we get separated. It can listen in on the police radio and other frequencies. The little buttons on the side switch between them, and I synced your communicator with Mona’s.”

Joker hummed. Somehow, the communicator had fit perfectly and didn’t cause any discomfort. Color him impressed.

“How am I supposed to use this?” Mona flicked his ear. “Not that there’s anything wrong with it! It feels a bit strange, that’s all.”

“I didn’t know how to design yours, so we can always tweak it.” She said. “I modeled the microphone so it would just look like a normal

bell, the wire wraps around your collar so that your earpiece won't come loose."

"You do good work." Mona said.

"Th-thanks." She poked her fingers together. "B-but we still don't know if they work yet."

Joker exchanged glances with Gentle, who shrugged.

"The only way to test these is to put them in action!" Joker looked into inky sky. "Shall we go?"

"Wait one moment." Gentle Criminal said, "I believe La Brava has something to say."

She flinched. "R-right now?"

"Yes, my dear." Gentle gestured to Joker and Mona, and gave her a nudge. "Go on."

She bit her lip as she approached with eyes downcast.

"Can you come down here?"

Joker and Mona exchanged glances, but Joker kneeled in front of her. Her maroon eyes searched his face for several moments, until they were locked eye to eye. Her cheeks flushed red and she was barely holding back tears.

"I'm sorry."

Joker blinked. "For what?"

"Last night, when I ran away..." Her eyes watered. "Wh-when you poured your trust into us. When we didn't react well and you got so upset I... I still don't know if I believe your story, and I'm sorry for that."

Joker half smiled. She couldn't see his full expression with his mask, but the sadness and faint embers of hurt were evident in his eyes.

"It's okay." Joker shrugged. "It's not an easy thing to believe."

Mona's tail gently tapped Joker's back. He stayed silent.

"Hey." Her cold hands cupped his cheeks, and he was forced to look into her eyes. "No matter what happens from here on out, I want you to know that I'll be on your side. I'll always support *my boys*, even if its just us against the world."

Joker's eyes widened.

"Don't look like that!" Her cheeks darkened even further. "You've been like a little brother to me."

"Aww, Joker's blushing!" Mona said with a snicker.

"I am *not* !"

"Are too. Why else would your face be all red!?"

"Do you need to be button mashed?"

"N-no! Not that again!"

"Boys!"

Mona and Joker snapped out of their bickering as her sullen expression melted away into a playful glare.

"My name. From now on I want you to call me by my given name!" She squished his cheeks together. "Got it?"

Joker's arms flailed. "Okay, got it!"

"Good!" She beamed as she let go and turned on her heel. " We can go now."

Gentle hid his smile with a gloved hand, but Joker saw how his shoulders were shaking from repressed laughter.

“Ouch.” Joker stood and massaged his red face.

“Now you know how I feel.” Mona whispered. “Futaba did that to me all the time!”

“Hush, you.” Joker massaged his jawline as he looked at Gentle and La Brava. “Stay here for a second so we can test the comms.”

Joker shot out his grapple, and Mona cried out as they ascended to the rooftops.

“Hey, a little warning next time!?” He said as he batted Joker’s hair with a tiny paw.

“Why? Warnings are boring.”

Mona rolled his eyes and then he looked down into the dark alleyway below.

“Are you okay with this?” he asked. “I know they still don’t believe us, but...”

“We told them the truth.” Joker walked to the other side of the rooftop and kicked a rock down the other side. “There’s nothing else we can do.”

“Joker...”

Joker paid him no mind as he reached up and pressed one of the buttons on his new communicator.

“Check, check.” He forced the hurt down with a smirk. “This is your captain speaking. Tonight should be smooth sailing, with clear skies and a pleasant breeze sweeping over the city. Chance of drama? Zero percent. Maybe. We’ll see how I feel within the next hour.”

"Ha ha, very funny." La Brava's voice trilled in their ears. "It seems to be working! Gentle?"

"I can hear him loud and clear." Gentle Criminal said. "We're coming up!"

Joker had his back to them, but he heard the *crunch crunch* of their footsteps as they landed.

"You said this thing taps into police radio too?"

"Yup!" She tilted her head and pointed to the second button on hers. "We can hear them, but they can't hear us. They won't know there's a bug in the system as long as we're careful. I hacked into other emergency wavelengths, too."

"Sweet."

"Can't you just hack their radio like you did when we went to the hospital?" Mona asked. "That would be easier."

"I could." La Brava put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "But it'll be dangerous if they catch on to it, and it might even be used against us. This is safer."

Joker nodded as he flipped through the channels, and Mona's ear flicked at the mix of static and police chatter.

"-rglary on 7th street gas station."

"10-4. A hero is on the way!"

"Multi car accident on 19 th and Gale, medical assistance is needed. Drunk driver suspected."

"The ambulances are on their way, the Youthful Hero is standing by."

"Possible drug deal in nearby park. Requesting backup."

"The closest hero has been alerted, and making their way to you now."

"Boy, they use heroes for everything, don't they?" Mona whispered.

"No kidding." Joker said.

"How's Giran?" Gentle Criminal asked. "It wouldn't bode well for us if he got arrested."

"Let me check with Yatagarasu." Joker closed his eyes and focused on the glowing thread tying them together. *"Is he there?"*

"Yes, Trickster. He is at the meeting location, as promised."

"And he came alone?"

"Yes. No one except Giran has entered or left this abandoned husk for the last few hours." Yatagarasu, who was perched atop a dilapidated building, nodded. *"It should be safe."*

"We'll be there soon." Joker opened his eyes to see the others staring at him. "We're in the clear."

"What are we standing around for?" La Brava marched toward the edge of the rooftop. "Let's not keep him waiting!"

"Wait." Joker dug around in his pockets and brought out a flat, wooden stick with Japanese writing down the middle. "This will help."

Morgana's eyes lit up in recognition. Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged glances as Joker snapped the wood in half, and the group was surrounded with pillars of soft green light.

"Wh-what was that!?" La Brava cried as the light faded.

"Hmm," Gentle Criminal looked down as he flexed his gloved hands. "I feel lighter, for some reason."

“It was an item from our world called an Idaten Ofuda.” Joker grinned as the wooden pieces disintegrated. “It’ll make us faster and we’ll be able to evade the heroes better. Let’s go!”

Morgana huddled down as Joker bolted across the rooftops.

“*H-hey!*” La Brava snapped over the comms. “*At least wait for us!*”

“*Come, my dear.*” Gentle said. “*We’ll catch up to them in no time!*”

They joined hands and shot over the rooftops with Gentle’s quirk.

Joker grinned as they landed on an adjacent building, before bouncing over to the next in sync with him and Mona. The four dark shadows flitted over the Thieves’ Highway, the city passing underneath their feet. They stopped every so often to avoid a hero and took a short detour around a busy shopping district. Slowly, something stirred in Joker.

Running free under the veil of night made his heart grow heavy. The other pair running alongside him and Mona were allies, but they would never be able to replace their *friends*. Colors bursting from his footsteps were like an invisible barrier between them. Separate. *Different*. Not of this world.

What would it be like to run alongside the other Phantom Thieves while their powers were unconstrained of the Metaverse? How would it feel if he could see several other pairs of colorful footsteps around him? He could almost hear his teammates now.

“*Wooooohoooo!*” Skull would holler as he flung himself over to the next rooftop. “*Isn’t this fun, Leader!?*”

“*Hey, not so loud!*” Panther would say. “*There are heroes everywhere!*”

“*I agree.*” Queen nodded solemnly, her scarf flowing with the wind. “*We mustn’t draw attention to ourselves.*”

"Ugh, fine! Buzzkills."

"Hey, wait up!" Oracle called as the group would pull to a stop. "Inari, what's taking you so long!? We're way ahead of you!"

"Uh, Fox? Hellooooo?"

"Fox!"

"Earth to Fox?"

"Hmm? Oh! My apologies." Fox lowered his hands with a shake of his head. "The composition of the cityscape in this spot was simply enthralling. I wonder if I could capture its beauty sometime."

"Sure, it's pretty or whatever, but that doesn't mean you have to stop every five minutes!" Skull cried. "We'll be spotted by the heroes if we don't move!"

"You're one to talk, being so darn loud!" Panther snapped. "It's like you're asking for trouble!"

Noir giggled, a charming and downright devilish sound in its own right.

"Well, if they do find us," She smiled sweetly as she ran her fingers over her polished bardiche. "Then I'll just take care of them. I hope they'll prove to be a challenge this time."

Skull wasn't the only one to feel a shiver down his spine, *"Er, r-right."*

"Joker?" Mona whispered, but it sounded awfully real. *"Joker!"*

Joker was thrown out of his thoughts as someone grabbed his collar and yanked him backwards. He blinked rapidly and shook his head, frowning as Gentle Criminal let go.

"What's wrong?"

La Brava held a single finger to her lips and pointed down. A duo of heroes passed underfoot, and she released a sigh of relief when they disappeared around a street corner.

"They would've seen you if you jumped!" La Brava threw her hands up. "Were you even paying attention!?"

"Sorry. I'm-" He cleared his throat as his voice trembled. "It's okay. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

Joker nodded. He looked out across the city, eyeing the glittering cityscape draped in darkness. His lips soured.

"I was just imagining what it would be like if everyone was here with us. I miss them so much." He said, voice barely above a whisper and he shook his head. "I didn't mean to space out like that."

Mona rubbed against his hair. "Are you able to face Giran tonight?"

"I already told you I'm *fine* ." Joker turned his back as Gentle and La Brava's faces fell in concern. "We're almost there, anyway."

He went ahead without them, and they hesitantly followed. A morose silence overtook them as they traversed into the poorer districts. Dilapidated buildings and broken streets were commonplace, a part of a greater city that was just left to rot. Heroes had much less of a presence. Police even less so. U.A. was far off in the distance. Visible, but unattainable.

At last, Joker felt Yatagarasu just one street over. They came to a stop one block away.

"I should meet with him alone." Joker said.

"But -" Gentle Criminal stopped as Joker held up his hand.

“It might scare him if we all go in there. Besides,” Joker glanced in between La Brava and Gentle, “It’s safer if he thinks that Mona and I are working alone for the time being.”

“What?” La Brava said, brows furrowed. “Why?”

“We don’t completely trust him.” Mona said. “We don’t know his motivations or everyone he works for. It’s better to keep you two in the shadows, just in case.”

“I guess...” La Brava huffed as she plopped down and crossed her arms. “But we’re here to back you up! If something goes wrong, then just say the word and we’ll barge in!”

“Roger.” Joker tapped at his new earpiece. “Stay on your toes.”

Mona nodded at him before he hopped off Joker’s shoulder.

Joker crept down a nearby fire escape and landed safely, his eyes catching the bright colors against the dead pavement at his feet. He was nothing more than a shadow as he crept across the street. The meeting place wasn’t much. This apartment building was broken and fractured, a veritable corpse of stone and mortar decomposing under the sun. He smirked as a sudden breeze caressed his back, and a ripped curtain gently fluttered in a shattered window. Broken glass crinkled under his boots as ventured inside.

“Heh, you’re right on time.”

Giran emerged from the shadows with a sleazy grin upon his face.

“Can’t be late to one’s own party.” Joker smirked as he walked to the middle of the room. “It’s rude for a host not to show himself to his guest, especially since I’m the one who sent the invitation.”

“Two is hardly a party.” Giran chuckled dryly as he watched Joker’s colorful footsteps. “I was hoping to meet the famous Mona tonight. Where is he?”

“Around.” Joker narrowed his eyes. “You know how cats are sometimes.”

“I get it.” Giran held up his hands. “So, down to business. What can I do for ya?”

“I want information about the recent kidnappings.”

“Kidnappings? You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“There have been a slew of kidnappings all across Japan.” Joker strolled around Giran like a predator, and the man’s eyes never left his. “Quirked and quirkless alike. People are vanishing into thin air, with more disappearing every week. What I want are the real numbers of those who went missing and where they’re being held, possibly take down the group that’s doing it. Or groups, be that as it may.”

“Hmm, that’s a tall order.” Giran said, but he suddenly stiffened. “Wait. Do you already have suspects?”

“The League Of Villains is my top guess.” Joker stopped. “I’ve dug through police files and matched up some of the missing people with the Nomu’s DNA. It’s not hard to put the pieces together, but I don’t put all of my eggs in one basket. If there are more traffickers out there, then I’ll take them down, too.”

The silence was deafening.

“That’ll cost you a pretty penny.” Giran had an odd gleam to his eyes. “The League hasn’t made any noteworthy headlines lately, but they’re not a group that you want to mess with. As for any other potential groups, it’ll cost you extra.”

“I can pay whatever price you have.”

“I’m not so sure.” Giran shrugged. “Do you even know what you’re asking? Hell, the underground is terrified to speak your name, but

even you wouldn't want to poke your nose into such shady business."

"Like I said," Joker said, unfettered. "Name your price."

"Then I'll take more of those fancy items of yours." Giran's sleazy grin returned in full force.

"No."

"Don't be like that. We could easily make millions with powerful items like those-"

"I'm not interested in money." Joker's eyes sharpened. "Besides, they made the battle with Stain a bit more difficult than it should have been. That's not a mistake I'm willing to repeat. They're off limits."

"What a wasted opportunity." Giran sighed.

"If it's money you're after," Joker grabbed his phone from his pocket and held it up. "I can pay that way."

Giran was quite for a moment. "How about you do a job for me, instead?"

Joker's arm slowly fell. "A job?"

"Yup. You do this for me and I'll get what information I can." Giran shrugged. "You would be doing yourself a favor, too."

"What do you mean?"

"What if I told you that this job involves the people that funded your bounty?" Joker stiffened, but he continued. "Don't worry, I know your type. You wouldn't physically hurt anybody, but these people aren't so squeaky clean either. You do your thing, and your bounty might just get taken down. I get one hell of a paycheck and you get your information. Then, we part ways like respectable gentlemen."

“What would you have me do, exactly?”

“Not so fast.” Giran waved a finger at him. “You’ll have to agree to do the job before I tell you anything more.”

Joker opened his mouth, and then closed it.

“His offer seems sensible.” Yatagarasu said.

“I don’t know.” Joker’s eyes were locked with Giran’s. *“Something about this doesn’t feel right. We could be walking into a trap.”*

“Hmm, perhaps he is being shady.” Ishtar whispered. *“But we don’t know what the full job entails, nor do we have any other leads to follow. It might be our only choice.”*

“Caution and patience are a must when a viper is sleeping upon one’s chest.” The Caped Warrior said. *“We should not take this decision lightly.”*

“Can I have a few days to think about it?”

Giran deflated with a long sigh, and Joker realized he was holding his breath, too.

“Sure.” Giran produced a card from his pocket. “Call this number when you’re ready.”

Joker nodded and grabbed it, but Giran wouldn’t let the card go. Instead, his smile stretched wide and Joker smelled the stale scent of cigarettes on his breath.

“You might want to hurry.” Giran said as he let go. “There’s another thief who might be interested, and you wouldn’t want to lose out. Innocent people are waiting on you. I’ll expect your call soon.”

The man walked into the shadows, leaving Joker alone with the ghostly wind.

Giran wandered down several alleyways, checking over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't followed. Satisfied, he grabbed one of his burners.

[???

Made contact with the target.

[???

Excellent.

Plan A will commence shortly.

And plan B?

[???

Got a nibble, but not a full bite.

Proxies and rivals are lined up for slaughter, but your tracks are completely covered.

It shouldn't take long if we make more people disappear.

[???

Very well.

Sensei will be pleased.

Sanguine and Showman will stand by for further instruction.

Giran tossed the phone on the ground, and the *crunch* under his boot was oddly satisfying. With a shaky hand, he reached into his coat and flipped open a new pack of cigarettes. The familiar taste coated his mouth as he lit it.

“Good luck, Joker.” He took a long drag and breathed out a cloud of smoke. “You’ll need it.”

The silent group made their way back to the Raven’s nest. They agreed to go over Joker’s meeting with Giran before making a decision, sticking to the shadows and weaving around heroes and police around the city. When they were halfway home, however, Yatararasu spoke.

“Trickster.”

The urgency in his voice froze Joker in his tracks. Gentle and La Brava ran ahead, but stopped once they couldn’t hear Joker’s steps.

Mona glanced at him in concern. “Are you-”

“Shh.” Joker pointed, and they looked to the sky. *“What is it?”*

“I don’t mean to cause you alarm, but several pillars of smoke have risen up across the city within the last few minutes.”

“Fires?”

“Most likely. Given how much smoke there is, these are no small flames.”

Joker reached for his comm and switched between the emergency channels.

“-ere are those firetrucks!?”

“Th-there are multiple fires in progress! Other stations are scrambling to cover them all, but they might not get there in time!”

“Backdraft is trying to put one out, but it’s too much! Can’t we draw in more heroes!? Multiple civilians are at risk if we can’t extinguish them!”

“W-we’re trying, but not many have quirks suited to take care of fires.”

“So we’re just supposed to sit here and do nothing!?”

“La Brava,” She startled at the seriousness in Joker’s voice. “Can you see what’s going on? It sounds like there’s trouble.”

“R-right.” She whipped out her laptop, and her eyes widened after a few minutes of typing. “Th-this is...”

“What’s wrong?” Gentle Criminal frowned as he looked at the screen.

She swiveled her computer around so Joker could see the red spots blooming across the map.

“These are all fires reported in the last ten minutes, and they’re spreading.”

“This isn’t natural.” Joker frowned. “Where’s the worst one?”

“Why?”

“There aren’t enough resources to cover them all, and we can’t sit around and do nothing.” Joker scowled. “Unlike the *heroes* .”

La Brava swallowed as she got to work. “The one with the highest possible casualty rate would be an apartment fire on the east side of town.”

“What about the rest?”

“A warehouse, a few storefronts, the rest look like abandoned buildings. Oh wait...” She squinted at the screen. “Never mind. The

largest one is at a park, but heroes evacuated the surrounding area.”

“That’s strange.” Mona narrowed his eyes. “There wouldn’t happen to be any Nomu around, would there?”

Ice sank into Joker’s stomach. “This better not turn out like Hosu.”

“Don’t worry.” La Brava said. “There haven’t been any reports of Nomu in Musutafu.”

Joker and Mona sighed in relief.

“We have completed our objective, so there is no harm with checking in on the situation.” Gentle Criminal put a hand to La Brava’s shoulder. “As long as we’re careful not to draw attention to ourselves.”

“I guess. This whole thing is suspicious, though.” She said.

“I know, but we’re not sitting around to let it happen.” Joker turned, his tailcoat whipping through the air. “Apartment building it is. Let’s move!”

“Follow my wings, Trickster.” Yatagarasu said, *“I’ll give you a boost!”*

Joker sprinted from the rooftop, vibrant colors splashing underneath Yatagarasu’s faithful shadow. Mona huddled down as Yatagarasu cast Sukukaja, Joker’s footsteps quickening with a flash of green light.

Mona chuckled. “Their speed is impressive, but they having nothing on a Sukukaja.”

“Hey! We heard that!” La Brava said.

“If speed is in question, then why not have a race?” Gentle asked with amusement.

“Let’s all get there safely and quietly.” Joker said as Mona winced.
“Mona and I learned our lesson about races last time.”

“R-right. Apologies.” Gentle whispered.

The rest of the trip was spent in silence, until the taste of ash stained the air and burned their noses. A vibrant glow flooded the surrounding blocks. Joker and Mona stopped on a building across the street from the complex, gaping as bright embers danced on a scalding breeze.

Tongues of blue flame forked out of windows and spilled stifling heat out onto the streets. A pillar of black smoke rose up into the sky and choked out the stars. Backdraft sprayed a constant stream of water to douse the flames, but it was no use. Despite the danger, a crowd had gathered around the block, recording videos as if it were some grand spectacle.

“Are they the result of a quirk? ” Joker looked over his shoulder to Gentle and La Brava, cast in deep shadows from the bright flames.
“No normal fire would be this color.”

“It’s possible.” La Brava shook her head. “There are plenty of fire based quirks, but something *this* strong would be pretty rare.”

Suddenly, the entrance burst open, and three men came stumbling out, clutching onto the middle one for dear life.

“N-no! Let me go!” He struggled against the arms holding him. “I have to go back in!”

“It’s too dangerous! You’ll be reduced to ashes in that heat!”

“B-but my daughter-!”

“No way! We’d never make it up to the fourth floor in that! Do you want to die!?”

“What life is worth living without her!?” He flailed like a wild animal. “She’s the only thing I have left!!”

Mona glanced warily as Joker touched the center of his mask, activating his Third Eye. The rest of the world drowned out as he stared at the building, the roar of flames became muffled and his vision gained a soft blue tint. A window on the fourth floor glowed a vibrant gold.

Joker let his Third Eye close, and nodded at Mona.

“Be careful.” Mona said as he hopped off Joker’s shoulder. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

“You worry too much.” Joker grinned as Yatagarasu fell back into the mindscape. “Byakko has Drain Fire. I’ll be fine.”

He was about to jump, but he was stopped. Joker looked at Gentle Criminal’s white cane hooking around his elbow, his eyes trailing back to Gentle’s own. The blue flames reflected his wide eyed disbelief, his mouth dropping open as if it were unstoppered.

“You can’t go in there!” He cried. “That’s certain death!”

“What are you thinking!?” La Brava whirled around to Mona. “A-and you were about to let him go!?”

“Relax.” Joker said with a wave of his hand.

“How can we relax when you were about to leap into a burning building?” Gentle furrowed his brow. “Our trip to the hospital is still fresh in everyone’s minds! The heroes would catch wind and be upon us in no time!”

“I’m not gonna let somebody else die just to protect my own skin!” Joker’s shout made them wince, and guilt flickered in Gentle’s eyes. He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Powers from a different

world, remember? Byakko gets *healed* by fire damage. I'll be fine, so just stand back and watch!"

Byakko reared his head and valiantly roared, "*Let's go!*"

He shot his grapple, winking at La Brava and Gentle Criminal before taking the plunge. His body was highlighted in blue as he swung through the air with a grin. The crowd exploded into cheers when they saw him.

"Please, save my daughter!!" The man screamed before Joker crashed through the window.

Joker ducked and rolled as the glass peppered the ground around him. Immediately, the thick smoke burned his eyes and the entire hallway was smothered by blackness. The heat should have stung and made his body break out in sweat, but Byakko's Drain Fire made the unbearable heat refreshing.

It was as if he was being recharged like a battery.

"*We must hurry!*" The Caped Warrior shouted. "*Get the child and leave with utmost haste!*"

"*I agree.*" Ishtar nodded. "*A child would expire without Byakko's protection!*"

A pit of worry sprouted like thorns in his stomach. He closed his watery eyes as he ducked under the thick cloud.

"I need to focus." He whispered.

The world was muted in a blue haze. Third Eye cut through the smoke and highlighted the ominous creaks of scorched support beams. The flames weaved and danced around him as his footsteps flowed one after another, kicking up fresh ash. He stopped in front of a wall of fire cutting the apartment in half.

“Don’t worry, Trickster.” Byakko reassured with an icy breath. *“My power will let us pass unharmed.”*

Joker nodded. He stuck his arm through first. The blaze parted underneath his hand like a waterfall. It was oddly alluring.

“Oh!”

He jumped back as if it had really burned him, but no harm was done.

“What’s wrong, Cerberus?”

“Nothing, Master! It’s just... these flames feel familiar.”

Joker frowned, but Byakko’s snarl interrupted him.

“Don’t distract him! Let’s hurry before we’re too late.”

He crept into the flames. It reminded him of his bond with Cerberus, but unlike Cerberus’ wonderful colors and warmth, these flames were mad with hunger, the brilliant blue devouring everything until there was nothing left. Finally, he passed through and Third Eye revealed a golden door at the end of a choked hallway. His heart pounded as he stopped in front of the blackened door.

“Stand back!” Joker shouted. “I’m coming in!”

He waited a second before he reared up and kicked the door in. Burnt wood scattered into splinters and he dove inside. Third Eye clouded the true color of the room, but his stomach twisted at stuffed animals and other toys all stained by ash or melted by the heat. He turned towards the glowing closet door and threw it open.

There, huddled in the corner, was a small girl. Barely seven years old and wearing a white sundress. Her brown hair done in pigtails.

He swallowed thickly as nausea overwhelmed him. He put a hand to her shoulder and shook her, but she was eerily still. Dread poured

into his other selves like a burst dam.

"Trickster...." Alice whispered.

"She's... No!" Joker shivered when Titania's voice broke. *"We must save her! You will save her, won't you!?"*

"Titania, it's no use. She's already-"

"Don't give me that, you harlot!" Titania bellowed, Ishtar and the others recoiled at her volume. *"We revived that hero! This is just a child, she doesn't deserve this fate!!"*

"Master cannot switch masks!" Cerberus said.

"I agree." Byakko said coolly. *"Use an item, otherwise the flames will devour you in an instant."*

"It is up to you, Trickster." Arsene whispered hesitantly. *"We know the dangers of revival, and will be at your back. No matter what."*

Joker cursed under his breath as he huddled the girl to his chest, and with his other hand he reached into his pockets for a Balm Of Life. He dipped his thumb into the cool blue ointment and drew a line on her forehead. The Balm sparkled faintly as it melded with her skin, a soft green light drowning out the blinding blue as iridescent vines and flowers wrapped around her. A crystal butterfly sprouted from one of the flowers and fluttered to the girl's forehead, before disappearing.

Relief flooded him when her eyes slowly fluttered open. A hazel brown painted by the azure light pooling around them. She stared at him for a second, confused, before they widened in realization.

"Oh, I know you." Her tiny voice tugged at his heart. *"Daddy says that vigilantes are bad."*

"You-" Joker blinked, and a strangled laugh escaped from his throat. *"Would a bad guy be rescuing you?"*

At that moment, her eyes flicked to her room and lit up in horror. The flames were encroaching, the smoke growing thicker.

“Here.” He threw the Balm in his pocket and got out a handkerchief. “Cover your face with this so that you don’t breathe in the smoke.”

“O-okay...”

“Hang on to me.” He grinned despite the flames licking at his heels. “I’ll get you out of here and back to your dad. I promise.”

She nodded and huddled into his chest, her little hands trembling as they grasped his tailcoat.

He scooped her up in both arms and whirled around to the nearest exit.

“Trickster, wait!!”

He took a single step before the earth shattered and the sky fell upon them in a thunderous boom. A beastly roar rang in their ears before everything went dark.

“Joker! You better not be dead or I’ll go down there and finish you off myself!”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.” He croaked.

“See? I told you he was fine!” Mona cried, but there was a hint of relief in his voice.

“Joker! Are you crazy!?” La Brava screeched.

“Don’t you ask me that every day?”

“I feel like we have to ask you on a daily basis, to check on our own sanity.” Gentle Criminal murmured. *“What’s your situation?”*

Joker coughed as he opened his eyes. It was pitch black and faint heat burned his cheeks, and he was cramped in the endless void.

“Mr. Vigilante, are you okay?”

He looked to the tiny bundle wrapped in his arms, “I’m fine. What about you?”

“I’m okay! I-it’s scary and dark, but the big kitty saved us!”

Joker looked to where she pointed.

“Trickster!” Giant glacier eyes blinked. “I am glad that you’re alright.”

“Byakko?” Joker shifted when he felt Byakko’s long tail wrapped around his body, the pouf of his tail supporting his head. “What are you...?”

Byakko was curled protectively over them, bearing the weight of the entire building on his shoulders, his tail guarded them from the spikes of broken wood at their backs. The King Of Beast’s muscles strained and his claws dug trenches into scorched wood and stone.

“Can you get us out of here?” Joker asked.

“Hmph, this is child’s play!”

Byakko shifted with Herculean effort. Charred wood snapped and the crumbled building moved. Joker tucked the girl’s head into the crook of his neck as burnt splinters rained down on them. Pillars of light pierced the darkness as great chunks of debris were moved. Fresh air never tasted so sweet.

“Wait!” A voice shouted. “Did you hear that?”

“Something’s moving!”

“Get back! It’s not stable!”

Byakko roared as he gave his final push.

Voices cried out when broken detritus scattered into the atmosphere, and a plume dust erupted. Joker was glad that he gave the girl a handkerchief, so that she wouldn't have to deal with grit staining her throat. Byakko helped him up as he suppressed coughs, putting a hand to the mighty beast's side so that they could get to safety. The little girl wrapped her arms around his neck.

They stepped over the building's remains and emerged from the dust.

He froze when a sea of eyes stared at him, and it was so quiet that they would hear a pin drop. Civilians, first responders, and the hero Backdraft were frozen in place. Then, chaos. The crowd erupted with noise and flashing lights from countless phone cameras blinded them.

A growl rumbled in Byakko's throat as he stepped around them to block their view.

"Nanako? Nanako!!"

"Dad!"

Joker set Nanako down and she scrambled towards her father, bare feet slapping the concrete. They met in the middle, and the man wrapped his arms around her, fingers grasping the back of her burnt dress.

"Nanako!" He pulled back, eyes alight. "Are you okay!? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No, I'm alright!" Her pigtails bounced as she shook her head. "Joker made me all better!"

Tears flooded his eyes and he looked at Joker as if he had hung the moon.

“Thank you! My daughter means everything to me.”

“No thanks necessary.” Joker said as he stuck his hands in his pockets. “She’s one brave little girl.”

His lip wobbled and he pulled Nanako into another tight hug.

“Dad, stop crying! You’re getting snot all over my dress!” She held out the handkerchief. “Use this instead. Mr. Vigilante gave it to me!”

This only made him cry harder, his sobs meshing with the crowd’s cheers.

Byakko’s ears pricked up. “Trickster.”

“Yeah.” Joker lost his mirth. “I hear them too.”

Countless sirens pierced the night air, and were growing louder by the second.

“Go.” Joker blinked as Nanako’s father huddled her close. “I won’t rat you out, not after you saved my entire world.”

Joker nodded as Byakko vanished. The crowd cheered for him as he shot out his grapple and disappeared over the rooftops. The wails of over a dozen police vehicles stopped around the decimated building, and officers spilled out onto the scene. Heroes weren’t far behind.

“Move aside!” An officer shouted. “We’re here to capture a dangerous vigilante!”

The sea of people huddled closer together, forming an impenetrable wall.

“Oh yeah?” A man crossed his arms and glared at the group of officers. “‘Dangerous’, you say?”

“Well, you sure got here quick.” An old woman jabbed her thumb at the pile of blackened debris. “Where were you people when this

building was on fire, huh!? If it wasn't for Joker than that little girl would've died!"

Another officer in the back whispered into his radio as the crowd jeered at them. Suddenly, streams of water separated the mob from the heroes and officers.

"Please, everyone calm down!" Backdraft said. "We're all on the same side!"

Joker heard their outrage as he broke out into a sprint, leaping across two buildings before a voice trickled in his ear.

"Joker, are you okay?" La Brava whispered.

"I'm-" The grit in the back of his throat stung, and he broke out in a coughing fit.

"That's it. We're coming to meet you!"

"I'm alright." He cleared his throat as he stopped on the next building. "But it's too dangerous. Let the heat die down and we'll rendezvous at point J. Understand?"

"I... I don't know about this." Mona said.

"There are many police officers and heroes gathering at the scene. Running in a large group would draw attention."

"Gentle is right. Splitting up and waiting for things to calm down is the best thing to do right now. Sorry for the trouble."

"You saved a little girl's life." Mona said with a tinge of pride. *"You shouldn't apologize for that."*

"Yeah. See you guys soon?"

"Just be careful or else!" La Brava said. *"I'll work on scrambling their signal, but don't give them an opening. You hear me, mister!?"*

“Loud and clear.”

“We’ll be waiting at the rendezvous.” Gentle said. *“Don’t keep us waiting, alright?”*

Joker nodded, even though they couldn’t see him. He took a deep breath before hopping over to the next building, his painted steps splashing the gravel rooftop. He was a shadow cutting across the city, but then, he heard it.

Thud.

He stopped to listen.

Thud.

It was closer this time.

Thud.

Seth snarled. *“Trickster, that sounds exactly like-”*

THUD.

Joker whipped around to see Ryukyu diving, jaws wide open and claws extended. He swore as he rolled out of the way, her outstretched hand missing him by a hair’s breadth. His stomach leapt up to his throat as the wind buffeted him off of his feet. He grasped his dagger and stabbed the rooftop as dust and gravel exploded into the sky, his boots inches away from the dark alley below.

Ryukyu hovered over him, her wing beats beating back his clothes and hair with mighty gusts.

“Surrender, Joker!” She howled. “This is your only warning!”

“I’d usually ask a lady to take me out to dinner first!” He blew a kiss and winked at her. “But we’ll have to take a rain check! I hope you

aren't too heartbroken, Ryukyu!"

"You *brat* ! Fine, don't say I didn't warn you!"

She folded in her wings and dropped from the sky.

Joker wrenched his dagger from the gravel and whipped out his pistol. Gunshots echoed and silver bullets whizzed through the air. The dragon snarled as she extended her wings and flapped hard to avoid them, but Joker was relentless.

He clicked his tongue when the magazine was empty and refilled it with lightning fast reflexes.

"Trickster, let me fight!" Seth howled as he beat his own wings.

"Seth?" Joker watched as Ryukyu circled him like a vulture.

"Shitstain was a disappointing battle, but this!" Seth's bloodlust trickled into the mindscape. *"This might be a worthy battle!! Let me fight her while you get away!"*

"But what about Eraser-"

"I'll flee into the mindscape if I sense that wretched man. I can disappear at any time, you cannot. I'll not allow you to be cornered again!"

Joker threw himself to the side as Ryukyu took another swipe for him, and it earned her a second round of bullets. Her scream sent shivers down his spine as a few pierced through her wing membranes.

"Allow me." Ishtar's power flared. *"It'll aid the both of you."*

The purple, green, and red lights of a Heat Riser flashed around him. Unimaginable power coursed through his veins. Another mask took Ishtar's place.

"I'll lend my power as well." The Observer whispered as he cast his spell. *"This hero does not stand a chance against our unified might."*

Ryukyu startled as three orbs of light spun around her before converging on her body. Her strength faltered and her mind felt like it was drowning in sap. She grunted as she flapped her wings harder to stay aloft, her eyes alight with rage.

"What did you do to me!?"

"You'll find out." Joker smirked as if the battle was won. "See ya!"

Her roar echoed through the city as she dove for him. She was close enough to see the whites of his eyes before she was blinded by a pillar of blue light. Ryukyu cried out as her vision turned spotty, and within the moment of blindness her world spun as she was tackled with the force of a bullet train.

Booming laughter reached her ears as she beat her wings and rose high over the city.

"What's wrong, hero!?" Seth bellowed as he soared upwards to meet her. "Feeling a little weak in the knees?"

She shook her head to clear the blindness and glanced down at the rooftop. Joker was gone.

"Where do you think you're looking!? This is just between you and me!" Seth was as fast as a missile, his body highlighted by the silvery moon. "You'll get killed if you don't focus!"

"Oh yeah? I won't go down that easy!"

"That's the spirit!" Seth cackled. "But I'll show you the difference between a mortal and a god!"

"That's ridiculous." Ryukyu scoffed. "You're not a real-"

Seth flared his massive black wings, the smaller pair on his head flapped rapidly.

Static danced through the air as dark thunderclouds drowned out the moon. The first drops of rain fell from the heavens and a flash of lightning ripped through the sky. The rumble of thunder followed. Seth beat his wings and shot towards her like a bullet. Crackles of lightning slithered around him as he rapidly spun through the air.

The strange malaise plaguing her body made her too slow to react as he barreled into her. Pain lanced through her whole body as she plummeted to the ground like a meteor, the concrete offered no cushioning as it crumbled under her weight. Another roll of thunder masked the impact.

She grunted as she pulled herself from the crater. Dust clung to her wet scales.

“This is Ryukyu, requesting backup!” She gasped, but her communicator only registered static. “Hello? What’s wrong with this thing?”

A nearby rooftop crunched, and she whirled up to see Seth glaring down at her, his golden eyes as bright as the sun and serpentine tongue wagging in glee. Lingering streams of lightning coursed over his body.

“Nobody is coming for you.”

“Do you think my friends would just ignore all of this?” Despite herself, she smirked at the smoking crater in the ground. “It won’t take them long to find us, and you’ll be outnumbered. Surrender! If Joker turns himself in now, then I promise that no harm will come to him!”

“As if!” Seth cried. “I’ll never let him fall into your hands as long as I still breathe!”

“Is your life really worth sacrificing?” She asked incredulously. “Joker left you behind! Aren’t you angry at him?”

“Angry!? I’m far from *angry* !” Seth howled with laughter. In truth, the glittering golden sands tying him to the Trickster was his ultimate treasure. A treasure worth dying for. “I wouldn’t expect a mere mortal like you to understand our bond.”

“Then explain it to me!” Ryukyu narrowed her eyes. “Why would he abandon you like this?”

His laughter grew in volume until it melded with the raging thunder. He suddenly stabbed the tips of his wings into the rooftop and launched himself.

She reared up to meet him head on, the sickening *crunch* of their collision echoed down the streets, timed with a deadly cacophony of thunder and lightning. The darkness was as thick as a fog, and the rain fell in whipping sheets. Seth dug his claws into her belly as they rolled, his wings grasping hers as he dug his teeth into her neck.

She kicked her back legs, but it was as if she was trying to push a titanium wall. Their deadly roll slowed down, and she used the final momentum to clasp her front legs over his neck. With a lurching motion, she swung Seth’s long body in an arc, his claws and teeth ripping free as his back was slammed into the street with a thunderous echo, mimicking the dark sky overhead.

She clamped her claws around his neck.

“I win.” She said with a pant. “Give it up.”

Seth’s laughter was quieter this time, but it was a vile sound that slithered in her ears like slimy serpents.

“You can’t be victorious with this petty strength!”

Seth's body contorted with blinding speed, her claws raking against his leathery skin as if it were steel, sparks flying and sputtering out onto the damp pavement. Her mouth dropped open when he swung his neck like a battering ram.

The blow cracked her scales and she tumbled back, claws gouging the concrete.

There was a moment of stillness where they studied one another, tension stifling the air. She tried to ignore the itch of blood trickling down her neck and belly, but her gut dropped like a boulder when Seth was uninjured. Not a *single* scratch was on him.

She raked her claws like a charging bull, and Seth's eyes sparkled with mad bloodlust.

Seth breathed in, his throat lighting up like a furnace.

Ryukyu shielded herself with her leathery wings, but Seth never got a chance to attack.

"YEEEEEEEEEEAAAAH!!!!!!!"

A familiar voice attack barreled down the street, hitting Seth straight on. Seth shook his head as the attack washed over him, snarling at the newcomer before spewing a jet of flame. It cut through the rain with hissing steam.

Present Mic squawked as he was about to be a pile of ash.

"Present Mic!" Ryukyu jumped in front of him, the flames licking her scales but doing no harm. "What are you doing!?"

"You looked like you needed help!" Present Mic grinned. "The cavalry has arrived!"

"Lacquered Chain Prison!!"

Seth slithered away from the branches sprouting from the rooftops, where Kamui Woods hung from. Other heroes, like Cementoss and Midnight, joined the fray with a small squad of police officers. Mount Lady ran to Kamui Woods' side, growing taller than the surrounding buildings. Ryukyu saw a flash, and her eyes trailed over to a crowd of onlookers unbothered by the destruction and foul weather.

"Everyone stay back and wait for my signal!" Ryukyu commanded with a flare of her wings, then she pinned Seth with a glare. "This is your final warning. Surrender now or face all of us."

Seth's tail wagged as if he were a playful puppy. He raised his head to the sky and cackled, the insanity of a bloodletting battle filled his entire body like a rush of adrenaline. He whipped towards the enamoured crowd, or more importantly, their recording phones.

"You think this is enough to take me down? ME!?" He trumpeted. "Hear my name and kneel before me, mortals! I am SETH! God of Storms, Deserts, and Chaos! What hope do you have to match my majesty!? Bring it on, *heroes!* "

Ryukyu and other heroes' eyes were wide, the shocked silence outweighing the rain.

"No? How disappointing." Seth reared up on his hind legs as he stretched his voluminous wings to the sky. "Then let me demonstrate my power!"

Seth's harrowing cry was as deep as a whale's song. It vibrated in their bones and shook the foundations of the buildings around them. The heavens listened. Clouds churned overhead, and static tingled over their bodies.

Ryukyu startled. "Get *down!!*"

A shower of golden bolts rained down from the sky with a *crack* . The shockwave shattered windows and cracked stone, knocking the

nearby civilians off their feet, but they were unharmed. The heroes weren't as lucky.

Mount Lady collapsed and shrunk down to normal size, as she had thrown herself over her comrades to protect them. A large number of police and lesser heroes collapsed like rag dolls.

"Mount Lady!!" Kamui Woods shouted. "You'll pay for that!"

Another scream ripped through the air as Ryukyu charged at Seth, her eyes alight with rage. Riot Gun punctured through her scales and several trickles of blood stained the pavement, but her adrenaline and anger were a deadly mix.

Seth stabbed his talons into the ground and met her head on. Literally. Their heads slammed together, but something was wrong. He was weakening.

Ryukyu growled as her claws gouged concrete. At last, the quirk Joker hit her with faded, her strength returning in droves. The rumbles grew distant and the rain was reduced to a sprinkle. He snarled as she took a step forward, and Seth's claws scrabbled over pavement. His body shook and he was losing ground. She reared her head up and knocked him off balance, her arm was a blur as she struck first with a sickening *thud* . Then another. And another.

The blows would rend trees and shatter boulders.

Seth's constant laughter made her blood boil as she continued her rapid assault, until finally, she finished by spinning around and smacked him with her tail.

"Now!!" She shouted.

Kamui Woods attacked as Cementoss put both hands to the concrete.

Seth howled as thick branches wrapped around him, compressing his wings and legs into his body. Heat spewed from Seth's throat, but Ryukyu slammed a paw down to close his mouth. The final layer came from Cementoss, who had sunk Seth a good few feet into the concrete as if it was quicksand.

"You... lost." Ryukyu said, panting.

Seth's body went limp, but that *infuriating* laughter spilled from his throat as any able bodies surrounded him.

"Ryukyu, you're injured!" Present Mic said as he rushed to her side. "Ambulances are already on their way!!"

"There's no need. I'm fine." Ryukyu growled. "Focus on getting help for everyone else, as well as getting proper transport to take this one into custody."

Seth cackled louder, as if the raw destruction around them was just some joke. Some wriggling thing in the back of her mind told her that she was missing something, but her hammering heart blocked it out.

"R-right!" Mic's grin fell as he cast a nervous glance at Seth. "The radios are still a bit wonky, but we're able to get a signal through!"

Ryukyu nodded. She turned and was about to give Cementoss her thanks, but both he and Midnight had their heads together, whispering. Midnight glanced at Seth, her eyes alight with... fear? Midnight's hand flew to her communicator and she whispered something.

Cementoss was like a stoic golem beside her.

"Victory is *mine* ."

Ryukyu whipped back towards Seth. "You're buried under cement and tied with Kamui Wood's branches, and you still think you've won?"

The tip of Seth's tail wagged in its cement prison. Seth pulled his lips back to show rows of razor sharp fangs, Present mic gulped and startled back, but Ryukyu stayed put. A harrowing wail escaped from his lips, with the nearby heroes clamping their hands over their ears. Ryukyu growled as embers spewed from his mouth, swatting Seth's mouth shut with enough force that it cracked the pavement.

"Enough, you-"

"Leave him alone!!"

Ryukyu didn't see the rock until it bounced off of her nose. She blinked and turned towards the crowd. More debris tumbled from her scales as they booed at her.

"He didn't do anything wrong!"

"Look at this mess! If it wasn't for *you* then everything would have been fine!"

"Let him go!"

"Get out of our city, Ryukyu! You're not wanted here!"

"Wh-what?" Ryukyu stumbled back as rocks and other debris pelted her.

"Now, now!" Present Mic waved his arms. "Everybody just calm down!"

Police officers held back the crowd with the help of Kamui Woods, but their glares pierced through Ryukyu's soul.

"Not even the gods can defy the will of the masses." Seth said, eyes smoldering. "You're no different, *hero*."

Those words would haunt her nightmares, and her heart plummeted when Seth dissipated in a shower of embers.

Before anybody asks, no that WAS NOT the real Nanako. Here's how it went down.

Me: Hmm, what name should I give this little OC-

Brain: Name her Nanako for another persona reference ;)

Me:

Brain:

Me:

Brain: ;)))

Me: Alright then.

IMPORTANT TO NOTE that the plot will pick up rather quickly from here. This chapter officially marks the first step towards a Point Of No Return. I hope you all prepare yourselves ;)

ALSO another milestone!!! Over 150k hits and 4k kudos? You guys are crazy, thank you so much!! <3 :D

Devil

Chapter 45: Devil

“Joker.”

He whirled around at the voice. A demon, with floating black hair and red eyes gleaming from slitted goggles, was staring him down from the other side of the roof.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[sirblack4](#) on deviantart!

Joker crouched like a gargoyle on the corner of a rooftop, grinning.

The wails of police vehicles were a distant siren call. Any heroes fled like bats out of hell, and the streets were bare of any civilian life. A pleasant chill accompanied the smell of fresh rain. The city lights seeped into a city doused by the downpour, painting a myriad of colors into the streets. Moonlight streamed through the clouds and added a veil of silver.

“Well, well, well.” Joker chuckled as Seth triumphantly returned.
“Somebody had fun.”

“Hmph, it wasn’t a glorious fight to the death like I wanted, but it was satisfactory.”

“Better than Shitstain?”

"Alice! What did we say about swearing?" Ishtar scolded.

"Yes!" Seth nuzzled Alice's hair. "It was much better than the battle with Shitstain!"

"Don't encourage her, Seth!"

"It's good that your fight was so loud." Byakko interrupted. "The chaos drew their attention away from the Trickster."

"That," Kohryu rumbled, "And the rain may have extinguished other fires."

"Bah, I didn't care about those." Seth huffed. "I wanted to show that you are not the only dragon who can create storms, Grandpa. Did you see how they trembled before me!?"

Kohryu chuckled. "It was marvelous."

"Too bad we used so much ammo." Joker stepped back into the shadows and hopped over to the next building. "I should've bought more."

"It couldn't be helped." The Caped Warrior said.

"Indeed." Ishtar tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "It was a useful deterrent for that wretched hero."

"Besides," Alice giggled. "Big brother can always restock next time."

"I guess." Joker sighed as he looked out to the rainy city, his hand reaching for the comms. "Let's regroup with the others."

"Right." Ishtar said. "They'll want to know that you're-"

Cold, dead silence.

It was the type of eerie disquiet that came after an execution in the Velvet room, before a new persona was born from the blood of the

old. It trickled into his skull like an icy stream, falling freely down his spine to fill the empty chasm in his chest. His costume wavered, and he grabbed that single spider's thread of power to keep himself from drowning.

"Joker."

He whirled around at the voice. A demon, with floating black hair and red eyes gleaming from slitted goggles, was staring him down from the other side of the roof. A single moment was all it took. *One single moment* to shatter his entire world and fill him with dread. He took one step back. Then another.

Eraserhead held his hands up in surrender. "Relax. I want to—"

Joker broke out in a frantic sprint.

"Kid, wait!" Eraserhead called. "I just want to talk!"

Joker was already onto the next building when the silvery scarf shot out. He threw himself over the fire escape as the rustle of fabric whipped over his head, and Eraserhead followed the sharp taps of metal downwards. Joker plummeted from the final platform as the hollow ice crackled through his chest and down his limbs. His ears rung as he forced his heavy legs to move, *move, MOVE!* His painted footsteps were all but gone as he threw himself around the corner, water splashing at his feet.

Why was it so hard to breathe? The hollow ice in his chest sharpened, as if there were demon's claws trying to rip out his heart. He slowed to a stop as bile burned his throat. He put a hand on the wall to keep himself steady, panting.

A shadow dropped from above with eyes like smoldering rubies. The hairs on the back of Joker's neck raised as Eraserhead studied him, his brow creased.

“Give them back!” Joker ripped his dagger from its sheath. “Give them back *now!* ”

Eraserhead inhaled sharply.

Joker’s voice held the same broken note as when he called out to Mona at the raid. Angry. Sorrowful. Desperate, yet controlled. The silvery swipes of Joker’s dagger were like flashes of moonlight under his eyes, and they fell into an intricate tango as Eraserhead refused to fight back. His heart lurched when Joker’s next swipe took a few hairs along with it.

Still, Joker was slowing down, his breathing becoming labored. His strikes became less accurate.

Eraserhead sidestepped the next attack. Joker stumbled.

He took a chance and shot out his capture weapon. The silvery fabric entangled Joker like a fly in a spider’s web, but Eraserhead took no satisfaction like the spider would. Quite the opposite. His heart was heavy as Joker struggled, grunting as his back hit the hard wall. Joker’s dagger dropped with a clatter.

Joker blinked, pupils tiny in the face of fear, and his heart was fluttering like a bird in a cage. The edges of his vision wavered as he stared the demon in the eye. Joker threw on a shaky grin despite the sweat trickling down his brow. He wiggled his fingers through the tight fabric, his bright red gloves peeking through.

“Congratulations, Eraser.” He spat. “It looks like you caught me... *red handed!*”

The man rolled his eyes and was about to scold him, when he bit it back. Joker was trembling, his breath wheezing between strained teeth. Eraserhead put a firm hand on Joker’s shoulder, but he retracted it when the kid flinched violently.

“Calm down.” Eraserhead spoke softly. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Like you haven’t already!” Joker chirped, teeth bared like a wild animal. “So, what fun are we going to have tonight? Drugging? Beating? A *drugged beating* ? Been there, done that-”

With a flick of Eraserhead’s wrist he wrapped Joker’s mouth with another band of fabric. Eraserhead’s eyes were on *fire* at this point, but he refused to blink just yet. Joker’s words were cemented into his mind.

“Listen here, Problem Child.” Joker stiffened as Eraserhead continued. “I’m *not* going to hurt you. I’m going to speak, and you’re going to listen. Quietly.”

Joker rolled his neck and shoulders until the extra fabric around his mouth fell away.

“Why would I ever listen to *you* ?”

“Because *after* you hear what I have to say...” Eraserhead relaxed, allowing the fabric to loosen. “Then I’ll let you go. My radio is off and I won’t report you to the police. You’ll be scot free.”

“I-” Joker’s jaw dropped, and he narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Firstly, because I know what crazy stunts you pulled tonight and I wanted to make sure that you were *okay* . And secondly...”Eraserhead sighed, “Because I made many mistakes and want to make things right.”

“I was just *dandy* until you came and ruined the party!” Joker raised his chin. “Untie me and return my powers. Give me the basic human decency of being on even speaking terms. Isn’t that the least you can do, *hero?*”

“I can’t-”

“Give. Them. Back!”

The hero recoiled as he stared at the desperation in Joker's eyes. The gears cranked in Eraserhead's mind, and he sighed after another moment or two, his shoulders falling.

"Fine. But I'll activate my quirk again if I think you're going to attack me. Got it?"

Joker nodded with gritted teeth.

The silver scarf fell away from Joker's body and the man blinked, his hair falling around his face and shoulders. Joker doubled over as he was slammed with screams and howls. Eraserhead flinched as Joker grasped his head.

"Joker?"

"Trickster!"

"Master!!"

"I'll drown him-"

"Let me-hee PUNCH HIM HO-"

"-vour him-"

"Skewer him-"

"-y teddies want to-"

"Everyone-"

"Slash him to ribbons!"

"Problem Child?"

"Pierce him with my weap-"

"Flay his skin with my magic-"

“-urn him until there’s nothing but ash!”

“SILENCE!!” The voices ceased as Arsene’s power slowly thawed the icy emptiness. *“We’re overwhelming him.”*

“Breathe.” Gentle hands grasped his shoulders. “You’re going to be alright.”

He scraped in a few wheezing breaths and forced them out. The ringing in his ears faded, and the weight on his shoulders-

Warm. Kind. All too familiar.

... Sojiro?

Hope sparked within him. But no, Sojiro wasn’t there when he looked up. Instead, it was the *impostor* .

“Don’t touch me!”

His hope was dashed on the rocks as he batted Eraserhead’s hands away and scrambled backwards, disturbing several cans littering the alleyway. Joker furiously scrubbed his eyes before he glared at the man.

“You weren’t responding.” Eraserhead held his hands up. “And I know what an anxiety attack looks like. I was only trying to help.”

“Whatever.” Joker scowled. “If you want to talk so badly, then *talk* .”

Arsene hovered at the edge of reality. Unlike their previous encounter, Arsene was calm, collected, and ready to act if his Trickster needed him. He wasn’t blinded by rage, but it still bubbled within their hearts at a low simmer.

Kohryu’s soothing presence reassured both of them.

Eraserhead’s lips pursed. The man took off his goggles, revealing so many bags under his eyes that it outmatched Hitoshi’s. Joker

watched him like a hawk. He tensed when Eraserhead reached into his pockets for a small vial.

“They’re eye drops.” He droned. “My quirk gives me bad dry eye. I go through three bottles a week dealing with my students.”

Joker scanned the alleyway for an exit, but his eyes landed on Eraserhead. The simple act of using the eye drops was so normal. So *mundane* . Yet, it had left the man open for attack. Was it a show of trust? Or was this man just an idiot?

Joker doubted it was the latter.

Finally, Eraserhead put the vial away, and exhausted coffee colored eyes stared into his own.

“I’m sorry.”

Joker froze. “What?”

“I said I’m sorry.” Eraserhead tucked his hands in his pockets. “For how we treated you after the USJ. For not being able to stop the raid. For misunderstanding your whole situation, and... for hurting you so badly. I know what happened when I erased your quirk during the raid.”

Joker’s cold chuckle sent a chill down Eraserhead’s spine.

“Really? You think you know what you did to me? Are you so certain, *hero* ? ” Joker tilted his head, locks of dark hair sweeping over his mask. “You don’t have *any* idea of the pain you put me through!”

“Let me speak!”

“... Are you sure, Arsene?”

“I will not harm him, but he needs to understand the gravity of his words! Allow me to pull back the curtain and reveal the truth!”

“One of them wants to come out.”

Eraserhead stiffened. “What?”

“Someone wants to speak with you.” Joker’s golden eyes intensified. “He won’t hurt you, I’ll make sure of that. But if you think you can apologize like it’s no big deal, then you have another thing coming.”

Eraserhead was quiet for several seconds, his jaw muscles tensing.

“Alright.”

Arsene, birthed in dancing blue flames, entered reality. He snuffed out the light, and curls of smoke wafted from his wings as he stepped towards Eraserhead. The *clack clack* of his knife heels gouging the concrete was nothing compared to how Arsene towered over the hero, his mask glowing like hot coals. Arsene’s wings surrounded Eraserhead, the inky black feathers reflecting faint translucent colors. His jacket creaked as he leaned down so that they were face to face.

Eraserhead didn’t move, even as Arsene raised deadly claws towards his neck.

“You’re ‘sorry.’” Arsene hissed as his feathers quivered. “Do you think an empty apology is enough!? Your hollow words mean *nothing* when the state of Joker’s soul is at stake!”

“His... soul?” Eraserhead whispered in horror. “What are you talking about?”

“Your foolishness tore his very being asunder! Not only did you almost kill Kohryu, but it would have sounded Joker’s death knell by shattering his soul! And all you can say to that is ‘I’m sorry’!?” Arsene snarled and lashed out at wall, his claws cleaving through solid brick. “You’re lucky that Kohryu has forgiven your transgressions, or I would’ve slain you where you stand!”

Eraserhead was as white as a sheet. The hero looked down at his hands, and then knotted them into fists. He swallowed as he looked back up to Arsene's volcanic mask, eyes hardening.

"I... I never wanted to hurt him."

"Your 'intentions' are meaningless." Arsene said.

"Not when I want to repair what damage was done!" Aizawa countered. "*Especially* when I want to help a kid who's been hurt by people who were supposed to protect him."

"I'm not a kid!" Joker snapped. "I don't *need* your help."

"Then how old are you?"

Arsene growled when Eraserhead tried looking at Joker, so the hero stayed put.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Joker asked.

"If you're a minor, then I *can* help you." Eraserhead sighed. "Actions speak louder than words. If you can't accept my apology, then let me take action instead."

Joker took a colorful step forward. "How?"

"This better not be another trick." Arsene hissed.

"It's not a trick." Eraserhead growled. "I can't promise anything right away, but I can work to get all of the heroes without an agency based in Musutafu to leave. U.A. is trying to create a Vigilante Program so that it'll be safe for you to come in-"

"Safe'." Joker sneered. "What do you mean it'll be 'safe'? What's stopping you from just slapping on the cuffs right now? You had me at your mercy. Do you know how many other heroes would kill to be in your position?"

“Because,” Eraserhead glared at the floor. “If you were arrested *right* now, then those bastards would lock you up in Tartarus and put you in a medically induced coma.”

“I’ll kill them.” Alice whispered all too calmly.

“I would like to see them try.” Byakko’s anger was as cold as his ice.

Many others cast death threats upon the heroes, but Arsene’s growing wrath silenced them. Arsene’s growl rumbled through the alley, and his feathers once again shook in rage. Eraserhead, despite this, stared right into Arsene’s mask.

“That’s why U.A., and especially the principal, is trying to fight for you. You deserve better than that.”

“Why?” Joker rapidly shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, gripping the back of his own neck. “I don’t get why you’re trying so hard. Why can’t you be just like every other shitty adult? Why do you have to be so much like *him* ?”

Joker’s fragile facade cracked, and Eraserhead heard the vulnerability in Joker’s voice. It was a small, broken thing. The hero’s heart hurt at the sound of it. He filed the small tidbit about who ‘he’ was, and decided to keep it in mind for later.

“I’m not like the other heroes.” Eraserhead kept his voice soft. “Believe it or not, a lot of us at U.A. aren’t happy with how the Commission has treated you. We’re trying to protect you from them.”

“Sure.” Joker’s cocky mask was pulled back on as he rolled his shoulder. “I still remember what Snipe’s bullet felt like. Have you ever been shot, Eraserhead? Getting your shoulder torn apart hurts like a bi-”

“Kid.” The hero sighed, deep and exhausted. “You and I both know you can’t do this forever. One day your impeccable luck will run out and somebody will have to make a hard choice. I don’t want to see

you fall into the wrong hands when that day comes. I'm trying to give you *options* without forcing my hand, but you have to work with me here."

"Oh, because your 'help' has worked out *fantastically* so far!"

"*Trickster, Arsene.*" They both stiffened at Kohryu's sternness. "*Give him one more chance. He has extended the olive branch we desperately need. Not only will it secure the Trickster's immediate safety, but it will extinguish the other heroes' future attempts for his capture. Take Ryukyu, for example. Do you think she will give up after a single defeat? Will anyone allied with her simply sit back and do nothing? What choice do we have but to put a little faith in this man?*"

Arsene looked over his shoulder at Joker, tilting his head to the side.

Joker's stomach churned like coiling serpents. The old dragon was right, wasn't he? La Brava's hacking could only keep their trail hidden for so long, but she couldn't eradicate the threat completely. An eternity passed within a couple of heartbeats.

"You're sure you can get them to leave?"

"It's a promise."

"*I... sense no lie.*" Ishtar whispered. "*He's willing to do this, Trickster.*"

Joker squared his shoulders. "Sixteen."

Eraserhead's eyebrows shot up. "*What ?*"

"I said I'm sixteen!" Joker snapped. "Does that satisfy you?"

"You... you're barely any older than my students." He whispered.

At that moment, a familiar shadow crept behind the hero. It was time to end this.

“Oh, Eraserhead?” A savage grin stretched from ear to ear. “*Hee ho*!”

Eraserhead opened his mouth, but their conversation ended with a flash of green light. A giant yellow fist socked Eraserhead right in the noggin. Arsene stepped aside and let the hero fall flat on his face with a *thud* . He was out cold.

“Mona!” Joker called as the not-cat sauntered into view. “It’s nice to see you?”

Mona had a thunderous scowl. “You have some nerve.”

“M-me?”

“Yes, you!” Mona used Eraserhead’s unconscious body as a stepping stone, before bouncing off his head. “We heard everything over the comms! I decided that it would be faster if I went alone, so I came! Why.... just WHY can’t we ever leave you by yourself!?”

“Did you go blind or something?” Joker waved towards Arsene. “I’m never alone!”

“You know what I mean!!” Mona screeched. “Aiba said there’s already footage of Seth and Byakko on the news!”

“It’s not my fault that I’m a natural trouble magnet?”

“Do I have to use Miracle Punch on you?” Mona’s eye twitched. “I’ll just have Mercurius drag your unconscious body home!”

Arsene disguised his laughter by clearing his throat. Joker playfully glared at his other self, before grinning at Mona.

“I’ll buy you tuna?”

“Fine.” He stuck his nose in the air. “But it better be extra fatty!”

Joker smirked. “It’s a deal.”

“Yes!” Mona’s face softened as he studied his partner. “Are you okay? You look pretty rough. What did he do to you? I swear, if he hurt you again-”

“He didn’t... do anything. I think?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine, Mona.” Joker shrugged. “He just took me by surprise, that’s all.”

The not-cat studied him for a long while, before sighing. “Okay. I’ll believe you this time.”

Joker nodded. His colorful footsteps rippled over smaller puddles as he approached Arsene.

“Thanks for having my back.”

“Always. You are my Trickster.” Arsene tipped his hat. “I want to apologize for how I acted at the cafe. I’ve taken your words to heart. I agree that my actions were most foolish, and that I put your life, and other lives, in grave danger. It won’t happen again.”

“Apology accepted.” Joker smiled as he ran his hand down Arsene’s soft feathers.

“I’m going to have cavities.” Mona deadpanned as he poked Eraserhead with his paw. “But we should leave before he wakes up.”

“... Right.”

Arsene put a hand to his breast and bowed before his Trickster. With that, he returned to his other self. Joker stepped around Eraserhead to recover his dagger. His golden eyes stared back at him from the polished metal, and he sheathed it with a sigh.

“Tonight was a disaster.” Mona leapt onto Joker’s shoulder, but he reared his head back. “Blech, you smell like a chimney and there’s

wet ash all over you! Let's go home so you can take a shower."

Joker glanced down at the man with a frown.

Mona looked in between them. "He'll be fine! We *won't* be if we don't get moving!"

The alleyway was left behind with a rush of wind and the metallic scraping of his grappling hook. Silence floated between the pair for a few minutes, but Joker slowed to a stop as something weighed on his heart.

Mona blinked at him. "Joker, what are you doing?"

Joker took out his comm and shut it off. He made sure Mona's was silenced before he spoke.

"That girl I rescued." Mona's ears pricked up. "I had to use a Balm Of Life."

"She was...?" Mona's eyes shone with tears. "Oh, Joker. I'm so sorry."

Joker shook his head. "She'll be alright now. I just thought you should know in case anything... comes up."

"Joker, look at me." Joker stiffened at Mona's tone, and obeyed. "We're partners, right?"

"Of course. Why-"

"Then, as partners, I want you to be able to confide in me." Mona lay his forehead against Joker's. "She may be okay now, but seeing a little girl like... like *that* can't be easy for anyone. Talk to me if you feel down, or if you think it's too much to handle alone. I know how you can be sometimes. We're in this together, after all!"

"Mona..."

“We’ll be okay as long as you get that through your thick skull.” Mona blinked away tears as he pulled back. “Got it, Leader?”

“Loud and clear.” Joker denied the warmth in his own eyes. “You know...”

“What is it?” Mona asked.

“You heard what Eraserhead said through the comms, right?”

“Most of it, but I went so fast that the wind muffled it.”

“He asked how old I was before you showed up.”

Mona blinked. “And?”

“I told him sixteen.” Joker counted on his fingers. “But if we added up the months we’ve been here then I would be seventeen. Am I seventeen even though my birthday *technically* hasn’t passed in this world? Is time passing normally in our world? What if it’s been stuck on the same day and all of the time we spent here won’t count when we go back? Am I currently sixteen or seventeen? Sixteen and a half? Three quarters?”

Mona blinked rapidly. “Th-that’s-”

“Or are we over 200 years old since my real birth certificate is from the early 2000’s and we got thrown into a future world? That’s the least likely, though.” Joker tugged at his hair. “I’m just glad that my hair isn’t as white as a certain grandpa’s.”

“Ugh, you’re hurting my head with this nonsense.” Mona muttered. “Can we go home already?”

“Okay. I’ll prepare myself for the usual lecture when we get back.”

They spent the rest of the way home in silence, with Mona clinging to shoulder.

He didn't mind the ash staining his fur.

Aizawa sat up, groaning as he clutched his pounding head. He dug out his phone and blinked at it. He was out for over ten minutes. He rubbed his eyes and looked around the alleyway. Joker was nowhere in sight.

"Hee ho ? Seriously?" He muttered. *"That cocky brat."*

His eyes lingered on the giant claw marks in the wall. That creature had sliced through solid brick like a hot knife through butter.

What was it he said about shattering Joker's soul? He nearly killed a *child*, a boy barely older than his own students, and all with just a single glance. Guilt strangled his heart, but Aizawa shook his head. No, he could drown in self deprecation later.

He swore under his breath as he dialed a familiar number and held it to his ear.

"Tsukauchi, you're not going to believe this. I ran into Joker."

"Whaat!?" Aizawa held the phone away as Tsukauchi's voice raised several octaves. *"What happened!?"*

"I was patrolling when Joker was spotted during that fire, and kept in touch with Midnight when Ryukyu fought Seth." Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the impending headache. *"Midnight told me that Seth had vanished, and that's when I saw Joker. I didn't think. I just... acted, and we had a confrontation."*

"Aizawa." Tsukauchi's voice turned serious. *"Where is he now? Did you arrest him?"*

"No, he got away. But..."

"But?"

"I got his age. Sixteen." Thick silence clogged the other line.
"Sixteen, Tsukauchi!"

"You believe him?"

"Of course I do." He growled. "It's what my instincts have been screaming at me this whole time. Look, there's something else I learned about his quirk, but I would rather talk in person."

"Understood. I'm not leaving my office any time tonight. All of these fires have brought on mountains of paperwork."

"I'll bring coffee. It won't be Joker's though."

Tsukauchi exhausted chuckle was followed by a sigh.

"You know we'll have to inform the chief and Nezu about this, right? We can't keep them in the dark forever, especially now that Joker stated his age. Using his profile might not be viable, but we can use this."

"I know." Aizawa pulled himself from the cold ground. "I'll see you soon."

"With coffee."

He sighed. "With coffee."

Aizawa hung up, staring at the five giant claw marks in the wall. With a shiver, he buried his face in his capture weapon and headed to the station.

Himiko Toga giggled as she skipped into the alleyway.

"Dabi!" She squealed when she saw him leaning against the wall. "I saw him! I really saw Joker!!"

Dabi blinked, unimpressed. "Congratulations."

“Don’t be like that!” Her golden eyes flashed with malice. “I had to hide in the stupid crowd! He was so close that I could’ve stabbed him if I wanted to! Why can’t I stab him yet!?”

“Patience.” A sentient cloud emerged from nothing, resembling the smoke staining the sky. “This is part of our plan. You will have your chance.”

Himiko stuck her tongue out at Kurogiri.

“One thing I don’t get.” Dabi lazily grinned as a spark of blue flames hissed around his fingers. “What was the point of all this? Sounds like he got away from the heroes.”

“It’s simple. Our contact made sure that Joker would be out tonight.” Kurogiri sighed like an impatient parent. “We needed to see how he would react to a situation like this, so that we can adjust our future plans accordingly. Although, I’m surprised at his strength over Ryukyu. Not to mention how he jumped in head first in that building, much less survive. How hot are your flames, Dabi?”

“Cremation can surpass two thousand degrees.” Dabi grumbled. “Joker and that little brat should’ve been turned to ash within minutes.”

“I see.” Kurogiri’s eyes widened. “He is becoming more dangerous by the day.”

“Who cares!?” Himiko said. “At least I have another chance to stab him!”

“Whatever.” Dabi huffed as he pulled himself from the wall. “My part’s done. Can we go?”

Kurogiri expanded his body into a larger portal.

Himiko giggled as she hopped in after Dabi.

“You want me to *what!?* ” Ryukyu screeched into the phone.

“C-calm down!” Her PR manager shouted. *“I don’t like it either, but an apology might soothe the public. Your ranking already plummeted by five spots, so we should-”*

“I don’t care about the rankings!” Ryukyu pounded the desk with her fist. “Joker is a criminal! Why should I have to apologize about trying to arrest a wanted villain!?”

“You might see him as a villain, but most of the public does not. He would already be in the top ten if he were officially licensed. This is just conjecture from Spotlight, but he would be tied with Hawks-”

“I already said to hell with the rankings! I’m not apologizing and that’s that.”

“Just think about it, okay?” The other woman sighed. *“Especially with rumor going around about Endeavor pulling out from the manhunt.”*

Ryukyu’s mouth dropped open. “He... he is?”

“You know how people talk. It’s just hearsay right now, but Endeavor hasn’t been seen much since the raid. But that’s off topic. If you won’t do the apology, then finish cleaning up in Musutafu and leave quietly, okay? It would be best if you don’t appear in the public eye right now.”

“Alright.” Ryukyu heard a beep. “Hey, I have another call. Talk to you later?”

“Okay. I’ll call you if there are any updates. Just remember what I said.”

She ripped the phone away from her ear, her sneer melting into a warm smile as Nejire’s number came up.

“Ryukyu!!” Nejire’s energy oozed from the phone. *“How are you doing!? I heard you were injured!?”*

"I'm fine. They already discharged me and I'm back at the office. What are you doing up this late?"

"I couldn't sleep because I'm mad at you!"

"Huh? Why?"

"You didn't take me on patrol tonight!! I could've helped out! I saw what happened on the news and I don't like how everyone is being so mean to you!"

"Nejire..." Ryukyu sank back into her chair with a sigh. "I didn't patrol with you because of your exams. You *have* been studying, right?"

"Of course!" She chirped. *"I've been helping Tamaki and Mirio, too! I swear those boys would be lost without me!"*

Ryukyu huffed in amusement. "I'm glad. It's late, so why don't you get some sleep?"

"Awww, but I wanted to ask questions about Joker! Like how tall is he? Are his eyes really molten gold? What does his voice sound like in person? How was fighting his dragon? How do you think Joker designed his costume-"

"Nejire." Ryukyu adopted her best motherly voice.

"Oh, alright. I'll ask tomorrow. Good night!"

Ryukyu smiled. "Good night."

Her smile fell as she leaned back in her chair. Her phone pinged with a new message, and her heart skipped a beat at the new Spotlight notification from *Joker*. Comments from heroes and civilians alike were flooding his post. She hesitantly opened Spotlight.

'I'll bring roses for our next date, Ryukyu! ;)'

Ryukyu saw red. She didn't realize what happened until her phone shattered into bits of plastic on the opposite wall.

"Damn him!" She buried her face into her hands. "What use is being a hero if I can't fight for justice?"

"Not even the gods can defy the will of the masses. You're no different, hero."

Tears flooded her eyes, and she furiously scrubbed them away.

Thankfully, nobody was there to see her cry.

Recovery Girl smiled at the young girl, "Now breathe in."

Nanako dutifully followed her instructions as Recovery Girl listened with a stethoscope.

"Hmm, you're as healthy as a horse." She said as she draped the tool around her neck. "But the hospital wants to keep her overnight for observation."

The girl's father, who sat on the edge of an uncomfortable stool with puffy red eyes, sagged in relief.

"Thank god." He sniffled and hid his face in his hands. "I don't know what I would do if I ever lost you."

"Daddy." Nanako reached out and touched her father's arm. "I'm okay! Mr. Vigilante was really nice, and he saved me from the dark place!"

"The... the dark place?" Her father paled.

"Deary, if it's alright with your father," Recovery Girl glanced at him, "Will you tell me what happened and how Joker healed you?"

“Oh.” Nanako clutched onto the black and red handkerchief like a lifeline. “Y-you won’t get mad at him, will you?”

Recovery Girl’s face softened. “Of course not.”

“Go ahead, sweetheart.” Her father said gently.

“D-daddy went outside for a smoke, s-so I stayed inside.” She hugged the handkerchief and stared at the floor. “B-but then I heard people screaming and got scared. I wanted to go outside, but the doorknob was so hot that it burned my hand. It was getting hotter and hotter, and I remember daddy telling me that if a villain attacked our building, that I should hide in my closet and wait for the heroes to come.”

Her father’s face lit up in horror as Recovery Girl grimaced.

“It was so scary.” Nanako shook her head as tears pooled in her eyes. “It got hard to breathe, a-and it just got so hot. I... I think I fell asleep? Because it was so dark and cold, and I thought I heard mommy’s voice calling to me.”

Her father bolted from his chair and placed his hands on her shoulders. “You... you heard her?”

“Mommy wanted me to go with her, but then we saw a really pretty butterfly!” Nanako nodded. “Mommy said she was happy that the butterfly came and that I shouldn’t be scared. She said everything would be okay!”

“What happened after?” Recovery Girl asked as her hands tightened over her cane, her heart thrumming rapidly.

“The butterfly landed on me and I felt really warm all over. I woke up to Mr. Vigilante holding me, he and his big kitty rescued me!”

“How did Joker react to you waking up?” She asked.

“He seemed... scared at first? But then he smiled and I knew everything would be okay! He reminded me of All Might.”

Nanako’s father pulled her into a hug, his shoulders trembling.

“Daddy, don’t cry! I’m okay, I promise!”

“R-right.” The man pulled back with a strained laugh and wiped his eyes. “I’m just so happy that you’re alright.”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her own eyes. “Can I go to sleep? I’m really tired.”

“You need your rest, deary.” Recovery Girl patted her knee.

“Of course.” Her father tucked her in bed and planted a kiss on her forehead. “Get some sleep, I’ll be right back.”

“Y-you’re leaving?”

“Just to get some coffee, and then I’ll come right back. Promise.”

“Okay...”

Nanako’s eyes closed and she fell asleep on the spot, still clutching that handkerchief.

Recovery Girl walked out with her father, who was ghostly pale. Horror lingered in his eyes.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” She said softly. “But what happened to Nanako’s mother?”

“She...” The man cleared his throat. “She died in a car accident when Nanako was just a baby.”

“You have my deepest condolences.”

“Thanks.” He gave her a strained smile. “I’m going to get some coffee. I might need something stronger when this is all over, though.”

“Here, take my card.” Recovery Girl grabbed one from her pocket. “Call me if you two need anything, alright?”

He stared at it for a moment. “I will. Thanks for checking up on Nanako.”

Recovery nodded and watched as he walked down the hall. She sighed when he turned the corner and was out of sight, her stomach falling upon her feet. The heroine glanced at the door behind her, and then walked down the opposite end. These endless white walls helped straighten her thoughts.

There was no way that girl, and by extension Joker, should have survived. Those flames were strong enough to melt brick and turn the entire building into a pile of blackened rubble. Nanako’s comments about her deceased mother were worrying.

“Is it possible? But that means....” She froze in the middle of the hallway. “Oh dear.”

She knew of the Hero Commission’s atrocities. She had her doubts about what the Commission *really* wanted Joker for. Healing powers were at the top of their list, but *true revival* was something that they would kill for. The ultimate treasure. The Quirk among all quirks.

She herself was a victim of their hunger. Images of dark, cold rooms and relentless quirk exhaustion tugged at her memory. If it wasn’t for Nezu, who had taken her under his wing and gave her sanctuary through U.A., then she would still be trapped in their clutches. She *wouldn’t* allow Joker to go through the same!

But what should she do? Tell the single person to whom she owed everything, to the sole being that could protect a young vigilante from

that dark fate, or would it be safer to take the truth of Joker's powers with her to the grave?

She pushed away the chills and quietly left the hospital, her heart heavier than it had ever been before.

There was a knock on the door.

"Izuku?" Inko stepped into her son's room. "Are you awake?"

She chuckled at the scene before her. Izuku was snoring into one of his notebooks, slumped over his desk while the computer was open to the news about Joker's latest stunts. Inko quietly approached and looked over his shoulder. 'Joker Quirk Theories!' was at the top of the page.

Things like 'Elemental Immunities?' and 'Physical Immunity!?' were underlined or circled several times. She glanced at the screen, where a massive white tiger glared directly into the camera. She shivered at its intense gaze. Inko gently ruffled her son's hair before shutting off the screen, then she draped a blanket over him.

"Good night, sweetie." She whispered.

Inko warmly smiled at her son as she shut the door.

"Do you hear that, Lady Stubbs!?" Spinner shouted as he vaulted over the rooftops. "Somebody needs our help!"

"Mroeeew!"

The sound of fighting echoed from the next alleyway, and Spinner jumped down without hesitation. Lady Stubbs clung to him for dear life as they plummeted. He rolled into his landing with a frazzled cat on his shoulder.

“Have no fear!!” Spinner whipped out his dagger and grinned.
“Spinner and Lady Stubbs are.... here?”

It was the oddest sight he’s ever seen.

One, a bald old man wearing traditional monk robes. His expression was chiselled into a fox-like grin as he danced around his opponent with minimal effort.

Two, a man nearly twice his size throwing punch after punch, screaming in rage as his attacks missed in successive turns.

Spinner slowly lowered his dagger as his jaw dropped.

Lady Stubbs tilted her head. “Merp?”

“Oh, hello!” The grinning monk weaved around another meaty fist.
“Can I help you?”

“You’re the one that needs help! I think?”

The attacker whirled around at Spinner’s voice, spittle spewing from his mouth as he screamed. Spinner fell into a battle stance and Lady Stubbs’ fur bristled. The brute charged at them, but the only took a single step.

The monk hooked his foot around the attacker’s ankle, and the behemoth fell with a thunderous crash. The grinning fox struck the crook’s neck like a viper, and he went still.

“Well,” The monk said as he straightened his robes. “That’s that.”

“Are you... okay?” Spinner asked warily, still clutching his dagger.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You just got attacked!” Spinner cried. “How are you okay!?”

“In truth, I’ve been expecting something like this.” The grinning monk crossed his arms and stared down at the unconscious attacker. “He lasted longer than I thought.”

“But why would he attack you?” Spinner took a step closer.

“My best guess? My quirk.”

“You’ve lost me.” Spinner sheathed his dagger as he exchanged a look with Lady Stubbs. “Why would he attack you because of your quirk?”

“My quirk allows me to predict the attacks of a single opponent. Such a quirk would go for a high price, no? Illegal fighting rings. Unwilling body guard. Test subject, perhaps?”

“W-wait,” Spinner stiffened. “Is he part of a quirk smuggling ring?”

“Have you been to the temple lately?” The monk faced him, his grin faltering just a bit. “There are Emas all over the shrine, and a growing number of people all have the same wish. ‘I wish they could find my sister.’ ‘I wish the heroes would work harder to protect us.’ ‘I wish those men would return my mother.’ ‘I wish for nothing but the safe return of my son.’ Things of that nature.”

“I thought I heard something about a kidnapping on the news, but they barely glossed over it.” Spinner’s scaly brow knotted together. “I didn’t think it was getting this bad.”

“It’s a bigger problem than most people realize.” The monk kneeled next to the thug. “Perhaps this one would have answers? You dress like Joker. That means you must admire him, yes?”

“That’s right!” Spinner beamed. “He’s a true hero that wouldn’t let something like this go!”

“Then you know what you must do. He shouldn’t be out for much longer.”

“Wait!” Spinner called as the man turned away. “Aren’t you going to help? This guy was trying to kidnap you!”

“No. I wish you luck with your interrogation, but I swore off violence years ago.”

“What!?” Spinner gestured to the man on the ground. “But you just took this guy out!”

“What are you talking about?” The monk’s grin widened as he tilted his head. “He wasn’t paying attention, and my foot just happened to be there.”

“And the other part?” Spinner chopped his hand.

“These robes trip you up when you least expect it, and I had to catch myself.” Spinner deadpanned as the man walked away. “I do hope to see you at the temple sometime, it’s beautiful this time of year.”

With that, the old fox disappeared down the alley. Spinner stood there, dumbfounded. After several moments Lady Stubbs headbutted him and he shook himself out of it.

“Some people are pretty strange, huh?”

“Merp.”

“We should probably tie this guy up and ask him some questions.”

“Merp.”

“You ready for the interrogation?”

Lady Stubbs puffed up. She held out one of her paws and flexed, revealing deadly claws not unlike miniature scythes.

“It’s a good thing I have scales!” Spinner chuckled as he reached in his pocket for a zip tie. “This guy isn’t so lucky. Don’t go overboard, okay? People are in trouble and we need answers!”

Lady Stubbs huffed and rolled her ghoulish eyes. “Merp...”

Spinner shook his head and got to work.

“Oof! Why is he.... so... heavy!” He let go of the man’s arm and looked at Lady Stubbs. “I don’t suppose you could help?”

“Merp.”

With a twitch of her stubby tail, she jumped onto the man’s back, blinking slowly.

“Really? That’s not helping, you’re just making it worse!”

“Merp?”

“You know what? Never mind. I’ll get there eventually.”

“Merp!”

She launched herself from the unconscious villain and to settle down in his vibrant pink hair. Spinner sighed as she began to purr.

“Fine, just stay put, will ya?”

“Merp.”

Spinner snatched the man’s wrists and dragged him, inch by inch, towards a sturdy looking dumpster. His grunts and whispered curses bounced around the alley. At last, the man’s hands were bound to the dumpster, and now they just had to wait for him to wake up. Spinner swore he’d find these missing people. If the heroes didn’t give a damn, then somebody else had to take care of the problem!

He wondered if his hero would be proud of him.

Kaito stood from his desk.

His throat was bone dry from lecturing Akira for over an hour, aided by a lively Aiba and Tobita. He had to give props to Akira, as he had taken the verbal beating with that smug grin of his. That kid would be the death of him. Kaito shook his head and grabbed his Phantom Thief coffee mug. Akira owed him another cup of good coffee after tonight's chaos. He opened the door to the lounge, and froze.

"Shh!" Aiba put a single finger to her lips.

Kaito slowly blinked. "Are they... sleeping?"

"Yes. Tonight was utterly exhausting, between meeting Giran, those fires, and clashing with the heroes." Tobita whispered from the couch. "It's best that we don't disturb their rest."

Maybe, just *maybe*, Kaito should be concerned about the giant Guard Dog of Hell taking up the entirety of his lounge. Akira, dressed in a loose black t-shirt and sweatpants, huddled into the beast's side, snoring softly. One of Akira's hands grasped Cerberus' snowy mane, the other cuddled a sleeping Morgana to his chest.

Cerberus curled his tail around them, as if to shield them from any threats. He saw how the beast's ears swiveled towards him when he walked in, too. Cerberus must have been pretending.

"He said something about mastering his bond with Cerberus, and then they passed out." Aiba said with a shake of her head. "These boys, I swear."

"Seeing him like this reminds me that he's just a kid." Kaito frowned. "It's easy to forget that sometimes."

"Yeah." Aiba huffed. "I wish he wouldn't worry me so much."

"It just means that you care deeply about him." Tobita said with a nod.

“W-well, you’re not wrong.” Her face turned red. “Don’t tell him I said that!”

Kaito just smiled as he turned on his heel.

He could pester Akira in the morning.

Hey guys, so a quick announcement. Next week will be... very difficult for me personally, and I don’t know how I’ll be when the week is over. Physically, I’ll be fine, but mentally it will take me a few weeks to recuperate. I apologize for spacing the chapters far apart recently, life has been making it really hard to write.

Still, you guys deserve the best <3 I would rather be at my best when I write this story, especially since we are at such an important part of it, than having to force myself when I feel not-so-great and then having the quality majorly suffer for it. I don't want to rush to get chapters done or cut corners, either. That's no fun for anybody!

So, the next planned chapter update will be May 1st, hopefully I’ll be better by then and we can get on with the story ;D ALSO, and this won’t be right away or all at once, but I’m going to start editing the first half of this story, to clean it up a little and patch things over so that it matches my current writing style.

Anywho, enough blabbering on my part. See you guys on the flip side <3

Tokyo Emergency

Chapter 46: Tokyo Emergency

“But... I don’t feel anything?”

“I just posted it.” Joker chuckled as he put it away. “Let’s give it some time... Wait, were you trying to transform right on top of me? You would’ve squished me!”

Early update!

There is also a very important note at the end of this chapter, it's highly personal and talks about what went down earlier this month.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The coffee was cold, and the curdled taste still lingered on their tongues as they sat in silence.

Tsukauchi’s knuckles were bone white. His eyes were downcast, and a knot formed in his stomach. He felt sick.

Aizawa, who sat opposite of him, was equally grave. He shared word for word what Joker had said, the mere *implications* of what Aizawa’s quirk had done haunted them. Worse yet, Joker was just a *kid*. He should’ve been in school, had friends, be a normal teenager. Aizawa was thrown out of his thoughts when Tsukauchi moved from his stupor.

“What are you doing?” Aizawa asked as Tsukauchi unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk.

“I just thought of something.” Tsukauchi placed a folder on his desk. “But you’re not going to like it.”

“Okay?”

“Not only did your quirk almost kill him,” Aizawa winced, and Tsukauchi smiled sadly, “But you mentioned that he had a bad reaction when you turned off your quirk, right?”

“Yeah?”

“... Almost as if his powers didn’t agree with him?”

Aizawa narrowed his eyes. “Where are you going with this?”

Tsukauchi opened the folder. Aizawa stared at Kurusu’s file when Tsukauchi pointed at the word ‘Quirkless’.

“Polygraph registered ‘truth’ every time Joker said that he didn’t have a quirk. We thought that wasn’t the case. Obviously a lot of people have seen him use his powers.” Tsukauchi swallowed, his wide eyes meeting Aizawa’s. “But what if it *is* true? What if he never had a quirk to begin with? What if those creatures of his are... are...”

Aizawa stiffened. “Nomu?”

“Maybe? But it doesn’t feel right calling them Nomu since Joker’s creatures have several key differences from any Nomu we’ve captured.”

“Like being able to speak and act for themselves. We still don’t know *how* many of them he has, either. They could be in a different category all on their own.” Aizawa glanced at the file. “What does it say? Does he have the toe joint?”

“There aren’t any medical records.” Tsukauchi flipped through the pages, and shook his head. “But we have several brain scans from the Nomu. Once we take him in, we should get x-rays and compare his brain activity to the Nomu’s.”

“You know he won’t agree to that, right?” Aizawa released a long sigh. “Especially if anything related to doctors or hospitals is part of his trauma.”

“I figured he won’t, but it would give us answers. Maybe he would want the answers, too? We won’t force it.” Tsukauchi said softly. “How did he react to the Vigilante Program that Nezu is working on?”

“Not much of a reaction.” Aizawa shrugged, “But you know he won’t come in easily even with Nezu’s program.”

“Yeah...” Tsukauchi closed the folder and rubbed his forehead. “Nezu’s going to have a field day with this.”

“I don’t doubt that the Nomu comparison is already swimming around in that head of his.” Aizawa chuckled dryly. “The best time to bring it up is after final exams.”

“I’ll call the chief and let him know we have something.” Tsukauchi swiveled his chair to stare at the city map, his eyes glued to where the Blue Lotus would be. “I hope we can get through to him.”

“We will.” Aizawa stood, eyes hardened. “I’ll stake my name on it.”

Tsukauchi turned to him, smiling. “Eraserhead is hard to beat, but the only Aizawa I know is a total softie once you get to know him.”

“Shut it.” Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon. “I’m *not* a softie.”

“If you say so.”

Aizawa rolled his eyes. “I’m leaving, I have brats to look after.”

“Still a softie!” Tsukauchi called as Aizawa marched out.

Tsukauchi’s eyes fell back to the map. The Blue Lotus’ location was burned into his brain, and his craving for good caffeine and a plate of godly curry intensified. He frowned at the stale styrofoam cup sitting

on his desk, his taste buds would hate him if he dared drink it. Joker's coffee was irreplaceable. Unfortunately, going to that cafe would have to wait.

Tsukauchi sighed as the first rays of sunlight peeked through the window.

"Hang in there, kid." He said to nobody. "I promise you'll get the help you need."

Akira covered his sneeze with the crook of his elbow.

"Gesundheit." Hitoshi smirked. "Honestly, I'm surprised you're not sneezing more with how people are talking."

"Very funny. It could be allergies for all you know." Akira said as he placed the mug in front of Hitoshi. "Can you find anything?"

"Nooope." Hitoshi scrolled through the feed. "While nobody has taken responsibility for the fires, the news has been more focused on the low casualty rate and the epic bout with Ryukyu. Both are being credited to a certain vigilante. I heard the mayor was getting a lot of flack for not speaking out against the raid heroes. I feel bad for her."

"I see." Akira frowned. "Manami couldn't find much about the culprit, either."

"Hey, check this out." Hitoshi leaned closer to his screen. "This article states 'Heroes and police were practically nonexistent during the crisis, but according to several eyewitnesses, they flooded to the scene where Joker rescued a seven-year-old girl from the deadly flames. Where were they when peoples' lives were in danger? Clearly, these so-called 'heroes' care more about apprehending a vigilante over protecting the lives of Musutafu citizens.' There are a lot of comments agreeing with it, but others are arguing that all the extra raid heroes are to blame, not the ones stationed in Musutafu."

Akira raised a brow. "Who wrote that?"

"Some small time magazine? Juzo News, I think." Akira snorted as Hitoshi clicked out of the tab. "You should see the memes that are popping up everywhere."

Akira peered over Hitoshi's shoulder, where there was a gif of Ryukyu absolutely wailing on a laughing Seth. The caption was 'Monday mornings'. Akira stifled his laughter as Seth cackled in his mind.

"Aside from all of that, there have been a few videos of the white tiger. I did see some fan art of Joker proposing to Ryukyu with a bouquet of roses."

"Are you serious?"

"Yup." Hitoshi sighed wistfully. "I forgot to save it though, and now I can't find it anywhere."

"What a shame." Akira said with a smirk.

"Master?"

"What is it, Cerberus?"

"Me been thinking-"

"Wow, you can actually think for yourself?" Byakko said sarcastically. *"I'm surprised."*

"Shush, pussy cat!" Cerberus growled. *"This is important!"*

Akira groaned, which earned a strange look from Hitoshi. He was promptly ignored as Akira concentrated on his other selves.

"Byakko, let him speak."

"Thanks, Master!" Cerberus wagged his tail. "But about those blue flames, I remember why they were so familiar. They tasted like Endeavor's when we were in Hosu!"

Akira eyes went wide. *"Are you saying Endeavor started those fires?"*

"Earth to Akira?"

"Not exactly? The flames of this world are special. They have... hmm, imprints of a soul to them?"

"Soul?" Kohryu flicked his whiskers in thought. "If we put to use our knowledge of Personas into the theory of quirks, then are you saying that quirks hold some sort of imprint from their wielder?"

"Yes!"

"So..." Akira scratched his head. "It wasn't Endeavor's fire specifically, but somebody related to him?"

"Yes! Master got it!"

"Bah! What a load of garbage." Byakko said with bared teeth. "Fire is fire. I felt nothing when the Trickster went into that building."

"You are not the Guard Dog Of Hell! All flames taste the same for you, but I can tell the difference!" Cerberus stuck his nose up towards Byakko. "What do you think my bond with the Trickster is? Life has many colors, has many intertwining souls all dancing together! It's far superior than a weak ice ribbon!"

Frozen shards crackled over the mindscape, and a brain freeze sprouted across Akira's head like creeping ice. He rubbed his temple as Hitoshi stared at him in concern. That's *never* happened before.

"Are you okay?" Hitoshi asked, words lost on Akira.

"You take that back!" Byakko roared. "Or I'll make you!"

“Never! Why do you think you always better than me!?”

“I am the King Of Beasts! All beasts should bow before me, and you are no different! I’m better than you in every conceivable way! Shall my claws prove it!?”

“Bring it!” Cerberus bared his fangs. *“I don’t even need flames to prove that I’m stronger than you!”*

“Enough!” A veritable wall of gold separated them, and Kohryu’s whiskers whipped both of their noses. *“Do not bicker like uncouth children! Byakko, as one of my Ssu Ling, I expect you to be on better behavior. Cerberus, do not let him get under your skin so easily. Keep your arguments at bay for the Trickster’s sake. Am I understood?”*

“Yes...” Cerberus muttered as he massaged his nose with a paw.

Byakko lowered his head. *“I apologize.”*

“Hey, snap out of it!”

Akira startled as Hitoshi clapped his hands inches from his nose.

“What?” Akira frantically looked around the empty cafe. *“What happened?”*

“You tell me.” Hitoshi shook his head. *“You went catatonic and wouldn’t answer me!”*

“Oh. Sorry.” Akira sheepishly smiled. *“A few of my Personas were talking, and I think we made a connection to the fires.”*

“You-” Hitoshi’s eye’s widened. *“Wait, really?”*

“Yup. What do you know about Endeavor’s family?”

Hitoshi squinted. *“Uh, are you telling me that Endeavor is somehow responsible? That’s really putting it out there.”*

“Humor me? One of his sons bought me Joker merch a while back, and the other is in class 1-A.” Akira shrugged. “I’m curious about any others. We can’t rule out all the possibilities, can we?”

Hitoshi blinked. “Do I have to point out how ironic that one of Endeavor’s kids bought you Joker merch?”

“Nope.”

“Poking into the number two’s family is pretty dangerous.” Hitoshi glanced at his computer. “Manami would do a much better job at that.”

Akira nodded, and was about to speak when Risumi emerged from the kitchen.

“Boys?” Risumi placed a pot of curry in the display and wiped her brow. “We’re ready to open. If you would do the honors, Kurusu?”

Hitoshi gulped down the rest of his coffee. He let out a dramatic gasp as he set the cup on the table and gathered his things.

“I’m gonna go in early.” Hitoshi said as he scooted out of the booth. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck on your exams, dear.” Risumi put her hand on her hips and beamed. “You can do it!”

He smiled warmly. “Thanks, mom.”

Akira and Hitoshi trailed to the door together, and Hitoshi nodded at him as Akira flipped the sign. Hitoshi cut through the morning crowd with surprising grace and vanished down the street towards U.A. Another familiar face greeted him as the usual crowd streamed in.

“Morning, Uraraka.” Akira smiled. “The usual?”

“Y-yes, please!” She gripped her bag straps as her face flushed. “I’m gonna need all of my strength today.”

She claimed a booth in the corner, and Akira got to work.

Akira and Risumi danced around each other as they battled the morning rush. The cafe came to life with chatter and laughter, with scents of coffee and caramel that set their customers' hearts at ease. Akira delivered Uraraka's dishes when the line dwindled.

"Sorry for the wait." Akira pulled on a smile. "Busy morning."

"Oh, it's okay!" She pushed aside a pile of note cards to make room. "I'm glad I came early to study! I've been cramming like crazy, but some of this stuff goes right over my head."

"You have exams, right?"

"Yep!"

"Do the hero classes have different exams compared to other classes?"

"W-well..." She gently tapped her spoon on the plate. "I've heard rumors that the hero course exams will have to fight robots for hero studies! I'm kind of nervous."

"Robots, huh?" Akira's eyebrows shot up. "You don't think they'll switch it up this year?"

Her eyes widened. "Why would they do that?"

"This year has been crazy." He half shrugged. "What with all of the villain attacks like the USJ and Hosu. I wouldn't be surprised if they changed it to a different test."

"Like Aizawa-sensei's 'logical ruses'. Oh no."

"Sorry." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I didn't mean to make you more nervous."

“N-no, it’s okay!” She waved at him. “I’ll be prepared for anything, just in case! But first, I have English to study for. A-and math... and biology...”

“I find that it’s better to study on rainy days.”

Uraraka tilted her head. “Really?”

“Really. The sound of a rainstorm would help with concentration, and there aren’t as many people around if you’re studying in a public space.”

“Ooh, I’ll have to try that next time!” Her face flushed and she poked at her curry. “I still remember the first time I came in that day it was raining. Maybe I should come here on rainy days and study?”

“I’ll provide the refreshments.” Akira said with a grin. “Make sure to pace yourself today. Same goes for the food. Nerves can mess with your stomach, and having stomach problems during an exam is just the worst.”

“R-right.” She took a deep breath and pumped her fist. “Thanks for the advice, Kurusu-kun! I’ll do my best!!”

He winked. “Any time, Uraraka.”

Akira chuckled as her face turned a deeper crimson. He made his usual rounds around the bustling cafe and helped Risumi at the counter. He noticed something when the crowd calmed down and he was busy washing dishes. He dried his hands and grabbed the familiar box of tea underneath the counter. The soft fragrance tickled his nose.

“Did Haru-san stop by yet?” Akira asked.

“Not yet.” Risumi tapped her finger on the counter.

“Do you think she’s okay?”

“She should be. Why? Are you worried about her?” Risumi looked at him. “She keeps busy despite her age, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s out running errands or something.”

Akira shrugged. “She wasn’t here yesterday either.”

He gave it the benefit of the doubt yesterday.

‘You might want to hurry. Innocent people are waiting on you.’

Giran’s underhanded threat followed him around like a shadow. The more he thought about it, the more his stomach sank like a rock. Was Haru-san....? But no, she only missed *two* days. There was no need to worry. Right? Was he just being paranoid?

‘I wouldn’t miss my daily cup of tea for anything. I’ve dearly missed this place!’

Akira frowned at the small box in his hands. It hardly weighed anything, but sometimes the smallest things held the biggest importance. What was the weight of a life? Was it as insignificant as these tea leaves, or was Haru-san’s smile worth so much more? Akira chose the latter. He snapped out of his thoughts when Risumi’s hand fell on his shoulder.

“I’m sure she’s fine.” She said. “Haru-san can take care of herself.”

Akira swallowed the dryness in his mouth. He planted on a smile when Risumi looked concerned.

“You’re right. She’s a pretty tough lady.”

Maybe it was just nerves getting to him, or maybe he should follow his gut feeling.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Manami said as she continued her frantic typing.

Tobita entered, and the faint smell of freshly baked cookies wafted in. He carefully maneuvered through the lumpy cushions and set out the tea on the desk. The sugar cookies had tiny pink hearts in the middle.

“Well?”

Manami rubbed her eyes as she accepted a cookie. “I ran a check for recent illegal laboratories, code named experiments, or any villain groups with the name Yaldabaoth.”

“And?”

“Nothing. I checked for ‘Shujin Academy’ alongside a ‘Masayoshi Shido’ that ran for prime minister. No hits whatsoever.” She bit the cookie in half and huffed in frustration. “The only solid thing I could find about Yaldabaoth is information from mythology, but that won’t help us. Maybe I should sweep through Chinese and Korean servers? They could’ve come from there.”

“I do feel bad for doing this behind Akira’s back.” Tobita frowned.
“Kaito wholeheartedly believes them.”

“I know, but what else are we supposed to do?”

“I believe the real question is, how do you truly feel about their story?”

“I...” Manami stared at her half eaten treat, the monitor highlighting her uncertainty. “I know that they really believe that they are from another world. B-but that can’t be, right? They have to be c-confused, or maybe some villain drilled it into their heads. I promised I would help them no matter what, so I’m going to uncover the truth!”

“I see.” Tobita grabbed his teacup, but frowned into the golden liquid.
“And what if, by the smallest chance, they *did* tell the truth?”

Manami froze. “What do you mean?”

“There is a certain saying, my dear.” He looked her in the eye with a kind smile. “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“So...?”

“So I know that this world has any number of strange and wonderful quirks. By the same aspect, who’s to say that the possibility of alternate worlds is zero?” Tobita shrugged. “What if they *did* tell the absolute truth, and we’re the ones playing the fools?”

The cookie tasted like ash in her mouth. She set it down as her stomach churned.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.” She sighed. “I just want to help them any way I can.”

“I know.” He put a hand to her shoulder. “Just something to think about my dear. Oh my, I made these cookies, and I forgot to share with Kaito! I’ll be back momentarily.”

She chuckled as he grabbed the cookie platter and vacated the cubicle.

Her phone chimed with a message from Akira.

[Curry God]

Hey, if it's not too much trouble, can you run a search for me?

[Haxxor]

Of course!

What do you need?

[Curry God]

A regular at the Blue Lotus hasn't come in and with the recent kidnappings...

I just want to be sure she's alright.

Can you look up a woman by the name of Haru Nukumi?

[Haxxor]

On it!

I'll have it for you soon.

[Curry God]

Thanks :)

Wait.

This doesn't make me a stalker, does it?

[Haxxor]

Depends on the context.

It's one thing if you want to make sure she's safe, buuuut~

I shouldn't have to tell you the other implications.

Doesn't look good for you :)

[Curry God]

Hey!

I'm a totally innocent bean and you know it ;)

Oh, I might have a theory about those fires, but that can wait until later.

Crap, Risumi's mad at me for being on the phone

Got to go

Manami shook her head and got to work.

Toshinori stood in the center of Ground Beta.

His hero costume swallowed his frail body, with extra heaps of fabric pooling around his feet. Skyscrapers jutted into the sky all around him, and he stood in one of their gargantuan shadows. Still, even if this was part of the school, the emptiness of such a vast city was unsettling. Offices that would never be worked in, apartments that would never hear the cries and laughter of people. Empty. Vacant.

He tried not to think that they were inhabited by long lost ghosts.

"-And that's why I'm calling this illogical." Aizawa grumbled over the comms. "We've had to shave five minutes from this test, and all because someone is being too stubborn to sit out."

"Aizawa, I assure you." Toshinori frowned. "My reduced time limit should have no effect on how these tests proceed. You have my word."

"It's not about you. We already cut time so that you could participate, instead of sitting by on the sidelines. How is that fair to any of our students?"

"Now, now, Aizawa." Nezu chirped. "We've remedied the reduced time limit by adding an additional 15% to our body weights. These

tests are fair."

"Whatever. I still don't like it."

"Wow, Shou!" Midnight cried. *"You're in a really bad mood today."*

"Don't get me started."

"Ooooh, I know!!" Present Mic yelled. *"Was it because you missed out on the action the other night!? Don't feel so down about that, Shouta!"*

"I'm not-"

"I swear, I'm going to scream if I hear one more word about Joker."
Snipe griped.

"Why?" Midnight asked.

"Because he's EVERYWHERE! You can't walk down the street, turn on the tv, or have a simple conversation with your neighbors without his name cropping up. My landlord spent thirty minutes, THIRTY MINUTES, cornering me in the hallway and just talking on and on about him!"

"Wasn't she at Musutafu General when Joker healed them?"
Ectoplasm asked.

"Well, yeah. But still!"

"Someone's jeeeealous." Midnight teased.

"I'm NOT jealous!!"

"That's just what someone who is jealous would say." Cementoss said.

"It doesn't matter how you feel about Joker." Aizawa suddenly snapped. *"You're going to apologize for shooting him when he gets*

here.”

“Yikes. *I haven’t heard the Dadzawa tone used on a fellow teacher before.*” Present Mic said.

“Shut it. *I’m being serious.*”

“I will apologize to him, I swear! It’s not that I’m angry or jealous. Its just...” There was a long sigh. *“His stunts are getting more and more out of hand. How long until it becomes a complete catastrophe? What if there’s another raid situation and an entire city gets decimated in the aftermath? We’re lucky that Musutafu wasn’t razed to the ground by that massive dragon. Nobody died, but how long until Joker actually kills someone?”*

“We will handle these situations as they come along.” Nezu had lost all mirth. *“Remember that this is a young vigilante whom we wish to help. Do not lose sight of that goal.”*

“RAAAUGH! That’s right!!” Hound Dog howled.

“Roger.” Snipe said tersely.

Toshinori’s mouth went dry.

A young vigilante. He stared down at his hands, nothing more than bare bones draped with skin. He curled them into fists as that tiny spark of hope flickered within his heart. Gran Torino’s words about his former sidekick occasionally ghosted his mind. He spent hours staring down at his phone with that familiar number on the screen, but his shaky thumb just wouldn’t hit the call button. He had been afraid. But, as Aizawa pointed out, this wasn’t about *him* .

This was all to help Joker.

Confidence flowed into him at that thought. Perhaps he really did need to get over himself and take the plunge. Nighteye was an

invaluable ally. His wits were second only to Nezu, and his quirk might be the key to solving this.

He shook his head and focused.

Nighteye would get a call soon, but first he had to get through this exam.

"How could you lose to some disgusting mutant who's far below your station!?"

"We promised investors that you would win the Sports Festival, hands down. Do you know how much money we lost!?"

No, mother, father, you're wrong! Tokoyami won through his own hard work. Don't insult him!

"That, and you decided to intern with some low class hero. Why didn't you just chose one of the more prestigious heroes we laid out for you? You're such an ungrateful daughter!"

Why can't you believe in me and let me follow my own path!?

"No, there's still a way out! We may have lost a few investors, but even they can't hold a candle to the Hero Commission! If we throw some money their way and secure her future as a top hero, then we'll keep living like kings for the rest of our days."

"Yes, what an excellent idea! They loathe that vigilante, right? Why don't we fund a bounty for his head? Thirty million should suffice. It would be enough to secure their favor for many years. Perhaps we can hold another charity to-"

Momo had zoned out in a panic. Please, don't drag Joker into this! Not somebody she looks up to so dearly. Not somebody who was the embodiment of her childhood hero. Did mother fall so low that she didn't see the comparison?

She wanted to say all of these things. Shout them to the heavens if she must, but she had bowed her head and kept silent, her tongue weighed with lead. She did what a good daughter would.

Or... did she?

"It sounds like the adults are using you for their own gain."

"Huh?" She gaped at the charming barista. "I... suppose they are, but they are my family-"

"Just because they are family, doesn't mean that they own you."

He had displayed such anger. A light shown within him that would incinerate any wrongdoers, as bright as the northern star. The tiny flecks of gold within his silvery eyes smoldered with that righteous anger. Her breath caught. She couldn't look away.

"They can't do whatever they want. You are your own person. If you believe that they're wrong, then stand up and fight for your own justice."

"My own justice?"

"Isn't that what Arsene would do?" Those flames cooled into a soft kindness. "He wouldn't sit around and wait to be rescued, he would fight against that unfairness with everything he had."

A swift shadow passed over her. She looked up to see a single raven circling them high in the sky. Free from the weight of the world. Momo loved her parents, but she refused to be just a doll that they could abuse whenever they felt like it.

"Yaoyorozu?"

Momo startled out of her thoughts and looked at Todoroki.

"My apologies." She tucked a stray bang behind her ear. "I was lost in thought."

“No problem.” Todoroki’s brows furrowed. “I wanted to ask if you had a plan to fight Aizawa-sensei.”

“O-oh. Aizawa-sensei specializes in stealth, right? I can use my quirk to create small items, and we’ll know when he’s around when his quirk stops mine. As for countering him, I might have a plan but... I don’t know if it’ll work.”

She trailed off, and Todoroki put a hand to her shoulder.

“You’re the smartest person in our class.” He said coolly. “I’m sure whatever plan you have will pull through.”

A rush of courage flooded her. She smiled as Todoroki let his hand fall. The thought of fiery silver eyes and Todoroki’s trust in her strengthened her resolve, and she stood just a bit taller. Just then, the gates screeched open, and a chipper ‘START!!’ echoed around them.

“Let’s go.”

Todoroki ran first, and she followed. A tiny smile crossed her lips as she looked up at the raven.

She couldn’t wait to *fly* .

“Deku, shoot now!!”

“Sorry, All Might!”

Deku pulled the pin, and the whole street was consumed in a mighty blaze. Buildings crumbled and the concrete was ripped apart, a plume of dust devoured the city.

“Kacchan, let’s go!”

Bakugo snarled as he followed Deku. They burst from the cloud and pounded down the street like their very lives depended on it.

“That won’t keep that bastard down!” Bakugo snapped.

“N-no, b-but I can see the exit! We can make it!”

“Can you *really* ?” All Might’s voice trickled in their ears, and suddenly the man was upon them.

One second was all it took for the gauntlets to be reduced to shattered bits. He and Deku were frozen by fear, eyes wide.

“Alright, heroes!” All Might’s smile never looked so sinister. “It’s time for you to die!!”

Bakugo saw stars when All Might’s knee struck his chin like a speeding train, and he was sent into the heavens. His vision blackened as glass and concrete broke under his body. He tumbled through the dark building. Bakugo rolled to a stop, his body screaming in pain. With a grunt, he hauled himself to his feet, stumbling before catching himself. He spat out a globule of crimson and wiped his chin.

Rage consumed him as the cataclysmic battle continued outside. How did Joker make this so easy? How did that bastard fend off the number one hero without lifting a finger, and yet Bakugo was so weak that he was struggling to stand! He forced one foot in front of the other, until he was close enough to the exit.

His explosion vaulted him back into the battle, just in time to witness All Might’s ruthlessness.

“NEW HAMPSHIRE SMAASH!!”

All Might flew through the sky like a meteor, his attack colliding with Deku’s exposed back. Bakugo’s eyes widened as time seemed to slow. He heard something over the fire and brimstone that had destroyed the city, such a small sound that had no right invading his ears.

A sickening *crack* .

Deku's face turned into a mask of pain. His body slammed into the concrete before colliding into a bus, where he pathetically fell to the earth, unmoving. A new wrath exploded into Bakugo like never before, as destructive as an erupting volcano.

"DIE!!!! HOWITZER IMPACT!"

All Might whirled towards him. His vibrant blue irises were kindled like a bonfire just moments before Bakugo unleashed his pent up fury. A corkscrew of heat and light doused the whole city like an exploding star. Bakugo ground his teeth together as bright light blinded him and the concussive force rattled his bones, but he hit his target.

All Might was blown into a building, glass and debris raining down upon the shattered road. Bakugo fell, but used his quirk to soften his landing as clouds of dust choked them. The sheen of sweat on his body was like glue, but he was too high from adrenaline to care about the grit clinging to him. He grinned as the building collapsed on itself. All Might didn't emerge.

"Is that all you got!?" He shouted between heavy pants. "Don't tell me that it's over already!?"

"Kacchan." Deku, the shriveled, pathetic mess on the ground, whined. "I th-think is w-worked!"

"No shit!" He growled. "Why don't you stop being useless and stand up already!? He'll come out at any second. I'm not losing because of you!"

"I-I can't..." Deku gasped as he looked at Bakugo, his large pupils flooded with pain. "I c-can't feel my legs."

Bakugo jolted. His crimson eyes scanned the decimated bus over Deku. The number one hero did a direct hit to Deku's *spine*, and that

sickening crack replayed several times in his mind. Did he really...? Was All Might that careless?

"D-don't worry about me!" Deku threw on a shaky grin. "Why don't you get out of here!? Y-you can still pass if you leave me here!"

Bakugo, however, was rooted to the spot. Leave him here?

Leave Deku here?

Abandon his supposed useless partner in a dangerous area to save his own skin?

"Wait a minute. Oh, I recognize you." That girl had smirked and crossed her arms. "You're that one villainous kid from the Sports Festival."

The cries of 'Villain!' had dogged his every step ever since the Sports Festival. He saw it in peoples' eyes whenever he was recognized in the streets. The voices and leering calls were constant in his fitful dreams. He never saw it from his classmates, but the halls were riddled with whispers of his supposed 'villainy'. Their hateful stares stabbed into his back when he wasn't looking.

Bakugo felt heat pool in his chest and he stomped towards Deku. He grabbed the idiot by the collar and lifted him up.

"I'M NOT A VILLAIN!!" He shouted right in Deku's face.

Deku paled. "Wh-what!? I-I never said you were-"

"Shut up!!"

"Wh-what are you doing!?" Deku shouted as he was thrown over Bakugo's shoulder. "I'll only slow you down!"

"I said shut it!!" Bakugo spat as he turned his back on the smoking rubble. "I'm saving your sorry ass and that's that! Now quit struggling and be quiet!"

Bakugo shot down the street with an occasional explosion to propel them forward. Deku was like dead weight, his legs dangling uselessly. Bakugo shoved it out of his mind when they flew under the exit.

The happy little ‘You Pass!!’ felt hollow, and robots carrying a stretcher zoomed towards them within seconds. He set Deku on it with a scowl, and they left for the medical tent. Deku’s eyes never left Bakugo’s face. Bakugo couldn’t look at him.

“Hey, meatbag!” Bakugo scowled at the singular robot that remained. “You’re injured, too! Are you coming to the medical tent or what?”

Bakugo shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away. “Mind your own damn business, tin can! I’m fine!”

“Bah! Meatbags have no manners.”

The little robot zipped away. Bakugo was alone with his thoughts. He stared back into the testing grounds, where smoke and dust still rained over the fake city, and the stale scent stung his nose. Bakugo turned away.

“I’m not a villain.” Bakugo repeated to himself. “I’m *not* .”

Meanwhile, Toshinori Yagi hacked dust out of his lungs as he made his way out of the rubble. The taste of irons stained his tongue. He tripped over his oversized costume more times than he cared to admit, pain lancing through his entire body. Pride swelled within him as he heard Nezu declare his students’ victory.

But his current pride would not hold up to the pure, unadulterated reckoning that Recovery Girl would wreak upon him.

“-And then All Might apparently broke the boy’s spine.”

"He WHAT!?" Cerberus howled. "Where is number one hero!? Me tear him to pieces for hurting my green child!!"

"Calm down, Cerberus." The Trickster said, though worry thrummed through their bond. "Is Midoriya okay? I know it's a hero school, but I didn't think they would go that far!"

"I did not see it personally, but I overheard it from his classmates." Yatagarasu scratched the branch under his talons. "I am currently waiting outside the medical tent. I'll have more news soon."

Minutes pass. The Trickster's uneasiness gnawed on their bond, and Yatagarasu couldn't help but fidget under it. Finally, the flap to the medical tent opened and Yatagarasu breathed a sigh of relief.

Midoriya looked exhausted. There were bags under his eyes. He rubbed at his lower back as he hobbled underneath Yatagarasu's branch.

"The boy is walking, though he looks quite sore. It seems the medical facilities are not inadequate after all. You need not intervene... for now."

"Good. I don't think sending a strongly worded calling card to Nezu would be enough if he wasn't."

"Indeed. I apologize for not witnessing his exam."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad he's okay." The Trickster paused for thought. "Can you do one more thing while you're there?"

"Anything for my Trickster."

"Can you check out the USJ? I hate that we can't reach it yet, but it doesn't hurt to have you poke around."

"Say no more. My wings shall be swift!"

"Thanks." Warmth filled Yatagarasu's heart when he heard the Trickster's faint laugh. *"We'll visit the beach soon, okay? I feel like I haven't rewarded you guys enough."*

Yatagarasu didn't hear his other selves' deny the Trickster's words as an unholy screech came from the tent. It sounded like demons dragging their helpless prey to the gates of hell, and he swore he heard cries of pain from the unwilling victim. Another stormed from the tent after an ominous silence.

The Hierophant Impostor had the darkest expression that he'd ever seen a human muster. Yatagarasu swooped down, claws raking across the back of the man's neck.

Yatagarasu reveled in the man's obscenities as he soared away. Black hairs drifted from his talons as he tilted his body, circling around the medical tent one last time. Then, with the wind under his feathers, he headed towards the USJ. A vast expanse of greenery and great cement constructs passed underneath. But something insidious prickled at his spine when he got closer.

A heaviness to the air.

An unseen miasma chilling him to the bone.

An unnaturally cold breeze that made his feathers twitchy.

It was a wonder how the Magician stayed sane during his mission here. This energy was barely detectable over the entire school, but grew thicker as he approached the eye of this invisible storm.

"Trickster." Yatagarasu landed at the top of the dome. *"Something is here."*

"What is it?"

"There is malicious energy centered over the USJ, and it's building like a storm on the horizon. It's not natural to this world. It almost

feels like... like the Metaverse, and yet not. Wait, I sense other energies entangled in this web. Could it be the other worlds? I cannot tell."

"I knew it." The Trickster muttered. "Damn it! I'll let Morgana know. My shift ends soon and he should be around the Blue Lotus somewhere."

"Trickster..."

"It's fine. We'll be fine. It's not like we have any way to get there safely." Yatagarasu felt sadness and embers of frustration. "Can you come back? We'll be checking on Haru-san soon."

"As you wish, my Trickster."

Yatagarasu let himself fade like morning fog, eager to escape the oppressing aura.

Aizawa grumbled as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Are you alright?" Tsukauchi asked from beside him.

"Fine." He let his hand drop with a sigh. "A bird dive bombed me earlier."

"Ah, after you and Recovery Girl yelled at All Might?" Nezu said from his desk. "Perhaps you strayed too close to its nest?"

"Hey, All Might deserved it for being a careless idiot! He *broke* Midoriya's spine like a twig! He's lucky Recovery Girl got to him so fast, otherwise he might not have walked again."

"Toshinori..." Tsukauchi face palmed. "Please tell me he's alive, at least?"

"Barely." Aizawa spat.

“The situation has been handled.” Nezu leaned back in his chair.
“Besides, miracles happen. Ingenium was never supposed to walk again, and yet-”

“Don’t even go there.” Aizawa growled.

Nezu grinned. Thankfully, a knock on the door interrupted Aizawa’s thoughts on strangling the mouse with his capture weapon.

“Come in!”

The door opened, and the hulking figure of Chief Tsuragamae stepped inside.

“Apologies for being late.” He strolled to a chair and eyed Admiral Feesh on the seat next to him. “I was preoccupied when I got your call, Tsukauchi.”

Tsukauchi bowed his head. “I’m sorry that we set this up so suddenly.”

“Don’t apologize.” Tsuragamae said. “Neither you nor Eraserhead would do something like this if it wasn’t important.”

“Indeed!” Nezu folded his paws and leaned forward. “The floor is yours, gentlemen. What did you need to discuss?”

Aizawa and Tsukauchi exchanged glances. Several seconds ticked by before Aizawa nodded, and Tsukauchi turned to face them, expression hardening.

“We know Joker’s age.” Tsukauchi sat up straight. “He’s... he’s only sixteen.”

Tsuragamae and Nezu froze like deer in the headlights.

“Care to explain how you came across this information?” The chief asked slowly. “The only way to know for sure is if Joker himself told you. Unless...?”

“Yes. I ran into him right after Seth’s fight with Ryukyu.” A haunted look glimmered in Aizawa’s eyes. “My body just moved when I saw the kid. He was... scared, but I was able to calm him down enough to where he would talk to me.”

“I’m surprised.” Nezu said, his eyes razor sharp. “You managed to speak to him after everything that happened that night?”

“Not only Joker, I got to speak with one of his de... his creatures.”

Nezu nearly vaulted himself from his desk, his tail waving rapidly.

“Which one?” Tsuragamae asked, eyes wide.

“The one that destroyed the police station, I didn’t get it’s name.” Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon. “It told me, in *explicit* detail, just how bad Joker’s injuries were on the day of the raid.”

“Do tell!” Nezu was vibrating with excitement. “Was my theory correct? Did you suffer the same backlash as Joker? How did it feel to confront that creature? Was it-”

“Nezu.” Aizawa looked directly into the rat’s eyes. “My quirk almost *killed* them. Both Joker and that dragon.”

Nezu’s expression plummeted, and his tail fell flat over his chair.

Tsuragamae took a deep breathe and slowly let it out, “He is tied to those creatures so deeply that erasing them is almost a death sentence?”

Aizawa nodded. “Joker looked a little ill when I first used my quirk, too.”

“And I have a theory.” Tsukauchi met Nezu’s beady eyes. “My quirk always registered ‘truth’ when Joker said he was quirkless, but we thought that wasn’t the case after everything we’ve witnessed. However, given Joker’s bad reaction to Aizawa’s quirk, we can only believe that-”

“Oh!” Nezu cut him off. “Are you saying that his creatures aren’t part of his quirk factor? It would make sense. With no true quirk factor to limit his capabilities, the possibilities would be near endless! Just like... the Nomu.” Nezu deflated, his solemnness painting the room. “I see. So his powers are not natural and they can overwhelm him?”

Aizawa nodded. “He was clutching his head and looked like he was in pain when I stopped my quirk.”

“That implies that his powers could be unstable.” Tsuragamae scratched his chin. “He could be in mortal danger, not just to others, but to himself too.”

“It also proves that quirk suppressants would impact his health even when his creatures aren’t out. Separation from them, even temporarily, could be detrimental.” Nezu’s paws balled into fists. “This presents a bit of a problem.”

“The lowest dose might not hurt him, since the quirk suppressant cuffs didn’t affect him after the USJ.” Tsukauchi said, frowning. “But there wouldn’t be a sure way to test it out until we get him into custody.”

“We can worry about that once he gets taken in.” Tsuragamae looked at Aizawa. “You’re sure he wasn’t lying about his age?”

“Positive. I *told* Kunikazu that he had to be underage, and I was right.”

“Hmm, but that’s not everything, is it?” Nezu’s eyes were like tiny pinpricks stabbing into them. “I imagine that Joker didn’t share such vital information about himself without some sort of compromise. He will gain something from this, correct?”

Tsukauchi turned pale.

“How did you know?” Aizawa sat up straight, glaring. “I didn’t tell you that part yet.”

“It’s not hard to figure out.” Nezu chuckled. “He was an expert in gaining intel during our initial interrogation, so a trade of some sort isn’t unlikely.”

“I promised him that we’d get the raid heroes out of Musutafu.”

“That won’t be easy.” Tsuragamae said.

“But it *is* possible.” Nezu folded his paws together. “Tensions between citizens and heroes are the highest they have ever been in Musutafu. People are unhappy. They feel as if the heroes value capturing a ‘wanted criminal’ over protecting them. Many news articles haven’t been kind since those fires broke out.”

“But can we do it?” Tsukauchi drummed his fingers on his knees.

“We better.” Aizawa growled. “I *don’t* make empty promises.”

“I agree!” Nezu swiveled in his chair and typed on his keyboard. “I’ll send an email to the mayor. The timing is just *perfect*. I have a feeling that she’ll take my offer with open arms!”

“I... don’t want to know.” Tsukauchi muttered.

“Perhaps we’ll win a bit of Joker’s trust. We’ll have an easier time if he’s more open for communication!” Nezu stopped typing and looked at the chief. “That is, if you’ll support my claim, Chief Tsuragamae? Understand that securing his position here is our highest priority. This Vigilante Program *cannot* fail. You know why.”

“I will support you.” Tsuragamae nodded, but he looked over to Aizawa and Tsukauchi with a frown. “However, not many will agree with your decision to keep your encounter with Joker a secret. Why did you not call it in?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Aizawa snapped. “Look at what happened during that live interview and the raid! Ryukyu’s reputation as a hero is up in flames since her fight with Seth. If it wasn’t for

Cementoss, then the cost to repair the damages of that fight would have been in the tens of thousands. If I called it in, who knows what else could've happened that night!"

"I did not mean to anger you, I just needed to hear your reason." Tsuragamae held up a hand. "It was a wise choice. This destruction will not end if we follow the same path over and over. A kinder approach is necessary, but not everyone will believe that you were in the right by withholding such vital information. If anything comes up, then I will bare the full responsibility."

Tsukauchi startled. "But-!"

"No." Tsuragamae shook his head. "The law might view you in the wrong, but I know you were only trying to protect a lost young man from a grisly fate. Allow me to do this, not for you, but for Joker. He will need a strong support system and I believe the both of you will be a good foundation for him."

Tsukauchi's eyes widened. "Chief..."

"Thank you." Aizawa bowed his head. "I'll repay you somehow."

"No need." Tsuragamae chuckled. "Just make sure that this boy has a bright future, and it will be paid back in full."

"There's no doubt that Kunikazu will try to fight against this program." Nezu giggled like a school girl. "I can't wait to reveal my trap card!"

"Your trap card?" Tsukauchi asked.

"Indeed!" Nezu's grin sharpened. "I have gained another unexpected ally, and his support will empower our claims even further."

Aizawa raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Endeavor."

"Endeavor!?" Their unified shout pierced Nezu's sensitive ears.

“Yes, Endeavor.” Nezu folded his paws together and glanced out the window. “Truly, his recent call came as a welcome surprise.”

“I thought Endeavor was against anything and everything vigilante?” Tsukauchi said, wide-eyed. “Why did he call you?”

“I believe it was because of Joker himself.” Nezu sighed at their confused glances. “Joker has triumphed over Endeavor at every turn. I believe the constant servings of humility and loss has weighed on Endeavor’s mind. It’s curious that his own children support Joker over him. I cannot fathom how that has affected him.”

“Humility can change any man.” Tsuragamae nodded.

“Quite.” Nezu turned back to his computer and continued typing. “Let’s take a few days to digest this information and allow the mayor time to respond. I’ll inform the rest of the U.A. staff about Joker’s status, too.”

“Very well.” Tsuragamae stood. “I’ll keep in touch.”

With that, the man left. Aizawa released a long sigh as he sunk into the cushions.

“I’m going to need so much coffee.” Aizawa muttered.

“Oh, perhaps from a lovely cafe called the Blue Lotus?” Nezu grinned, his tip of his tail wagging. “I might visit soon! After all, I would love to meet Joker without his costume.”

Both men startled.

“*What ?*” Tsukauchi turned pale. “How did you find out!?”

“It wasn’t too difficult. Aizawa changed drastically after he visited a certain cafe, and his demeanor shifted whenever we mentioned Joker afterwards.” Nezu chuckled. “That, and Young Shinsou was a vital piece of the puzzle.”

Aizawa blinked, and then stiffened. “That cafe is owned by the *Shinsou family*. Joker works there.” He facepalmed. “Damn it. Why didn’t I figure it out earlier?”

“It’s quite alright, Aizawa. There’s no need to feel downtrodden about it!” Nezu wore a reassuring smile. “Think of it like this. Perhaps the Shinsou family is aware of their employee’s status. If that is true, then we have another avenue to gain Joker’s trust. Keeping those people around will help him immensely.”

“Questioning them would be a bad move.” Tsukauchi said. “One of my officers checks in daily, but he’s still a flight risk.”

“We’ll leave that family alone for the time being.” Nezu chirped. “Still, I can’t wait to visit! I’ve heard many good things about that cafe.”

“Nezu, *don’t*. ” Aizawa jumped to the edge of his seat. “You should’ve seen how *terrified* he was the other night. Tsukauchi and I want to give him time before we go back. We *can’t* mess this up.”

“I know, Aizawa.” Nezu’s enthusiasm died on the spot. “My sudden appearance at the cafe would spook him, so I shall wait.”

“Good.”

Nezu sighed after a few moments of silence.

“It has been an interesting day, no?” Nezu hopped down from his chair and rounded the desk. “We’ll need all the rest we can get!”

“Is that a nice way to say that you’re kicking us out?” Aizawa grumbled.

Nezu grinned, and Aizawa groaned.

“Fine. Tsukauchi?”

“Right...”

Nezu watched the two men scrape themselves from the cushions and leave his office.

“How exciting!” Nezu looked to Admiral Feesh, who had been all but ignored by the others. “I truly cannot wait to see what the future has in store for Joker. Don’t you agree Admiral Feesh?”

Admiral Feesh kept his silence, but Nezu knew that he was excited too.

“Slow down!” Morgana whispered from the bag. “You’re making me feel sick... urg...”

“Sorry.” Akira slowed his footsteps.

He refrained from bolting out of the Blue Lotus the moment his shift ended. Akira forced himself to relax so that he didn’t crush the bag of goodies. He brought it just in case. If Haru-san was fine and he was being paranoid, then he could say that he was delivering the goodie bag as a favor to Risumi.

But... if she wasn’t...

If Haru-san had gotten hurt because he was too suspicious of Giran’s offer-

“Trickster.” Ishtar said. *“You cannot blame yourself if something has happened.”*

“Don’t even try, big brother!” Alice pouted.

“Please, put your mind at ease.” Yatagarasu floated in the night sky overhead. *“We will deal with this accordingly. If this woman has been harmed, then know that you have all of us at your back. There will be no safe haven for any who wish harm on others.”*

Akira took comfort in their words, and pressed on.

Other faces around him were all blurred in his narrow focus to his GPS. He flowed through the night time crowd and came across the apartment building. It didn't look like much. A smaller complex tucked into a nicer neighborhood. Quiet. Quaint. And yet, the ominous aura leaking from it could curdle his blood.

He swore he smelled ash on the air, and the flash of a white sundress popped into his head.

"Are we there yet?" Morgana was a blissful interruption.

"Yes." Akira blended with the shadows as he crept into the alley.
"We're here."

"Okay!" Morgana wriggled out and leapt off of his shoulder. "Just like we planned. Manami said there was a fire escape right by the window. I'll take that route and you go in through the front."

"Yeah, I know." Akira's nerves distorted his smile. "I turned on our comms, so let me know if you see anything strange."

"You got it, Leader."

Morgana leapt skywards with the aid of a Garudyne while Akira went around to the front. If he learned anything about infiltration, it was that you either snuck through undetected, or *act* like you already belonged there. The mask was so easy to pull over his own skin. That bundle of jagged emotions was covered by a layer of beautiful porcelain, he only had to make sure that it wouldn't crack.

He winked at the woman covering the front desk, and her reddened face killed any suspicion she might have. He crossed the lobby with an easy stride. The elevator let off a happy chime and he stepped inside, pressing the button for the fifth floor. His heartbeats counted the long seconds that went by, until he reached his destination.

Haru-san's apartment was at the end of the hall. A modest looking door with polished golden numbers tacked on. Apartment 56. He

cleared his throat and rapped his knuckles on it. The resulting knocks were far too loud within the hall's silence.

"Haru-san?" Akira said gently. "I brought food from the Blue Lotus."

He waited. He shifted.

"Haru-san?" He knocked once more.

Silence. Akira leaned in and put his ear on the door. There were muffled sounds, but he couldn't make them out.

"Akira." Morgana's voice was in his ear. *"I don't like this."*

"What do you see?" He whispered.

"It looks normal? The window is closed and I hear the TV playing, but something doesn't feel right. I'm not sensing anybody inside."

"I'm coming in."

It was locked, but nothing that his skills with a lock pick couldn't handle. He slipped inside and shut the door.

"Haru-san?" He called. "Sorry for the intrusion."

It was dark, but a TV splashed light down the hall. He walked as quiet as a mouse, and the hallway opened up into a large living room and kitchen separated by a line of counter tops. Dull splashes of green were peppered throughout the apartment, plants whose soil were dry. A thin layer of dust blanketed the furniture.

"Hey, let me in!"

He ignored the television as he opened the window. Morgana hopped in and took a look around.

"Hey, this is a nice place!" He said, but frowned at Akira's uneasiness. "Sorry, I just.... hey, what's that over there?"

Akira followed his gaze into the kitchen. "A broken glass?"

"That's not a good sign." Morgana darted away as Akira stepped into the kitchen. "I'll check the bathroom and bedroom!"

"A broken glass. Beloved plants unwatered. Television playing, as if to cover up other sounds. A fine layer of dust." Arsene growled.
"Trickster, I think-"

"I know." Akira curled his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms.

"It's completely empty." Morgana ran into the kitchen, eyes wide.
"Akira, what does Third Eye see?"

Akira let the world turn into an obscure haze. Pops of vibrant color on the floor churned his stomach.

"Footprints, a lot of them." He paced around the kitchen, careful not to disturb the glass shards. "Haru-san's footprints are gold, but there are two or three other pairs in blue. There was a struggle..."

Akira followed them into the living room and down a second hallway. He stopped, his shoes covering the last golden footprints stained into the wood. Haru's were much smaller than his.

"They disappear right here." He turned towards Morgana, who's fur bristled. "They must've had a teleport quirk or something. Morgana, we *have* to accept Giran's job."

"Whoa, hey!" Morgana jumped onto his shoulder. "I understand that you're angry, but we shouldn't dive head first into this."

"Look around! The longer we wait, the longer Haru-san, and who knows *how* many others, will suffer." He ran a hand through his hair.
"We can't just ignore them like everyone else!"

Morgana locked eyes with him for several seconds, tail twitching.

“Alright.” Morgana rubbed against his fluffy hair. “I have your back, Leader.”

Akira wasted no time.

The swifter exit was out the window. He made sure it was closed and raced down the fire escape, burning anger fueled his every step.

“Sorry for the waste, Risumi.” Akira tossed the goodie bag into the trash, the treats completely squished.

Ribbons of flame danced around Akira as they crept down the dark alley. Joker emerged unscathed with a rather frightening grin on his face, and he pulled at his blood red gloves. Even the shadows seemed afraid of him, shying away from his painted footsteps.

Mona gulped as Joker retrieved his phone and dialed Giran’s number.

One rule of Giran’s job was to *never* ask too many questions.

Yet, the questions hung off of his tongue as he stared at the vigilante in front of him. Those clothes were deceitful. Made of the finest quality leather he’s ever seen, and it protected the wearer better than a full suit of military grade body armor. Now, the newest item of Joker’s that drew his fascination.

A gun.

It would be a normal pistol by any other right, except this one was carved from the purest silver. Angelic wings spread out from the back. He could see that every feather was painstakingly detailed. There was something... *off* about it, as if its mere presence proved the existence of divine beings. A weapon that could shoot down such divine beings out of the sky and send devils back into the pits of hell. He suppressed shivers just thinking about how much it was worth.

Joker finished reloading the pistol and stuck the rest of the magazines in his costume. He twirled the gun around his fingers when he caught Giran staring. Giran decided not to comment on how any light that touched the weapon became an enchanting prismatic sheen.

Joker smirked. "Jealous?"

"Only a little." Giran chuckled. "I've never seen anything like it before, so I was curious on where you got it."

"That's simple." Joker tucked the weapon in his belt. "You just have to execute the Voice Of God with an electric chair."

Giran blinked. Joker's demeanor didn't change, so the vigilante was just screwing with him.

"Right..." Giran shook his head. "The payment?"

"Here." Joker whipped out his phone. "As we agreed."

Giran grinned as his phone pinged.

"No problem." Giran reached into his coat for a file. "Now, the job. All of the details are in here, so don't lose it."

Joker snatched the file with a blood red glove.

Giran kept the slimy feelings in his gut from showing. He knew immediately that their plans had worked, that Joker had only called him because of the sudden spike in kidnappings around the area. Still, the calm, silent fury that Joker exuded when he walked into the building made his skin crawl. He almost jumped when Joker closed the file with a *snap*, and his eyes stabbed into Giran's like a knife.

"Here I thought it would be a difficult job." Sharpness flowed into Joker's Chesire grin. "It shouldn't take more than one night. I expect you to have the information by the time I'm done, Giran."

“Of course.” Giran grinned. “What sort of businessman would I be if I didn’t hold up my end of the bargain?”

“Good.” Joker turned his back and waved. “See ya!”

“Wait.” The vigilante paused and looked over his shoulder. “You can take whatever information you need from the place, but I want a cut of any ‘goods’ you come across.”

“Fine.”

Giran let the vigilante walk, watching the strange splashes of color at Joker’s feet. He waited alone in the dilapidated building, only reaching for his phone when the coast was clear.

[???

The big fish took the bait.

Prepare the others.

“There’s a possible route here.” Morgana said as he stamped his paw on the west wing.

“Maybe.” Akira frowned as he tapped the marker against his chin. “It’s the easiest point of entry, but the farthest away from the treasure. It might not be the best.”

Morgana pulled his paw back, brows furrowed.

“Why are you so worried?” Manami said from her laptop. “The security system will be down and it’ll be safe!”

“And this treasure is in an unused mansion!” Tobita said. “It should be an easy job.”

“Don’t think that this will be so simple.” Akira said with a frown. “It might look easy when we’re sitting here staring at blueprints, but the real heist will be a whole other ordeal.”

“Akira’s right. The number one rule of being a phantom thief is that you should *always* be alert.” Morgana sighed. “It’s common sense because anything could go wrong at any moment.”

“I have to ask.” Tobita gestured at the map. “You’ve traversed Palaces before without a map, right? Is it any different having the full outline before a heist?”

Akira and Morgana exchanged glances.

“I guess. Usually we’d sneak in blind and work as we go.” Morgana narrowed his eyes. “It’s a bit refreshing to have everything beforehand!”

“For once.” Akira muttered. “Have you found anything on the targets, Manami?”

“Not much, they’ve covered their tracks really well.” She glanced over her screen. “But there are odd coincidences here and there. If Giran’s information is right, then the evidence of their wrongdoing is in this mansion?”

“Correct.” Akira sighed as he set the marker down. “Supposedly, the Yaoyorozu’s wealth is founded on fraud. Stealing from charities, planting employees into rival companies and ruining their reputation, blackmail, that sort of thing.”

“Do these people never learn?” Morgana shook his head. “It’s like Silver Falcon all over again.”

“They think their wealth makes them untouchable.” Akira shrugged. “They place the evidence in one of their unused mansions to keep it safe. No foot traffic or servants to find their dirty laundry, but they

have every reason to keep the security sky high. Still, something's been bothering me."

"What's wrong?" Morgana asked.

"Momo is innocent."

"That 1-A girl from the cafe?" Morgana tilted his head.

"She felt like her family was using her for their own gain. It was like watching Haru being abused by her father all over again."

"Akira..." Morgana said softly.

"I see." Tobita stroked his facial hair. "So, we expose their crimes, save a young woman from an abusive family, and get your bounty taken down."

"*And* get information on the missing people. That's the most important thing." Golden fire came into Akira's eyes. "We can't fail."

"We won't!" Morgana hopped up on all fours with that same spitfire. "We have a lot riding on this, but we'll do it together!"

"How about some tea before we finish planning?" Tobita said with a smile. "It's always been a ritual of mine to have a fine cup of tea before going out as Gentle Criminal!"

"That sounds nice." Akira leaned back with a sigh.

"We could use a break." Morgana said. "We've been staring at this map for hours! My eyes are starting to hurt."

"Very well!" Tobita stood with a flourish. "I have a special blend tucked away for occasions like this!"

They chuckled as he got to work.

Kaito stopped them as they emerged a few hours later.

“Please don’t do anything stupid.” Kaito said with crossed arms, his lips set in a pout. “And come back safely.”

“We’ll take care of him!” La Brava said as she patted Joker’s arm.

“Hey! What about Morgana?”

“Indeed!” Gentle Criminal put a hand over his heart. “We won’t allow him to come to harm. You have my word.”

Kaito pinned them with a glare, before relaxing. “Good.”

“We’re being ignored, aren’t we?” Joker whispered to Mona, who chuckled.

“Now scram. It’ll be a disaster if any customers walk in and see all of you.”

“You don’t get any customers anyway, Grandpa.” Joker winked as he walked towards the door. “We’ll be fine, just you wait and see.”

Kaito sighed when he was alone in the Raven’s Nest.

“As long as you come back home.” He whispered. “That’s all I care.”

“Ah, isn’t this a wonderful feeling?” Arsene said. “Tonight is perfect. The stage is set. Our infiltration is but a moment away! The excitement just before the heist is like no other! Trickster, I would like this heist to be my reward.”

“A fun reward.” Joker mused. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Arsene tipped his hat. “A good heist is what I need. It is the perfect prize for an old gentleman thief!”

“Hey, you better not be calling me old!”

“I am thou, thou art I.”

“Okay, Bird Dad. Whatever you say.”

“Bird-” Arsene sighed and shook his head. *“Let’s not get distracted, the others are staring at you.”*

Joker turned around.

Mona was on his shoulder, as usual. Gentle Criminal smoothed over his costume when he saw Joker staring back, and La Brava fiddled with her gadgets. They were in the richest part of Musutafu, perched safely upon a high rooftop.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.” Joker frowned.

“But Gentle and I haven’t made a video in ages!” La Brava held up her pink camera. “We shouldn’t waste this opportunity!”

“I don’t want my enemies targeting you. It would be better if people thought Mona and I worked solo. What if some villain goes after you because of us?”

“It can still appear that you’re working solo.” Gentle gave him a reassuring smile. “The world will think that we just encountered each other by chance, and nothing more!”

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t sit right with me.”

La Brava rolled her eyes. “Are you doubting our strength?”

“What?” Joker’s eyes widened. “No-”

“Really? Because it feels that way! Did you forget everything we’ve gone through together?” Her face softened. “I let it pass when you met with Giran, but you have to let us make our own decisions!”

“Please don’t doubt us.” Gentle Criminal put a hand on Joker’s shoulder. “We are powerful enough to look after ourselves. No villain will get the upper hand as long as we stick together!”

“Yeah!” La Brava threw her hands up. “We’re a *team*. Partners in crime! Nothing’s going to change that.”

Mona looked at Joker. “You can’t really argue with that.”

“I agree!” Gentle nodded. “The extra publicity would do us all good.”

“And your quir-powers get stronger with the public’s cognition, right?” La Brava asked. “So you’d benefit from this, too.”

“That’s true.” Joker scratched the back of his head.

“We’ve been in the public’s cognition for two and a half months and yet I still can’t transform.” Mona muttered.

“You would be the perfect getaway van-” Joker’s eyes widened in realization, then he facepalmed. “Mona, we’re *idiots* .”

“Who are you calling an idiot!?”

“Cognition. Our powers grow stronger from it.”

“I know! And?”

Joker got out his phone. Mona watched as he typed in a new post for Spotlight.

‘Fun Fact! Did you know that cats turning into buses used to be a common myth in Japan? The more you know!’

“Joker, you’re a genius!”

“I know.”

“But... I don’t feel anything?”

“I *just* posted it.” Joker chuckled as he put it away. “Let’s give it some time... Wait, were you trying to transform right on top of me? You would’ve squished me!”

“You would’ve been fine!”

“Boys!” La Brava interrupted. “Are we going to film the intro or are we going to stand here all night?”

“Let’s do this.” Mona said. “The faster we move, the faster this job gets done.”

“I’ll begin when La Brava starts the camera, then we’ll pan over to you.” Gentle said. “Does that sound alright?”

Joker grinned as he pulled on that familiar mask. “Just make sure to get my good side.”

“Please.” Mona scoffed. “Any side of you is your good side.”

“Thanks, Mona.”

Mona rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. Joker backed away to give Gentle and La Brava some space.

“Hey, Mona.” Joker whispered. “You mind giving us a bit of wind to make us look dramatic?”

Mona snickered. “I’ll do it when the time is right. Good idea, Joker!”

“Aaaaand,” La Brava flipped open her pink camera screen and pushed a button. “We’re recording!”

“It has been a while, but it’s nice to meet you again, dear listeners!” Gentle Criminal splayed his arms out. “That’s right! It is I, Gentle Criminal! Tonight is not like any night! In fact, we are about to act against people who have committed heinous crimes. We have a one in a lifetime guest with us this evening to aid in our endeavor. Someone who has taken the spotlight many times! Isn’t that right, Joker?”

A breeze flowed over the rooftops right on cue, tussling his hair and gently swaying his tailcoat. La Brava panned over to him as he

squared his shoulders and stepped forward, splashing extra color into the frame. Mona's fur puffed up and he glared at the camera.

"That's right." Joker wore his authority as easily as his thief costume. "We'll prove that the Yaoyorozu family has taken advantage of those who are less fortunate. Their greed has tainted this country long enough. That ends tonight."

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a familiar card, holding it between his middle and pointer finger. The 'Take Your Heart!' faced the camera. He chuckled as his eyes glowed a molten gold, his grin stretching from ear to ear.

"It's showtime!"

"That was so cool!" La Brava lowered her camera. "I won't even have to edit that!"

"Joker likes to be a showoff." Mona said. "It comes naturally to him."

"Don't think I didn't see you posing out of the corner of my eye." Joker poked Mona's nose with the calling card. "You like it just as much as me."

"Ouch! I have a sensitive nose! How dare you do that to me!"

"Aren't you just avoiding the topic?" Joker chuckled. "You can't trick me."

"You-!!" Mona batted Joker's nose.

"Would it be funny if I got this on camera?" La Brava whispered to Gentle. "We could have a bloopers reel."

"We heard that!" Mona yelled.

"Oops." Gentle Criminal shrugged. "We're busted."

Joker shook his head. "Let's stay on track. La Brava, is your virus working?"

"Yes! I made a hybrid program between Silver Falcon's video and that time during the Sport's Festival." La Brava grinned at her computer screen. "It looks like it did the trick!"

"Good." Joker faced the mansion looming across the street. "Let's get this show on the road!"

I would like to share what has been happening. These past few years have been the worst part of my life. It started off when my sperm donar, a man so cold hearted and vile, a real life Kamoshida with zero remorse (and whom I've legitimately based Silver Falcon from), and the sole reason for the trauma that myself and several other people have suffered through, did something unspeakable to my little sister that ultimately claimed her life.

He walked free ever since her death. Until now. We've been fighting for years to get the justice and closure that she rightly deserved, and just hearing a jury say 'Guilty' will be something that I remember for the rest of my life. He really thought he would get away with it, and I've never seen somebody lose literally all color in their body.

Now I feel as if we can finally move on from her death, to grieve her properly and try to heal without a case hanging over our heads.

I want to thank you guys too. If I didn't have this wonderful community and these stories to positively channel all of those emotions into.... then I really don't know where I would be right now, but it most likely wouldn't be in a positive state. I literally have no words to describe how much you all mean to me.

Please check my twitter for an important and possibly exciting announcement.

<https://twitter.com/BukuBuk42803188/status/1389637847985098752>

A Woman

Chapter 47: A Woman

The air was different here. It wasn't cold and empty. Something had disturbed this room, and recently. Spiders crawled over the back of his neck. His heartbeat picked up as Gentle and La Brava were about to take the first steps towards the staircase. He held out an arm to stop them.

Light spoiler(ish) warning for the background of a League member.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!

[Aria](#) on Twitter!

“Merp.”

“Shh! I know you're uncomfortable, but deal with it!”

Lady Stubbs wiggled within the satchel tightly bound to his chest, her ghoulisn eyes seething. Spinner adjusted his current position, ignoring her. Clinging upside down on an overpass was easy with his quirk, but the cat *hated* it.

“Merp!”

“Shh!”

“Did you hear something?”

Spinner froze. His targets were a small group of thugs huddled around a trash fire, now shifting and looking around.

“Up there!”

Spinner cursed as he dropped from the sky and landed directly on one of them. The man under his boots didn't move as Spinner dusted himself off. Spinner jabbed a finger at them, grinning.

“Surrender, criminals!” He shouted. “Or face our wrath!!”

The thug on the left paled. “Crap, it's Joker!!”

“No it's not, you idiot!” The ringleader, a man with jet black hair and a tribal tattoo on his shoulder, grinned. “It's that fake that's been giving our group hell recently. Why don't we return the favor? He's outnumbered.”

Confidence shined in their eyes as the three remaining thugs spread out.

Lady Stubbs growled as Spinner unsheathed his dagger and unclasped the satchel.

“Come on, then!” Spinner shouted as they charged.

Lady Stubbs leapt with a screeching yowl, unleashing her pent up fury on the face of the thug on the right. Spinner joined her in the assault, whipping his dagger with blinding speed. The ringleader jumped out of his reach as the final brigand swung his fist.

Spinner's head snapped back as the blow connected with his jaw, but the attacker flinched as he flashed them a wild, bloody grin. He reciprocated the attack, his steely scales knocking out teeth as the man slumped over like a sack of potatoes.

“Haha! I might have been outnumbered, but you're the one who's outmatched!” Spinner turned to the ringleader, the final crony was flailing from Lady Stubbs' claws. “Have you given up yet?”

The ringleader narrowed his eyes. Then, a greasy smile slid on his face that made Spinner's insides squirm.

"How about we make a deal?"

Spinner, with his dagger still raised, frowned. "Oh?"

"I know what you're after. I'll give you what you want if you let me go."

"What about your friends?"

He sneered. "They aren't worth keeping around if they lost to some nobody fake. Do we have a deal or what?"

They heard a *thud*, and witnessed Lady Stubbs climbing off from the last unconscious man, his face near unrecognizable. She piled some loose gravel on him, stuck her nose up in the air, and pranced to Spinner's side.

"Merp."

"That's one ugly cat."

She growled as she clambered up to Spinner's shoulder, hackles raised.

"Easy, Lady Stubbs." Spinner said as he pet her. "Fine. You tell me why people are disappearing and where they're being taken, and then I'll let you walk away."

"I don't know *where* they're being held specifically, but I'll give you a lead."

His greasy smile widened. He paused to dig a cigarette out of his pocket, lighting it with a lick of flame from his finger tips. The man had the gall to blow the smoke in their direction, choking both of them with the acrid smell.

"I never met their leader, but they paid good money for fresh meat."

"You... you actually *sold people*?" Spinner grit his teeth together as the man laughed. "How can you put a price on anybody's life!?"

"Hey, business is business." He flicked ash from his cigarette. "And business has been *booming* lately."

"You're sick."

"Please." He chuckled. "You're making me blush."

"Tell me what you know." Spinner's choked down a growl. "Now ."

"Are you sure you want this?" He said. "My fellow businessmen won't take kindly to anybody cutting their profit. They'd kill you as easily as looking at you."

"You let me worry about that!"

"These big fish are a bit out of your *league*, but fine. It's your funeral." He reached into his pocket and tossed a business card. "Just know that Steel Flame sent ya to your death."

Spinner picked up the card as the man turned on his heel. Spinner simmered in his anger, accidentally scrunching up the card as he shoved it in his pocket. Lady Stubbs blinked at him.

"Merp?"

"Yeah." Spinner's bloody grin turned savage. "We let him walk far enough."

Lady Stubbs readied her claws. "Merp!"

Steel Flame would awaken several hours later. Bloodied, bruised, and in the same cell as the rest of his lackeys.

~Meanwhile~

The window opened and a cool night breeze flowed inside.

A familiar shadow hopped inside, blending with the darkness like a drop of ink. The figures were ready for any trap that would spell a normal intruder's doom. However, it was silent. Not quite safe, but no immediate danger.

They scanned the room.

Marble flooring, while it hadn't been polished in years, still held their blurry reflections. A grand fireplace was on the opposite wall. Around it was the furniture, all covered with ghostly white tarps. Only dust bunnies made this their home now.

"It's all clear." Joker whispered.

He stepped away from the window as Gentle Criminal and La Brava entered.

La Brava's mouth dropped as she took in the high arched ceilings, her camera panning around the room. Gentle stroked his facial hair as he studied the fireplace.

"Geez." Mona's voice echoed faintly, "They really left all of this behind? How much do you think some of this stuff is worth?"

"Who knows." Joker ripped the tarp from an ornate couch and poked the golden leg with his boot. "Do you think this thing can pay for a decent house?"

"Or a sushi apartment!?" Mona's eyes lit up.

"You're *still* hung up on that? You know we can't carry this thing out of here." Joker gestured to it. "It's way too heavy!"

"It was worth a shot..." Mona's tail drooped.

“But who knows what else is here, right?” La Brava stepped beside them. “We could take smaller items!”

“In a place like this?” Joker smirked. “It’s practically ripe for the picking.”

“What sort of gentlemen thieves would we be if we didn’t?” Gentle glanced over to them, smiling. “Isn’t that right, Joker?”

“That’s right. Just remember what we’re here for, that’s more important.” Joker nodded. “Let’s move.”

As usual, Joker took point. They passed through a long dining room, with crystal chandeliers and matching ornate chairs as the ones in the previous room. Without another glance, they left it behind after La Brava got some footage.

Joker occasionally looked over his shoulder when they were in the open, expecting to see some Shadow creeping down the way. But, there were no Shadows. Only stone and dusty furniture occupied this place, aside from the occasional painting decorating the walls. Silence permeated the walls. A cold emptiness drifted alongside them as they made their way through the manor, and Joker had to push back shivers as the creak of the next door was magnified into a wailing moan.

Joker felt Gentle and La Brava stiffen behind him, but the coast was clear.

“This was a lonely place.” Arsene murmured. *“Even when it was occupied.”*

“I know.” Joker peeked around the corner of the next hallway, and waved for the others to follow. *“I feel it too. I wonder how Momo felt when she lived here.”*

“I cannot say. Children of higher status were usually raised by their tutors and nannys. They often saw the maids more than their own

mothers."

They stopped in a library. It was small, but the walls were lined with shelves and there was plenty of space to lounge on plush chairs. Joker wrinkled his nose at the old, musty smell. What a waste.

Joker approached a random shelf on a whim, where one vibrant red book stood out from the rest. He tapped his chin in thought, before reaching towards it.

"What are you doing?" La Brava asked when he slowly pulled it out.

He held his breath, hoping to hear the crank of gears or some grand machination shifting the room around to uncover a hidden treasure. Nothing happened. A quick scan with Third Eye revealed only a darkened room. Not one treasure was in sight.

"Welp, there aren't any secret passages." Joker sighed as he pushed it back with a single finger. "How boring."

La Brava chuckled. "I'm going to get some footage, okay?"

Joker leaned against the shelf. "Help yourself."

"We're about half-way there." Mona whispered as the other two wondered through the shelves. "This is a lot easier than I thought it would be."

"Yeah, only because we don't have to fight Shadows. We're lucky that nothing else is here to exhaust us." Joker shrugged. "But let's not jinx ourselves, okay?"

"Right!"

"Okay, we're good to go!" La Brava grinned. "We just have to get to the second floor, right?"

"According to the map, there's a staircase in the foyer next door." Joker said. "We can get to the second floor from there."

“Why didn’t we come in through the foyer?” Gentle asked.

Joker chuckled. “What kind of thief comes in through the front door?”

Amusement sparkled in Gentle’s eyes. “Ah, good point.”

They left the Boring Library behind and stepped into the foyer. The first thing that guests saw was a great winding staircase engulfing the room, the wooden balusters were carved with intricate sea serpents and other mythological figures. It drew the eye towards the arched ceiling soaring overhead, almost as vast as the sky itself. A dull red carpet lined the marble stairs.

Joker stiffened.

The air was different here. It wasn’t cold and empty. Something had disturbed this room, and *recently* . Spiders crawled over the back of his neck. His heartbeat picked up as Gentle and La Brava were about to take the first steps towards the staircase. He held out an arm to stop them.

Mona gave him an odd look.

“Wait.” Joker slowly reached for his dagger. “Something’s-”

A *woosh* of air from above was the only warning. His instincts threw him forwards. A butcher’s knife had swung right where his head had been as he pirouetted away, his coattails flaring. Mona cried out as Joker unsheathed his dagger, raising it just in time to clash with another.

“Joker!” La Brava and Gentle’s voices shouted in unison.

Sparks flew as weapons clashed in vile screeches of steel. The deadly dancers bobbed and weaved between one another, neither of them getting the upper hand. After a few more darting strikes, his opponent jumped back, bouncing on her heels with a giddy squeal.

“You like fighting with knives too!?” Golden eyes stared into his, tinted with bloodlust. “That’s so cool, Joker!”

“They’re my weapon of choice.” Joker winked to mask his surprise. “But I usually ask for a lady’s name *before* we dance.”

“Toga!” Her face turned bright red. “Toga Himiko!”

“Sanguine!” Another’s long sigh echoed in the foyer. “So much for code names.”

“Code names are lame!” Toga whipped around to the figure leaning on the top of the staircase. “What kind of code name is *Showman* anyway, Compress?”

“You-!” The masked man squawked. “I worked hard to come up with those names! Don’t you have any taste for theatrics!?”

“Why do I need to be theatrical to stab somebody!? As long as they are covered in pretty red at the end, then I don’t care!”

Joker studied them as they bickered.

The man was covered from head to toe. From his bright yellow overcoat with a popped collar, a mask with black and white markings, and a feathered top hat that rivaled Arsene’s. Well, maybe that was a lie. *Nobody* could rival Arsene’s dapper getup.

The girl looked fresh from high school, and still in uniform to boot. Her silky blonde hair was tucked into messy twin buns, with bangs sweeping above her manic, gilded eyes. Sharp fangs were in place of canines whenever she opened her mouth.

Gentle Criminal and La Brava joined Joker’s side.

“Joker, are you alright?” Gentle Criminal whispered.

“I’m fine.” He tightened his grip on the dagger. “I have a plan.”

“We better hurry, they won’t be distracted for long.” Mona said.

Joker nodded. “Mona, go with Gentle and secure the treasure. I’ll entertain our guests in the meantime. La Brava?”

“I’ll stay with you.” She held up her camera with a grin. “This’ll be exciting footage!”

“Go!”

Mona leapt onto Gentle Criminal’s shoulder as he launched himself. The two bickering opponents whipped around as Gentle and Mona bounced around the room at lightning speed, until they disappeared over the railing of the second floor.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” Toga shouted as she waved her knife.

Joker snatched the Metaverse version of Spotlight and threw it at his feet. Suddenly, a bright light pooled around him, shining down as if from the heavens itself. The tall shadow stretching out behind him gave him an overwhelming presence. Toga and Compress couldn’t tear their eyes away from Joker as he gave a showman’s bow.

“Welcome to the party, lady and gentleman! Why don’t we move this to the ballroom?” Joker’s voice boomed around the foyer as he stood and held out his arms. “We’ll have more room to dance there!”

After a moment of silence, he bolted.

La Brava was on his heels as they ran through another hallway on the other end of the foyer. More pairs of footsteps echoed from behind.

“Stay out of the fighting, okay?” Joker said. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me! I’ll be careful.”

Joker chuckled as they came upon a pair of glass double doors. It was etched with intricate ivy designs, and Joker grabbed the golden handles and threw them open. The ballroom was the largest one yet. Floor to ceiling windows towered above them and thick curtains of moonlight splashed the room with silver pools. A grand chandelier, while covered in cobwebs, sent dazzling sparkles to the walls. The ceiling was a dome of glass. Stars twinkled from high above and would bare witness to tonight's festivities.

"Get back here!" Toga charged in with a manic grin. "Stop running so I can see you bleed!"

"A little eager, are we?" Joker laughed as he side stepped her swipe. "What shall tonight's dance be? It seems like you would be perfect for a tango, my dear."

Toga's face turned bright red, but her swift attacks never let up.

La Brava hopped away from the fight, her camera drinking in the action.

Joker saw a glimmer in the corner of his eye. Compress flicked a small marble at him as he dodged and weaved around Toga's strikes. There was a *snap*, and suddenly a sharp spike jutted from the ground. Joker's eyes were blown wide as he threw himself backwards. Pain sliced his cheek, and a small red trickle trailed down his face.

"Oh, pretty! So you *can* bleed!" Toga giggled. "I can't wait to see you covered in it."

Compress clapped as Joker wiped the blood away with his thumb.

"I'm impressed!" Mr. Compress held up a finger. "Not many would react so quickly, and to see you dodge so fantastically is quite refreshing. You'd make a wonderful acrobat."

Joker smirked. "This is a show, isn't it? We can't have our audience get bored so easily."

"Yes!" Compress threw up his arms. "Finally! Someone who understands!"

Toga pouted.

"Still, the star of the show can't show weakness." Joker snapped his fingers and ribbons of light swirled around him. Joker's cheek was healed. There was not one drop of blood in sight.

"You think *you're* the star of the show?" Compress shook a finger at him. "You're sorely mistaken! If anything, this show belongs to *yours truly*."

"Oh really?" Joker chuckled. "Well why don't we even the odds, then? While two against one is always a fun time, we can't forget an important co-star! Come, *Arsene!!* "

Joker didn't hear Compress's sharp inhale as the ballroom was drowned in bright blue light. Arsene hovered over the Trickster. Arsene's deep shadow fell over Toga and Compress as the flames died down. Joker grinned as he twirled his dagger, with Arsene's wings surrounding him like a feathery cape. They reveled in each other's presence, mutual excitement buzzing through their cold bond.

"You frauds who are in over your heads," Arsene raised his arms, claws splayed. "Allow us to show you how you pale in comparison to us as thieves!"

Compress flinched. "*Fraud!?* "

Joker and Arsene charged as one.

Toga giggled as her blade clashed with Joker's once more, while Arsene barreled past them. Arsene twirled around, his boot swinging

in a magnificent arc, but Compress was just as agile. He threw himself to the side as Arsene's knife heel gouged the floor, shards of marble flying everywhere.

Compress dusted himself off as Arsene turned towards him. The shadow over Arsene's face made his mask glow red hot.

"How dare you call *me* a fraud." Compress' cane rapped against the floor. "You're the one who's stealing Arsene's great name!"

"What are you talking about?" Arsene chuckled. "I *am* Arsene!"

"Don't give me that!" Compress snapped. "Arsene's story is hundreds of years old! His exploits are *legendary*. He's someone that all thieves aspire to be! Don't lie and say that you're that same thief! That's ludicrous! Nobody ever knew his face, or his real name!"

Arsene threw his head back and laughed. Amusement flowed from the Trickster as he danced with his opponent, the *swish* of their knives cutting the air.

"Then perhaps I should introduce myself like a proper gentleman."

Arsene removed his mask and top hat. He bowed. Moonlight flooded his hollow clothes, allowing the whole world to see an empty husk given life by his true other self. Compress's eyes were wide underneath his mask.

"I am the Pillager of Twilight, Arsene! I am the rebel soul that resides within Joker!" He bellowed as cursed tendrils surged at his feet. "Do not think that I am just some charlatan claiming a false name! To insult me is to insult the great title of Phantom Thief! I shall not allow it!"

Arsene flicked his wings. Dark energy cascaded from them in great red and black waves. Compress threw a hand full of marbles in front of him and the boulders were reduced to powdered dust. Toga Himiko wasn't so lucky.

The Maeigaon was a direct hit. She flew back several feet, before she tumbled and rolled over the ground, unmoving. She still clutched her knife with a slack grip.

Joker sighed. "I was just starting to have fun."

Arsene huffed as he replaced his hat and mask, and Joker turned towards La Brava with a grin. However, her face paled.

"Look out!" She cried.

Joker whipped around as Arsene was torn away from reality. The pressure squeezed Joker's heart as Compress held up a blue marble, the faint figure of Arsene could be seen inside. Joker tugged on Arsene's bond. The chain felt as if it were snagged in a wall. Shivers crept up Joker's spine as Yaldabaoth's laughter echoed within his mind, he shoved it away and glared at the man holding Arsene hostage.

With a deft movement, the marble vanished from Mr. Compress's hand. He waggled his empty fingers at Joker.

"How interesting." He tilted his head. "I've been following your progress ever since the USJ, and I have to say that you don't disappoint. It's no wonder that Stain fell beneath your blade."

"Oh, it's always nice to meet a fan!" Joker said, grinning despite his rabbiting heart. "As long as you're not the creepy stalker type."

"Trickster, try switching masks." Titania said.

"Yes, Arsene is still tied to us." Kohryu's scales rustled. *"This man's power cannot steal him away!"*

"A fan? No." Compress leaned on his cane. "I see you as more of a rival."

There was a twinge in his chest as he switched to Seth, and Arsene was thrown back into the mindscape. Rage bubbled within his other

self as he smoothed down ruffled feathers.

"That arrogant, no good fool!" Arsene howled as relief lessened Joker's pain. *"I don't care if he sees himself as a rival thief, he'll pay for what he did!"*

"Calm yourself." Kohryu's whisker brushed his arm. *"The Trickster has a plan."*

"A rival?" Joker smirked. "Don't make me laugh. You might have copied Arsene's style, but you'll never match us."

"Oh no, my dear Joker. I believe you're the one who's mistaken." Compress tipped his hat. "Being a phantom thief is my birthright. I am the star of the show! After all, I stole Arsene! You're nothing without him."

"Are you sure about that?" Joker's eyes blazed gold.

The man jumped as an azure pyre rose up behind him. Arsene towered over Compress, growling like a demon from the pits of hell. The temperature plummeted as the flames died down and Arsene's body coursed with hellish power.

Joker wasn't the only one to have goosebumps.

Compress reached into his coat for the marble. It shattered, and an inky black feather gracefully fell to his feet. He gaped at it, before slowly raising his head.

"Er... apologies, good sir?"

Arsene's scream pierced through the whole manor, followed by another high pitched shriek.

But there was another cry that shouldn't belong.

Joker turned to see Toga, her knife raised over La Brava. Joker shot out his grapple, the wire wrapping around Toga's wrist, then Joker

pulled the girl close with a yank.

“How about we have a proper dance, my lady?” He purred as both knives clattered to the ground. “Tonight is lovely for one, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her eyes went wide when he interlocked his fingers with hers, his other hand caressing her back.

“It’s easy.” Joker spun around in a slow waltz. “Just follow my lead and you’ll do fine.”

She couldn’t look away. He had her entranced, his golden eyes peering deeply into her own. His body was flush with hers, his face was inches away as they flowed into an elegant dance. There was no orchestra, no violins or cellos to highlight the elegant movements. Still, there was music. It came in the form of a demon’s furious howl, a crescendo that accompanied Compress’s screams of terror. The *slams* and *cracks* of the demon’s attacks rattled the entire manor.

Dust spewed around them in thick clouds, but the moonlight made it sparkle like a thousand diamonds. It was as if she were a puppet being pulled along on strings, and Joker was the master puppeteer. She didn’t care. Her movements mimicked his. Her heart pounded and her face flushed as they continued their waltz.

Toga couldn’t help but smile as Joker twirled her around the last time. She leaned back as Joker lead her into the finale, her arm splayed out towards the sky. Toga was breathing heavily as they were locked in a moment of peace.

Compress’s body whizzed right by them and crashed into the wall, he fell into an undignified slump. He was ignored.

“Nobody told me I would dance with a princess tonight.”

“Really?” Toga’s eyes sparkled. “You think I’m a princess?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind.” He smirked as Arsene, satisfied, returned to his other self. “You’d make a lovely Sleeping Beauty.”

Toga blinked. “Sleeping Beauty?”

Joker snapped his fingers. Titania’s Dormina worked wonders. The girl’s eyes slowly fluttered shut and she went limp. He gently lay her down on the floor. A scrape of concrete drew his attention, and he turned towards Compress, who sat up against the wall. One hand held the cracked pieces of his mask together, the other clutching his ribs. There was a prominent slice taken out from the rim of his hat.

“Give up yet?” Joker picked up his dagger and pointed it at Compress. “Your partner is down for the count.”

Compress chuckled. His hand fell, and the pieces of his mask with it. Joker felt a twinge of disappointment at Compress’ balaclava hiding most of his face. His brown eyes scrutinized Joker as his mouth twisted into a sharp grin.

“Don’t you know that phantom thieves such as us never give in? The act must go on, *always*.” He said. “Still, would you answer one question while I am at your mercy?”

“What?” Joker narrowed his eyes. “What could you possibly want to ask me?”

“Why did you choose this way of life?” Compress said as his grin fell, and his eyes pooled with something inscrutable. “What made you into the showman that stands before me?”

“Give me one reason why I should answer.”

“Humor a fellow thief?”

“Fine.” The resolve in Joker’s voice rang as clear as a bell. “A system that abandons the helpless and empowers those who feed upon them is corrupt. It doesn’t matter who stands in front of me, I’ll take

justice into my own hands if it means that innocent people are saved.”

“You say that as if the world isn’t black and white.”

“Because it isn’t that simple.” Joker shook his head. “‘Heroes’ can act villainous while a so called ‘villain’ can be kind and help someone in need. We like to put them in certain boxes and keep it that way, but there are a lot more to people than what society labels them. You just have to dig a little deeper.”

“And you? What sort of ‘box’ are you in?”

“None.” Joker grinned. “I’ll carve my own path through this world, thank you very much.”

Compress was silent. Then, he laughed. Pain made his body spasm, but he still chuckled as he dragged himself to his feet. Joker tensed and raised his dagger.

“How interesting.” Compress wheezed. “It’s too bad we couldn’t meet before this. It would have been fun. But, as much as I would *love* to stick around, our time as grown short. It’s time for the curtain call.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what comes next, Joker.” Compress threw a handful of marbles into the air. “We always have an ace up our sleeves!”

Joker leapt back as black smoke smothered the whole room. Yatagarasu became his mask, and he waved his arm as Magarudyne blew the smoke away. Compress and Toga were gone. Glass shattered overhead. Joker looked up just as sparkling shards peppered the ground.

Joker sighed as he sheathed his dagger. “La Brava, are you okay?”

“I’m fine! Thanks for the rescue.” She closed her camera screen and stared at the hole in the ceiling. “Who do you think they were?”

“Don’t know. Giran said there were other thieves interested in this job.” Joker walked over and picked up one half of Compress’ mask. “That bastard.”

“W-we can review the footage later and I can find more information on them.” She said. “But lets regroup with Gentle Criminal and Mona first.”

“Yeah.” Joker tossed the mask aside. “You *did* get my good side while I was dancing, right?”

La Brava rolled her eyes. “Oh please, I’m sure over half of our fans will want to dance with you! Where did you learn that, anyway?”

“It’s a secret.” He winked. “Maybe I could teach you how to dance, but you might be a bit too short to pull it off.”

La Brava punched him in the shin for that.

~10 minutes earlier... ~

Mona’s claws dug into Gentle’s shoulder as they ping ponged down the second floor hallway.

“W-would you slow down!?” Mona screamed.

“Apologies!” Gentle bounced one last time, before his feet firmly planted on solid ground.

“Ugh...” Mona’s world spun and he melted over Gentle’s shoulder. “That was worse than riding two dragons.”

Gentle chuckled. “A feeling that you’re getting used to?”

“Hush!” Mona shook his head. “Let’s focus on getting the treasure, we don’t know how long Joker will hold those other two off.”

“You’re right.” Gentle’s face hardened. “The main office is somewhere up ahead, correct?”

Mona closed his eyes and concentrated. A slight breeze caressed their bodies as it flowed down the massive hallway. Aha, there it was!

“Yes!” Mona grinned. “We just go to the end of this hallway and take a right!”

Gentle nodded, and they were off. His clacking footsteps echoed through the hallway, and he followed Mona’s instructions to the letter, stopping in front of a pair of grand wooden doors towering over them. They were intricately carved with swirling ivy markings, and the golden doorknobs gleamed faintly.

Gentle reached for them. “Locked. I don’t suppose you have a lock pick? I wouldn’t know how to work one, though.”

“It would take too long with my paws! Stand back.” Mona said, grinning. “I have an idea!”

Gentle stepped backwards as Mona jumped from his shoulder. Mona released a breath as a tornado of whipping green flames churned behind him. Mercurius burst from it, his staff raised to the sky.

“Do it!” Mona shouted.

“Yes!!”

Mercurius’ vibrant wings commanded tornadic gales. He twirled around and kicked through the air, and a blast of wind tore the double doors from the frame. One door hung on by a few nails, the other skid halfway into the room, broken and reduced to a mass of splinters.

“Oh my.” Gentle murmured as the wind died down.

“Come on!” Mona leapt in head first as Mercurius vanished.

Gentle Criminal followed with splinters crunching under his boots.

This room, like many others, was an expansive waste of space. Another marble fireplace was ingrained into the wall, its embers had long gone cold. Gold trimmed windows stretched from floor to ceiling to give an impressive view over the entire manor. A hulking shape at the other end of the room, draped in a white tarp. Their eyes trailed to the wall above it.

A large painting in a gilded frame hung above the desk, and Mona recognized Yaoyorozu Momo. At least, a young version of her.

The little girl's expression was solemn between her stone faced parents. Mona felt the loneliness emanating from it. His heart twinged when he thought of Haru, but he pushed the thought away as Mercurius sent a soothing wave of comfort.

Gentle Criminal tore the drape from the massive oak desk.

"Is it hard to believe that this single room is bigger than my apartment back home?" Gentle Criminal ran a hand over the smooth wood. "It's unbelievable."

"It's amazing what rich people will spend their money on." Mona glanced at the painting, his tail swishing. "Let's hurry and find the treasure before-"

Just then, a demonic scream shook the mansion. Gentle Criminal braced himself with the desk and Mona clamped his paws over his ears. It faded after another moment or two.

"Geez, just what are they doing down there!?"

Gentle Criminal tapped his comm. "La Brava, is everything alright?"

"I-it's all good down here!" She said. "I'm getting some good footage of the battle, so you don't need to worry about us!"

“Very well, my dear.” His hand fell and he smiled at Mona. “Shall we?”

“Let’s check around that painting first.” Mona said. “I wonder if there’s a safe behind it?”

A blast of Mona’s wind knocked it onto the floor. Mona didn’t say it, but he breathed a bit easier when it landed face down.

“Apologies.” Gentle said to the painting, and then he frowned at the bare wall. “It seems like nothing is there.”

“That’s disappointing.” Mona looked down at the desk. “Maybe this has something?”

Gentle nodded. He approached the drawers and pulled them out one by one.

“Oh.”

“Did you find it!?” Mona asked.

“I don’t think so?” Gentle held up a golden watch by its chain, the outside had the same ivy-like markings as the doors. “This was in the last drawer. There’s nothing else in this desk.”

Mona deflated with a sigh. “Does it even work?”

Gentle flipped open the watch. The inside was decorated with intricate gears, the clock and hands were crafted from platinum and gold. Mona stared at the singular diamond in the center of the clock, frowning. It wasn’t ticking. It was a hunk of useless metal.

“It’s beautiful, if nothing else.” Gentle Criminal closed it. “But it’s not our objective.”

“Hey, you can take it as a souvenir!” Mona said. “It’s not like anybody else is using it. Besides, Joker could probably fix it for you if we get the right parts.”

“A fine souvenir, then.” Gentle tucked it into his coat, but sighed as he looked over the room. “Did we miss something? There’s nothing else to search through. Was Giran misinformed?”

“Maybe-” Morgana’s fur stood on end. “Somebody’s coming!”

Gentle Criminal readied his cane as footsteps echoed through the hall and into the room. His quirk was at his fingertips, Mona’s winds wouldn’t bow to any opponent. Finally, the figures emerged from the darkness, one followed by splashing footsteps.

“Warn us ahead of time!” Mona scoffed. “We almost attacked you!”

Joker shrugged. “But there’s no genuine surprise if I tell you everything, Mona.”

“It’s like you’re asking me to use Miracle Punch on you.” Mona said, eye twitching.

“I’ll just have Seth negate it.” Joker’s grin stretched from ear to ear as Mona rolled his eyes.

“What about those other two?” Gentle scanned both of his comrades. “Did they cause much trouble?”

“Not really. They fled with their tails between their legs. The girl was good at dancing, at least.” Joker said as he joined them by the desk. “Did you find anything?”

“No.” Gentle Criminal said. “Nothing that will help us, in this case.”

“Do you think Giran lied?” La Brava panned her camera around the room.

“I don’t think so.” Joker said. “Hang on, let me try something.”

Mona saw Joker touch the center of his forehead. Joker’s eyes glazed over with a strange haze, but that didn’t seem to bother him

as he stepped towards the middle of the room, his head swiveling around. He stopped in front of the marble fireplace, tapping his chin.

Joker grabbed the iron poker from its stand and held it up.

“What are you doing?” La Brava asked, her camera centered on him.

“We have to use this for something.” Joker scooted the rest of the tools aside with his boot. “Aha, here we go!”

Joker jabbed the end of the poker into a small hole in the floor and twisted it like a key. Their eyes widened as the room came alive with the sound of mechanical whirs. They listened as the noise traveled all the way to the blank space on the wall, Mona noted that it was where the painting used to be. Joker left the tool behind with a smug grin.

“Well, it’s no secret room in a library.” He said as a hidden panel opened to reveal a safe. “But at least we’re not completely disappointed!”

“Ooh!” La Brava zoomed in on it. “How do we open it? Can you even pick a lock like that?”

“It looks like it needs a code *and* a fingerprint.” Gentle Criminal said with a frown. “I’m not sure it’s possible.”

“Just watch.” Joker pulled at his gloves. “A lock like this takes a special touch.”

Joker donned Shiva as his mask. He waltzed up to the electronic lock and placed his hand over it. Joker closed his eyes as he concentrated, focusing on his bond with Shiva. It was a beautiful stream of stardust, freshly forged from the fires of destruction. The glimmering stream floated within a dark sea of nothingness, the stardust yearning for something new to be born from the ashes of the old.

Shiva smiled warmly as the Trickster tapped into his power.

The others cried out in shock as Joker's hand was consumed with arcs of golden lightning. Joker chuckled as the lock beeped and groaned, the electronics spewing a shower of sparks. Then, it went dark. Smoke wafted from the safe as the door slowly screeched open.

"See?" Joker dusted himself off. "Easy."

"What's inside!?" La Brava asked.

Joker swiped the contents from the safe and splayed everything out over the desk.

"A couple of files and... a blue satchel?" Gentle said as he scanned the first file's contents.

"The satchel is filled with diamonds." Joker held up a tiny stone to the light.

"Why would they stick a bunch of diamonds here?" La Brava shut off her camera and peeked over the edge of the desk. "It doesn't make any sense."

"It could be another means of hiding their ill gotten money." Morgana tilted his head at the satchel as Joker closed it. "There are all sorts of ways to do that."

"Indeed." Gentle Criminal looked up from the first file. "This has information about a sister company in Hong Kong. Interesting. The Yaoyorozu's were a relatively small support business until a couple of years ago."

"Let me guess," Joker narrowed his eyes. "Their competition suddenly disappeared and they stole a majority of the customer base? I bet that heroes pay top dollar for their support gear."

“More or less.” La Brava said. “I don’t get where they would get their funds from. It didn’t take long for them to rapidly expand overseas, and that would take some serious cash even with heroes funding them!”

“That family usually holds extravagant galas to raise money for charities. Top heroes would show up and donate a whole bunch of money.” La Brava said. “The events are sometimes broadcast nationally.”

“Here is another statement from Taiwan.” Gentle’s brows creased at the second file. “But the amounts on here are... exorbitant.”

“Let me see. Wait a second...” La Brava’s eyes widened. “This amount looks familiar. Let me check something!”

Joker and Mona exchanged glances as she whipped out her phone.

“I knew it.” She shoved the screen under their noses. “This is the amount they raised at their last gala. Doesn’t it match the records from their sister company in Taiwan?”

Gentle Criminal glanced between the two. “Indeed.”

“So that’s why Giran’s information hinted at possible fraud.” Joker paced back and forth. “They send these ‘charity’ funds to their accounts overseas, and then these sister companies would send it back as profits for that region. Nobody would bat an eye when those funds become legitimized. They *look* valid on the surface, but when you dig a little deeper-” Joker clapped his hands together. “Then the lie is revealed.”

Mona snickered. “I can’t wait for us to expose them!”

“We might need to paint the full picture first.” La Brava tucked her phone away and put her laptop on the desk. “It should be easy if I hack these accounts and match them up with the charity funds they’ve gathered over the years!”

“You can do that?” Mona asked, jaw dropping.

“Don’t underestimate me!” La Brava said with a grin. “It shouldn’t take too long!”

“We’ll take these files with us.” Gentle Criminal arranged them in a neat pile, and then looked at Joker. “What about the diamonds?”

“Giran said he wanted in on any goods we pilfered.” Joker shook his head, then he grabbed another diamond from the bag. “I guess this’ll have to-”

Joker stiffened. His eyes widened and he blinked several times.

La Brava exchanged glances with Gentle, Mona frowned as he stared at his partner.

“Are you *kidding* me.” Joker muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Mona asked.

Arsene appeared behind Joker, flames licking at their heels as he leaned over his other self. Joker tossed him the satchel, which he spilled onto the desk. The jewels scattered on the surface, spilling specks of multicolored light upon the wood.

Arsene fumed as he separated the stones into two groups.

“*These* are real diamonds.” Arsene gestured to a tiny palm full of stones, then he pointed to the larger group. “However, these are fake. They are a mix of cubic zirconia and jewelery grade glass! A lesser thief would’ve been fooled, but not I!”

“I can’t believe it.” Joker face palmed as a high pitched chuckle escaped him. “They put a *red herring* to throw people off!”

“Anyone would think that those stones are far more valuable than paperwork.” Gentle Criminal murmured. “How clever.”

“But not clever enough.” Mona glared at the jewels. “Who do they think we are, amateurs!?”

“Apparently so.” Joker scooped the stones back into the satchel and closed it tight. “La Brava, how long would it take to finalize this video?”

“Hmmm,” She slowly closed her laptop. “It shouldn’t take more than a day or two to get the information from the sister companies, maybe another to edit the video if I work really hard!”

“I can help with editing.” Gentle Criminal placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s the least I can do to lighten your workload.”

She beamed at him.

“Alright.” Joker stuck the satchel in his breast pocket. “I’ll meet up with Giran and get the information after the video goes live. Let’s get out of here and regroup at the hideout.”

Arsene laughed as he vanished. Mona jumped onto Joker’s shoulder as Joker turned on his heel and began to walk out.

Gentle Criminal followed after he swiped the files, but hesitated when La Brava was rooted to her spot, frowning.

“Are you alright, my dear?” He asked.

“I’m fine!” She shook her head. “It’s nothing. Let’s go!”

She took Gentle’s hand and they followed after Joker.

In truth, something *did* bother her. There was a single line of code within the security system here. It didn’t *do* anything per se, but it wasn’t part of the original codes here, either. No matter how she poked and prodded at it, it just sat dormant. A glitch? A defect in the program?

Maybe it really was nothing and the nerves of their first heist were just getting to her.

“You’ve been staring at that feather for a long time, Compress.” Kurogiri said. “Is something the matter?”

Compress tore his eyes away from the black iridescent feather pinched between his fingers. He had donned a new mask since his encounter with Joker, but his damaged hat remained. Toga giggled as she and Twice danced around the bar.

“I hate this!” Twice shouted as Toga lead him into a twirl. “Ooh, this is fun!!”

Kurogiri shook his head as Compress chuckled.

“It’s nothing.” Compress safely placed the feather in his jacket pocket. “I find it interesting how Ar... Joker’s summon escaped my quirk. That’s never happened before.”

“You’re useless.” Shigaraki, donning the hand on his face, glowered. “You didn’t even use any of the Nomu we gave you.”

“That plan was moot the moment Joker teamed up with Gentle Criminal. Unknown elements would’ve been detrimental.” Compress sighed. “Besides, I learned valuable intel about Joker’s values by doing it my way.”

“That’s bullshit. You should’ve just stuck to the plan.” Shigaraki snapped. “What kind of party member are you if you don’t follow my orders? What’s stopping me from killing you and getting a replacement?”

“Don’t be so hasty!” Compress wagged a gloved finger at him. “Joker’s summons are unique. He can call upon and dispel them as he pleases, thus it is how that being escaped my quirk. However, if I were to capture *Joker*, hence cut off the head of the serpent...”

“Then he shouldn’t be able to escape.” Kurogiri’s eyes widened.

“Exactly. But it won’t be easy to corner such a fluid master of the arts.”

“Whatever.” Shigaraki said.

“Don’t be sour.” Compress tipped his hat. “I’m going to prove that I am the better thief. Joker won’t get the upper hand next time.”

“You get one more chance, but that’s it.” Shigaraki’s gleaming red eye was visible between the fingers. “I won’t stand for another failed mission.”

“You don’t need to be so uptight!” Compress said as he stood from the bar. “You gentlemen have my number. Call me when the plans are finalized.”

“Very well. I shall keep you updated.” Kurogiri eyed the two behind him. “Toga, while you are adequately agile, your steps are sloppy. You need to be as graceful as a swan if you want the dance to flow correctly.”

“Really!? Joker made it look so easy!” Twice shrieked as Toga dropped him from the romantic bow. She hopped up to the bar, her shoulder jarring Shigaraki’s. “Can you teach me!? I bet you’re good at dancing!”

“Oh! Oooh! Me too!” Twice picked himself up and joined her. “Wait, no! I HATE dancing!!”

Compress tipped his hat and left the bar behind. He didn’t feel sorry for the mist man as his shoulders sagged and he released a heavy sigh, his other charge ignoring them completely. The door shut behind him and he walked down the dingy alleyway. He tapped his cane with each step and hummed a pleasant tune.

However, he stopped a few blocks away.

His shaky hand reached for the items stashed in hidden pockets.

“No way. There’s *no* way.” He muttered to himself. “That can’t be the real one. Or... can it?”

His thumb brushed away the black feather so that the title of an ancient book was revealed.

‘Arsene Lupin, Gentlemen Burgler’ By Maurice Leblanc.

The original copy. Handed down his family line for centuries, reaching back before the dawn of quirks. This book was an inspiration for those like him, and his long heritage of master thieves was no different. The book’s familiar, earthy aroma made his heart ache.

“Why would an incarnation of Arsene work with Joker? Is it just a figment of his quirk, or is it the real deal? If not a quirk, then is it by choice or coincidence?” Compress’ heart rate picked up. “And... Joker’s just like me.”

He took a deep breath, and ground it out through a clenched jaw. Compress shook his head. His treasures, now including the feather, were safely tucked away from the rest of the world.

He let Joker get away once, but it wouldn’t work a second time.

That man... no, that *monster* pulling the strings behind the League’s movements could reduce him to a bloody paste without even lifting a finger. He wanted Joker. That fiend hired Compress to kidnap the vigilante, and he had accepted the job. His eagerness to face Joker had clouded his judgement. An eagerness which, with only a single encounter, was changed into a deep seated respect for someone who viewed the world with the same lens.

“We’re two sides of the same coin.” He muttered. “But I wonder which side will be victorious?”

He continued his walk through the backstreets of Kamino.

With any luck, his metaphorical coin would land on its edge.

The knot in Risumi's stomach grew heavier as she watched Kurusu over the last two days, until the little knot was a rock hard boulder.

It started off as normal.

Kurusu came in early, smiling with the same bouncy energy he radiated every morning. He greeted the regulars, treating Uraraka, Akane, Emiyo, and others with their signature curry for the day. That boundless charm had their customers smitten. But his mask was wearing thin.

He was on edge. Incessantly tapping his notepad with a pen, or glancing at the clock every other minute, his expression pinching together as if in irritation. The boy had been spacing off a lot more than usual, too. Like right now, when the tables were clean and all customers went home satisfied.

"Kurusu?" That stone in her gut sprouted thorns when he stared off into space. "Kurusu!"

He jumped and looked at her with wide eyes. "What?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said your shift was over."

"Sorry, I was lost in thought." Risumi felt the breeze as he rushed towards the door. "See you tomorrow!"

"Akira!"

He froze with the door wide open. She put her hands on her hips and sighed, but she couldn't help her smile.

"At least take off your apron. You forgot your bag, too."

“Oh. Right.” He trailed back inside and untied his apron. “Sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize, but I’m curious as to why you’re in such a rush.”

He simply grinned. “I have a date that I can’t possibly miss. That’s all.”

“Just a date, huh?” She watched as he hung up the apron and retrieved his bag. “Akira, wait a moment before you leave.”

Kurusu glanced at the door, his hands wringing the straps of his bag. He took a quick breath to relax. Then, he turned to her with a raised brow. His silvery eyes were *so tired*. Nobody his age should be so exhausted. Her heart hurt at the thought of the weight he bore on his shoulders.

“What’s up?”

Kurusu stiffened when she wrapped her arms around him. It was like trying to melt a glacier, but he slowly thawed and returned the embrace. They stayed like that for a few moments.

“I know you have a lot on your plate, kiddo.” She whispered as she pulled away, Kurusu’s ears were red and his eyes were watery. “But remember that Ayumu and I have your back, no matter what. You don’t have to handle everything by yourself. Got it?”

“Y-yeah.” Kurusu scratched the back of his head as he grinned sheepishly. “Thanks. I... I sometimes forget that not all adults are bad. I mean, you’re *not* bad, but-”

“I know, sweetheart.” She ruffled his fluffy hair. “Remember what I said, okay? Come to us if you need help.”

“I will.” He smoothed down his hair, an utterly impossible task, before he turned away. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Bright and early!”

And like that, Kurusu was gone.

The lingering chime of the bell didn't soothe her worries. Ayumu poked his head out of the kitchen when the tune died down.

"Did he say anything?"

"Not much." Risumi scrubbed her face. "I'm worried about him."

"Yeah." The man glanced down at his phone, which was open to Spotlight. "You think it has anything to do with his post on cats and buses?"

"Maybe." Risumi chuckled. "It honestly reminded me of My Neighbor Totoro."

"Do you think Morgana can turn into a bus?"

Risumi's eyes widened. "No way! There's... no way, right?"

"Who knows?" Ayumu shrugged with a growing smirk. "I don't think he posted that for nothing."

"You want to make a bet? Loser washes all of the dishes for a month."

"Oh, you're on."

The soft carpet muted Momo's footsteps as she wandered the manor.

It was the dead of night. She kept tossing and turning, so she decided it was best to make herself a cup of tea, and she didn't want to bother the staff over something so small. Momo passed the door to her father's office, but stopped.

There were muffled voices behind it.

She frowned as she looked up and down the hallway. Nobody was there. Her parents were in the drawing room on the other side of the manor, planning their next gala. The servants weren't supposed to be in there at night!

She sighed sharply through her nose and opened the door. Momo took two steps inside before she froze over, her heart leaping into her throat.

"Who are you!?" She called to the figure leaning against father's desk.

It was dark, and the only light came in from the windows. The tall figure's face was shrouded by shadow, his outline painted by dull silver hues. His glowing citrine eyes were as bright as the sun. They narrowed in glee as he pulled himself away from the desk and waved his blood red gloves. There was another shape dangling on his shoulder with an accompanying pair of sapphire eyes.

"Well, well, well." His velvety voice sent goosebumps down her arms. "It seems like you've caught me red handed, Empress."

"I'll ask again," She fell into a battle stance as a bo staff formed in her hands. "Who are you, and what are you doing here!?"

"I was hoping that my reputation would precede me. You should know me by now." The man took a colorful step forward, ripples flowing over the polished marble floor. "I've gotten acquainted with many of your classmates, after all."

Momo scanned him from head to toe. The darkness made it difficult to see intricate details. Something about his costume was familiar, his voice was even more so. Then, it hit her. That costume was all over Spotlight. His companion equally as famous.

"J-Joker?" Her eyes went wide. "And Mona?"

“So you do know our names.” He bowed like a gentleman. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Yaoyorozu Momo.”

Her mouth went dry, the staff in her hands trembled. Momo's heart thrummed in her ears, and she inhaled a shaky breath.

“Wh-what...” She cleared her throat as her knuckles went white. “What are you doing here?”

“I wish I was here on pleasant business, Empress.” Joker lost all mirth as he stood at his full height. “But unfortunately your family has become my next target.”

“What!? What did my family ever do?”

“I don't choose my targets for no reason.”

“Explain yourself!”

His chuckle made the hairs on the back of her neck raise.

“Do you know how your family gained their wealth?” He took one step closer, then another, his shadow consuming her. “What if I told you that they destroyed their competition through illicit means, that any ‘charity’ they fund will flow right back into their pockets? The last time I checked, fraud wasn't looked kindly upon between honest businessmen.”

“You're lying!” She said. “My family would never-”

“Wouldn't they?” Joker had a sharp cheshire grin. “Have you never questioned how your family went from rags to riches in such a short period of time?”

“Father got lucky on a business trip to I-Island.” Momo rapidly shook her head. “He proved that our support equipment was top quality and got a good sponsor! The competition couldn't keep up!”

“The competition that was rapidly snuffed out? Jobs lost? Surrounding support companies going bankrupt within a month? Doesn’t that seem a bit strange to you?”

“I-I admit that we rose to the top ranks rather quickly...” She glared at him. “No, they wouldn’t!”

“The evidence was well hidden, but it wasn’t enough. I’m ripping off the veil so that the whole of Japan won’t be blinded by their deceit anymore. You’ll see for yourself. I have a proposition for you.”

“*What ?*”

She held her breath as he came closer. A card appeared between his fingers with a flick of his wrist. Her eyes drank in the ‘Take Your Heart!’ on the back.

“Will you cling to a pretty little lie? Or...” He held the card towards her. “Will you break free from those chains and choose your own path?”

“What are you implying?” She snapped.

“Deliver your own justice, Yaoyorozu Momo.” Those words froze her to the bone, and Joker smiled softly at her. “Isn’t that what a *hero* is supposed to do?”

Her bo staff dropped from her hands with a clatter. They ignored how it rolled away, their eyes locked together. She reached for the card, her fingers brushing Joker’s red glove. It was warm. Momo pulled away and read it aloud.

“To the Yaoyorozu family, who’s sin of gluttony is boundless, you pilfer funds that shouldn’t belong to you and sabotage any who stand in your way.” Her vision became blurry, but she blinked the tears away, “Y-you use your heiress like an unwilling puppet, and she shall be freed by her own power. We’ll reveal the true origins of your

wealth to the world. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts? What is this? Joker-”

She looked up. Joker and Mona were gone, the window behind her father’s desk was open. The curtain gently swayed in the breeze.

“They can’t do whatever they want. You are your own person. If you believe that they’re wrong, then stand up and fight for your own justice.”

“My own justice?”

“Isn’t that what Arsene would do?”

“If it’s true...” She traced the top of the card with her finger. “No, the only way to find out is to ask.”

She turned on her heel and fled her father’s office. The rest of the manor was a blur and she reached the drawing room within minutes. Panting, she threw open the door.

“Mother, father!”

Her parents, frozen in place as if they were cast in marble, were gaping at the television. Plans for the next gala was splayed around them, forgotten.

“-Itiple leaked accounts match the Yaoyorozu’s extravagant charity events and the ‘profits’ that their sister companies have sent from overseas. A few heroes who attended these events assure that the charities were legitimate and that Joker’s claims are falsified, but others who have donated to their causes are calling for an in-depth investigation-”

“What is this?”

Father scrambled to pick up the remote and turn off the news.

“Momo!” Mother had sweat beading down her forehead. “Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“I-I couldn’t sleep-”

“We don’t have time to dawdle!” Father dialed on his phone. “I’m calling our lawyers. I won’t stand for this drive!”

“Mother.” Momo’s stomach sank as she approached. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing you should concern yourself over.” She said, though her eyes trailed between the television and her husband. “You should return to your room and... what’s that in your hand?”

“I-it’s a calling card f-for us-”

Mother snatched it and went as pale as a ghost. “Where did you get this?”

“Joker was in father’s office. He gave it to me, a-and then he left.”

“That criminal was here!?” Father shouted. “Why didn’t our security go off?”

“That doesn’t matter!” Mother cried as she tossed the card aside. “Are they picking up or not? We don’t pay them top dollar for nothing.”

“Not yet.” Father grumbled as he tore the phone away from his ear. “I’ll keep trying.”

“Mother-”

“Go back to bed.” Mother commanded as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “With any luck, we’ll have this mess smoothed over by morning. You shouldn’t worry.”

“Listen to me!” Her mother flinched, eyes wide. “Please answer my questions honestly. Are those accusations on that card true?”

“*What?* ” Mother hissed, her eyes sharpening. “Of course not!”

“Th-then what about our competition? Thinking about it now, they dropped like flies after our products hit the market. It was after.... after our first trip to I-Island when I was really young. They found illegal technology in the Hatsume Industries’ laboratory. They were ostracized from I-Island and their company fell apart.”

Her parents exchanged long glances, but she continued.

“And the Shinzo Group? Their products suddenly experienced severe malfunctions around the same time and several hero agencies dropped their contracts with them. Contracts which our family swept up when the opportunity arose.”

“Momo, you’re just tired-”

“No, I’m not done. There are several more companies that went downhill, and they were all merged into our company out of desperation.” Momo took a step closer, her mother took a step back. “Everything lines up, and it all started when father got that sponsor!”

Father hung up with a frustrated sigh. “Sweetheart, we have no time for your hysterics right now-”

“Would you show me a little honesty for once in your lives!? Look me in the eye and tell me that Joker is wrong, th-that these are all just crazy coincidences!”

Her outburst surprised her as much as her parents. The room echoed with a silence that was far too loud. Mother pursed her lips, face set with something that made Momo’s stomach churn. Mother approached and put both hands on Momo’s shoulders.

“Momo, you listen to me.” She said, locking eyes with her daughter. “We didn’t want you to live in squalor like we had to when we were young. You shouldn’t have to live with looking over your shoulder to make sure you weren’t mugged by some villain, or worse . We did everything we could to survive. ” Mother became unusually soft as she tucked hair behind Momo’s ear. “We did what we had to do.”

“... You don’t deny it?” Momo whispered.

“Momo-”

“No.” She backpedaled away from her mother. “Joker’s calling card was telling the truth?”

“Everything we’ve done was to give you a better future.” Father said.

“A future that you stole by ruining other people’s lives!? I never wanted that to happen!” Tears returned in a flood. “And you’re acting as if you did nothing wrong by sweeping it under the rug? How are you supposed to redeem yourself when you don’t take responsibility for what you’ve done!?”

“Responsibility!? You have no idea what that word means!” Mother’s face turned red. “Who’s roof have you lived under your whole life? Who supplied the clothes on your back? The food you eat? Who’s money made sure that you’d be a top hero?”

“I don’t want to be a top hero if it means that other people will be hurt!” Momo wiped her eyes as a few sniffles escaped. “I’ve never wanted *any* of this! I... I only wanted us to be a family.”

“We’re still a family.” Father whispered. “But we’ll be in ruins if we don’t *fix* this-”

“You’re not running away!” She swept away the final tears and stood tall against her parents. “Your mistakes are your own, and I’ll make sure everything is properly investigated and that you are tried in a court of law.”

“You wouldn’t *dare* testify against us?” Mother’s reddened face rapidly lost color.

“I’m going to walk my own path and make sure that everyone you’ve hurt receives the justice they deserve.” Momo’s hands curled into fists. “I’m not going to be chained down by your expectations any more!”

Mother stumbled backwards and collapsed in the closest chair.

Father gaped as if he was really seeing her for the first time.

Momo’s heart shattered. It was a small, broken thing ticking away in her chest, but she willed herself to stay firm.

Soon, sirens echoed through the halls of the Yaoyorozu Manor.

This was such a fun chapter to write!

In other news, I got a hold of Persona 5 Strikers! I won't play it until I finished my NG+ playthrough of Royal first. I've also been working on getting the actual DTESH persona builds in Royal, so maybe I'll post screenshots or something eventually.

Check my twitter for updates on certain DTESH related things :D

<https://twitter.com/BukuBuk42803188>

Recall

Chapter 48: Recall

“... What was he like?”

“Mysterious. Intimidating. Irritably charming? He called me an ‘Empress’.”

I would like to thank the awesome betas for helping out with this chapter!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!

[Kirisuma](#) on twitter!

“It has been a while, but it’s nice to meet you again, dear listeners! That’s right! It is I, Gentle Criminal! Tonight is not like any night! In fact, we are about to act against people who have committed heinous crimes. We have a once in a lifetime guest with us this evening to aid in our endeavor. Someone who has taken the spotlight many times! Isn’t that right, Joker?”

“That’s right. We’ll prove that the Yaoyorozu family has taken advantage of those who are less fortunate. Their greed has tainted this country long enough. That ends tonight.” Joker held up the infamous calling card. “It’s showtime!”

The feed cut to lavish rooms of a mansion, finely coated in layers of dust. A dining room, library, and foyer, but that's where the video changed. Bursts of sparks popped like firecrackers through the darkened foyer as two opponents frolicked with deadly blades.

The next moment a spotlight shown down on Joker as he gave a bow.

"Welcome to the party, lady and gentleman! Why don't we move this to the ballroom?" Joker's voice boomed. "We'll have more room to dance there!"

Stardust and moonlight painted the extravagant ballroom.

Dark shadows pulsated around a being in contrast to the pale moonlight. He was hollow. A ghost inhabiting old styled clothes. No face or body, but he was as enchanting as a lead actor taking the center stage by storm. The captivated audience couldn't look away.

"I am the Pillager of Twilight, Arsene! I am the rebel soul that resides within Joker!" His wings splayed like a billowing cape. "Do not think that I am just some charlatan claiming a false name. To insult me is to insult the great title of Phantom Thief! I shall not allow it!"

Black energy cascaded from the newly dubbed Arsene, but the scene was quick to change once more. Joker, dancing to a demon's glorious howls, led his former opponent through a slow waltz. Joker had put his partner to sleep as he turned to the man beaten by Arsene.

"Still, would you answer one question while I am at your mercy?"

"What could you possibly want to ask me?"

"Why did you choose this way of life?" Compress said as his grin fell, and his eyes pooled with something inscrutable. "What made you into the showman that stands before me?"

"Give me one reason why I should answer."

"Humor a fellow thief?"

"Fine." The resolve oozed through the screen and gave the watchers goosebumps. "A system that abandons the helpless and empowers those who feed upon them is corrupt. It doesn't matter who stands in front of me, I'll take justice into my own hands if it means that innocent people are saved."

"You say that as if the world isn't black and white."

"Because it isn't that simple." Joker shook his head. "'Heroes' can act villainous while a so called 'villain' can be kind and help someone in need. We like to put them in certain boxes and keep it that way, but there are a lot more to people than what society labels them. You just have to dig a little deeper."

"And you? What sort of 'box' are you in?"

"None." Joker grinned. "I'll carve my own path through this world, thank you very much."

The ballroom faded away into an office. A safe, busted by golden sparks crackling from Joker's own hand, was opened. Joker, Mona and Gentle Criminal were looking down at some files on the desk. Scenes of the mansion bled away. Files were thrown up one half the screen with several highlighted areas. The other half showed the serious revenue gained from the charities. They were one and the same.

"The Yaoyorozu family is famous for throwing extravagant galas in the name of charity." Gentle Criminal said as photos of the events popped up. Heroes in costume, donors in thousand dollar suits, and the Yaoyorozu's themselves. "However, it is all a farce. These documents show their true destination!"

Then, the finale. The screen was black, except for a spinning top hat and mask in the center.

“To the Yaoyorozu family, who’s sin of gluttony is boundless, you pilfer funds that shouldn’t belong to you and sabotage any who stand in your way. You use your heiress like an unwilling puppet, and she shall be freed by her own power. We’ll reveal the true origins of your wealth to the world. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.”

The scenery changed for the last time.

Gentle Criminal beamed as he poured a cup of tea, and then leaned back on a plush chair. The room he occupied was dark, with only a few beams of light pouring in from an off screen window. He gazed into the camera.

“And this marks the end of our daring heist! So, did everyone like our special guest? How are you reacting to such a terrible crime enacted towards our society? It might seem dark now, but take heart!” Gentle raised his cup. “Those of you lamenting the times, believe in me and follow me! I will keep striving to change our world for the better! Until next time, dear listeners!”

Shoto, along with Fuyumi who leaned against his shoulder, gawked at the phone until it went dark.

“Th-this is unbelievable.” Fuyumi whispered, horrified and awed.

“I know.” Shoto said as the 1-A chatroom exploded with activity. “It’s already going viral.”

[Pinky]

HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS!!

[Ingenium2.0]

Ashido, do not swear!!

[Pinky]

I can't help it!! I'm losing my damn mind right now!!

[RRiot]

RIGHT!?

So much is happening that I don't know what's going on anymore!!!

The news channels are EXPLODING

[Chargebolt]

DID YOU GUYS SEE JOKER!?!?!?

HE USED LIGHTNING ON THAT SAFE

LIGHTINGG!!!

JUST LIKE MEE!!!

[Wraith]

At least he doesn't turn brainless when he uses it :3

[Chargebolt]

DON'T BE MEAN HAGAKURE

[Tsukiyomi]

This madness aside...

His companion, Arsene. Dark Shadow and I encountered him in the USJ.

I had forgotten his name until now.

[Sparkles~]

Oui!! I cannot believe it!

Arsene Lupin is a famous master thief, and he has been with Joker this entire time!?

It makes sense, seeing two gentlemen thieves working together!

And who is this other lovely gentlemen taking the screen?

[Wraith]

I dunno, but Gentle seems cool?

I might follow him.

[Froppy]

I don't know if that's smart, Hagakure-chan.

Beside that, just how many things can Joker do?

It's like he has so many quirks all in one, but wouldn't that be impossible, kero?

[Uravity]

Maybe??

I think Deku's brain must be in overdrive right about now!

[RRiot]

Mido! Are you there!?

[Pinky]

DEKU WE NEED ANSWERS ABOUT JOKER'S QUIRK!!

DON'T IGNORE USSS!!!

[MurderPomeranian]

WOULD YOU ALL SHUT UP ALREADY!

I'm so sick of Joker!! He's just an asshole vying for attention, same with that 'gentle criminal' bullshit.

Don't you morons have something else to be more concerned about!?

[Ingenium2.0]

As much as I disagree with Bakugo's language, he is right.

We should be more concerned for our classmate who's going through a difficult time!

[Anima]

Has anyone gotten a hold of Yaomomo yet?

She hasn't answered any of my texts...

[Froppy]

No.

I'm getting concerned, kero.

[Earphone Jack]

Same, but I left her voicemails telling her that we are here for her.

[Tentacole]

She probably can't answer right now.

I hope she's alright.

[Ingenium2.0]

As Class Representative, I shall keep an eye on the situation and inform you if I hear anything!

Please be respectful towards Yaoyorozu during this time!

Shoto looked up at Fuyumi's frustrated sigh.

"Natsuo hasn't answered." Fuyumi massaged her forehead. "Out of all the times he doesn't respond!"

Thunderous footsteps echoed down the hall. They stiffened as Endeavor entered the living room, wearing a standard suit and tie instead of his hero costume, although the tie had a flame motif to it. Shoto thought it was tacky.

“Shoto,” Enji’s eyes landed on him. “Come with me.”

“Why?”

“I will explain later.” He turned to Fuyumi, who went white. “Please prepare the guest room while we are gone.”

“Y-yes!”

Shoto and Fuyumi exchanged glances as Enji left the room. Fuyumi squeezed her little brother’s hand, and decided not to comment on how shaky it was.

“I’m telling Natsuo to come home *now* .” She said. “This isn’t like father at all. We *never* have guests!”

“I’ll keep you updated.” Shoto squeezed her hand back, then they parted. “I don’t know where this is going, either.”

Shoto walked in a daze as he got into the car with his father. Enji drove while Shoto crammed himself into the backseat on the opposite side. Heavy silence suffocated him. Shoto pretended that his heart wasn’t beating like a panicked bird in a cage. Instead, he browsed on his phone. A million and one articles were being pumped out by the minute.

Joker’s Newest Calling Card Revealed!

An In-depth Analysis Of Gentle Criminal’s Latest Video!

History of Arsene Lupin - Revisited!

The True Cost Of Vigilantism On Heroic Societies.

Joker’s 25 Million Bounty Crumbles As Hero Commission Remains Silent!

Yaoyorozu Family: Fraud Or Victims Of Reckless Vigilantism?

Top 10 Reasons Why Joker Needs To Be Stopped.

U.A. Principal, Police Chief Tsuragamae, and Musutafu Mayor Call For Emergency Press Conference!

Shoto sent the last one to the group chat and listened in.

Flashing cameras flooded the conference room. Principal Nezu, Tsuragamae, and the mayor sat at a table in the front with dozens of microphones crowding them.

Mayor Tanabata Miyazu took the center. She wore a dark pant suit. Her silky black hair was pulled back into an elegant bun, and although her features were soft, the raw power she exuded cowed even the bravest reporters. She stared into the camera as the first question was asked.

“Mayor Tanabata, can you confirm that the Yaoyorozu’s fortune is really stemmed from fraud?”

“We cannot confirm anything at this time, but the heads of the house have placed themselves in protective custody under the guidance of their lawyers.” Her cold voice cut through like ice. *“Their assets have been frozen until the investigation concludes.”*

“We are treating this case very seriously.” Chief Tsuragamae spoke next. *“The protective custody is for their own safety.”*

“Chief Tsuragamae!” None other than Demizu Mika shouted. *“If they are found guilty of fraud, then do you think that their crimes would never have seen the light of day if it wasn’t for Joker and Gentle Criminal’s actions?”*

“I cannot say for certain. However, please keep in mind that they have accessed this information illegally, and posting the records to the public might invalidate parts of our investigation.”

"Principal Nezu, doesn't the Yaoyorozu heiress attend U.A.? Will you be expelling her because of her family's crimes!?"

Shoto's expression soured. He had to mute the 1-A Chatroom as it spilled over with outrage.

"No." If looks could kill, than half of the reporters would've been struck dead. "She will not be expelled for crimes that her parents may have committed. She is one of the brightest students of her year and I will not stand for anybody tarnishing her name."

"Is she in protective custody with her parents?"

"No." Chief Tsuragamae said. "Given the severity of her situation, she will be temporarily housed with a hero."

"Who!?"

"For privacy reasons, we won't be sharing." Nezu's tail flicked like a whip. "And we will not be answering any more questions over Miss Yaoyorozu. Next line of questioning, please."

"I have something to say." A tall man waltzed towards the front. He had wavy black hair and mismatched pupils and, for some reason, his voice sounded familiar. "The leaked information states that the Yaoyorozu family funded the 25 million for Joker's bounty. What happens to it now? I can't see the bounty staying up with this scandal. The Hero Commission acts as if the petition doesn't exist either, even though it has signatures from several hero agencies and civilians alike. What are you going to do about it?"

"While President Kunikazu has not officially taken it down, I will not condone any more nonsense that has taken over my city. Therefore," Tanabata's expression hardened, "If Joker were to be taken in, then no bounty will be rewarded. Also, any heroes from the raid will have 72 hours to vacate Musutafu."

One could hear a pin drop.

“A-are you kicking out every raid hero in the city?”

“Precisely.” Her hardness melted with a smile. “While I don’t side with Joker or agree with vigilantism, the damages in this city far surpasses the bounty at this point. Many citizens have come forth to share their discomfort over the influx of heroes on the streets. Any ‘raid’ heroes remaining after the 72 hour time limit will be heavily fined.”

Nezu beamed with pride. It took several moments for the reporters’ outcries and the blinding flashes to calm down. The same man raised his hand again.

“Another question about Joker.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and leered at Nezu. “Can you confirm the rumors about your Vigilante Program? It’s not official yet, but I have to ask why U.A. wants a vigilante among it’s students?”

“Yes,” Chief Tsuragamae narrowed his eyes at the man, “I have decided to support Principal Nezu in getting it finalized. The hearing for that will be sometime during the next month.”

“Okay, but that’s avoiding my question.” His smirk was equal to a hidden blade. “Why would U.A. want a vigilante at their school? Why not sponsor a capable hero agency to do it instead? Unless... you know something about him that we don’t?”

Hunger came into the reporters’ eyes. Nezu and Chief Tsuragamae exchanged a glance. An entire conversation flowed between them within a heartbeat, and the mayor pulled away to whisper something in Nezu’s ear. The mouse-bear-dog nodded. Chief Tsuragamae, however, looked troubled.

Anybody who knew Nezu shivered. He had *that* look in his eyes. That same insidious gleam that spelled disaster and reigned endless chaos upon friend and foe alike. The whole world held it’s breath as Nezu leaned closer to the microphones.

"My school would be the best location for him, as no single hero agency can match our resources. U.A. is a place of learning for all young minds." Nezu said plainly. *"Joker is no different."*

"Are you implying that Joker is underage!?" Demizu Mika shouted.

Shoto's heart hammered as Tsuragamae answered, his expression grave.

"Joker had a recent encounter with an underground hero," Tsuragamae sighed, *"Before he escaped this hero, it was revealed that he was a minor-"*

Shoto didn't hear the undying chaos as he vaulted forward, his forehead smacked the front seat while his phone tumbled to the floor. Shoto rubbed his head and glared at Enji. They had stopped at a red light, but fury and shock burned in the man's eyes as the steering wheel creaked ominously.

"Shoto, turn that off." He bit out. "We're almost there."

"Y-yeah..."

He lay his phone face down on the seat next to him. Shoto placed his hands on his lap and pretended as if the world didn't just shatter. His *hero* might be the same age. Joker, who had fought against countless heroes, Nomu, villains, who had fended off All Might *twice* without a scratch, was only a teenager.

Half of his classmates were probably screaming into the cosmos. He wondered if Midoriya's brain was going haywire, well, even more haywire given his absence in the chat.

Enji pulled into a parking space and turned off the car. The jingling keys were the only noise as they digested the news, before Enji ripped them from the ignition. He took a deep breath, then turned to Shoto.

“Let’s go.”

Shoto nodded as they exited the car.

A police station was around the corner, and the morning crowd cleared a path when they looked upon a thunderous Enji. Birds in nearby trees happily chirped in contrast to the fire and brimstone that reigned down over the news. He spotted a few people gaping at their phones before he was whisked inside the station.

The receptionist paled. “Th-they’re ready for you in room two, sir.”

Shoto nodded at the woman, her name tag reading Yamiko, and then he followed his father down another hall. Enji opened a door to the left, and Shoto froze.

Yaoyorozu was hunched over on a chair. There was an untouched bottle of water in front of her as she huddled into a shock blanket. Her cheeks were tear stained and her eyes were puffy and red from crying.

Aizawa-sensei sat beside her, his hand rubbing circles on her back.

“Todoroki, thank you for coming on such short notice.” Detective Tsukauchi sat on the other side of the table, equally exhausted.

“Don’t worry about it.” Enji crossed his arms. “Does she have everything she needs? If not, we can always get supplies when she’s recovered.”

Yaoyorozu looked up as if just noticing their arrival. Her eyes brightened, a tiny spark within a sputtering star.

She bowed to them. “Th-thank you for taking me in.”

“Think nothing of it. Are you ready to go?”

Shoto stared at Enji’s back. Was that... *softness* in his voice? But that couldn’t be right. Could it? That tone didn’t match the towering

behemoth, it was like an evil dragon showing true compassion to the trapped princess. Thankfully, Momo's voice prevented confusion from sprouting on his face.

"Y-yes. I already have everything packed." She grabbed a small duffel bag from under the table and stood up, Aizawa-sensei stood with her.

"You have my number." Aizawa said. "Call me if you need anything."

"I will." Her smile was strained. "Thank you for your kindness."

"Shoto," Enji handed him the car keys. "Take her to the car while I get everything finalized here. It shouldn't take too long."

He nodded, somewhat stunned. "I can carry that for you."

"Thank you."

Shoto took the duffel bag, and with a nod to Tsukauchi and Aizawa, they left. Yaoyorozu walked through the station in a daze, and Shoto stopped her from stumbling into a door frame. He felt the receptionist's eyes on them when they stopped at the exit.

Momo hugged herself. Shoto said nothing as she pulled her jacket hood on, and she walked outside with a lowered head. People passed by without a second glance. They made it to the car without trouble. Shoto held the door open for her, put the duffel bag in the trunk, and slipped in on the other side.

Silence fell upon them as they were cut off from the rest of the world. A disquiet that was ear-piercing.

Shoto glanced at her in time to see a crystal tear drop onto her pants. She sniffled and tried to wipe it away. He almost asked if she was alright, but the words died on his tongue.

Of course she wasn't.

Her entire life was ripped away in a single night.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He asked softly. “You don’t have to if you’re not feeling up for it.”

“I...” She collapsed in on herself as her hands covered her face.

The strangled sob within her throat sounded so *broken* that it stoked a fire in Shoto’s heart. He grit his teeth together and placed a hand on her shoulder. The side that harbored his father’s quirk. She leaned slightly into the warmth.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m trying to hold it together.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” He copied Aizawa and rubbed circles into her back. “I’m here to talk if you want. Do you want me to text Iida and explain what happened? He can handle the rest of our class for a while.”

“Yes, please.” Her hands dropped but her head stayed bowed. “I can’t even look at my phone right now.”

Shoto grabbed his phone and went to Iida’s contact.

[Peppermint]

Momo is going to stay with my family for a bit. She’s alright, but really upset.

Can you make sure that the rest of our class knows?

[Ingenium2.0]

I will inform them right away!

Call me if you require any assistance!!

“I sent the message.”

“Thank you. I...” Momo blinked tears from her eyes and took a breath. “I don’t hate him.”

“What?”

“Joker. I don’t hate him for what he did. I... I am angry at him, a-and confused, but I don’t outright hate him. ‘Why would he target my family?’ is what I asked myself.” She stared down at her clenched fists. “And then I found out that my entire life was founded on lies and fraud! My parents didn’t try to hide their guilt.”

Shoto’s eyes widened. “You met Joker?”

“I did. Mona was there too.” She clasped her hands together, her knuckles turning white. “They were in the manor, and Joker handed me the calling card himself. The police took it for evidence.”

“... What was he like?”

“Mysterious. Intimidating. Irritably charming? He called me an ‘Empress’.” Momo pulled at the end of her sleeve. “And he had this... this unwavering *authority* when he spoke. It’s nothing I’ve ever encountered before.”

“And how do you feel about your parents?” Shoto felt like a failure when another tear fell.

“I still love them. How could I not?” She frantically shook her head. “But they wronged so many people. I hope that they will see what they did and try to redeem themselves, but... I’m not going to hold my breath.” Finally, she met his eyes, her own flooding with tears. “Todoroki, did I do the right thing? They wanted to pretend that nothing was wrong, that they could just sweep everything away.”

Shoto pursed his lips. “Do you feel like you did the right thing?”

“Yes... no? I don’t know.” She placed a hand over her heart. “It feels like I’ve betrayed them. It just hurts *so much* .”

“They are the ones who made that choice, just like you made yours.” Shoto stared at his own left hand. “You are not your parents, you’re your own person. If it makes any difference, I think you did the right thing by standing up to them.”

Another strangled sob was locked behind quivering lips. Shoto’s face softened, and he tentatively held out his arms. Her body crashed into his, and he held her tight while she cried on his shoulder. His shirt was getting damp, but he honestly didn’t care.

He would let her cry for as long as she needs.

“What the *hell* was that.” Aizawa paced the small room, the heat of his anger thrumming through his veins. “Why would Joker target one of *my* students? It doesn’t make any sense!”

“Aizawa, take a breath and calm down.” Tsukauchi sighed as he finished arranging Todoroki’s papers, Joker’s calling card, and Yaoyorozu’s initial interview in a neat pile. “The Yaoyorozu family funded his bounty, so I don’t think he targeted her just because she’s in your class. The calling card stated that she would be ‘freed by her own power.’”

Tsukauchi gestured to the door, and they left the room together.

“But that doesn’t make any sense either. It’s not like she was *trapped*. ” Aizawa’s anger fumed away with an exhausted sigh. “Joker wouldn’t be so petty as to target them for revenge. He’s not like that.”

“I don’t know? We saw the video. He teamed up with Gentle Criminal and La Brava, and fought two other villains in the Yaoyorozu’s old manor.” Tsukauchi stopped in the middle of the hallway, expression

grim. “There *has* to be more to this than just targeting the Yaoyorozu’s. We’re missing pieces of the puzzle here.”

“With Joker? There are *several* pieces that we’re missing. Then the whole picture changes when we think we’re getting close to finding one.” Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know there’s one way to get answers.”

“Aizawa, *no* . You know how shaky of a relationship we have with him. It could ruin everything if we go there and interrogate him.” Tsukauchi bit the inside of his cheek. “It’s not worth scaring him off.”

“I... you’re right. Sorry.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “But she didn’t deserve *this* . Just seeing Yaoyorozu like that makes me so angry.”

“That just means that you care about your students.”

“Shut it.” Aizawa grumbled, his eyes flashing red.

“Hey, there you are!”

Officer Tamakawa bolted down the hall, giving Tsukauchi the *look* .

“Sansa? Oh no.” Tsukauchi paled. “What’s wrong now?”

“That press conference with Nezu, the mayor, and the chief?” Tamakawa shook his head. “Mayor Tanabata is kicking out the raid heroes, and then they officially stated that Joker is a minor right after. Everyone knows. The news stations are practically on fire.”

Aizawa’s eye twitched.

“... Is it too late to crawl into bed and pretend this day didn’t happen?” Tsukauchi asked wistfully.

“I wish.” Tamakawa smirked. “Does anybody have any marshmallows?”

“Why?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Because we could make s’mores with how hot the news is right now!” He nudged Tsukauchi with his elbow. “Huh? Am I right?”

Tsukauchi deadpanned.

“That joke sucks.” Aizawa said without remorse.

“Oh, come on!” Tamakawa called after he stormed away. “My sense of humor is so underappreciated around here. Oh, and I left the files about Gentle Criminal and La Brava on your desk. You’re *welcome*, by the way!”

Aizawa groaned, half tempted to bang his head against a wall. “I’ll call that damned rat after the conference is over. This is probably part of his master plan.”

“I just wish he would warn us ahead of time. People might be more accepting towards Nezu’s program now that Joker’s status has been announced. Better than the HC’s... ‘punishment’.”

“Maybe, but I think a small part of him thrives off this chaos.” Aizawa sulked. “Nezu is the Devil incarnate and you cannot convince me otherwise.”

“Remind you of anyone else we know?” Tsukauchi smiled wryly, but it slowly fell as he turned white. “Oh my god. And we’re *working* to get Joker and Nezu in the same place.”

The two men gaped at one another, suppressing shivers as a unknowable chill entered the hall.

“Natsuo, please relax.” Fuyumi said as she watched her brother do another lap around the living room. “Shoto told us what was going on. They’ll be home any minute!”

“That’s what I don’t get!” Natsuo threw his hands up into the air.
“Why, *why* after everything we’ve been through, does Dipshit finally decide to be a decent human being!?”

“Natsuo-”

They startled when the front door opened. The siblings held their breath as several footsteps trailed towards the living room, one pair drastically louder than the others. Shoto came in next to an exhausted girl, Enji towered behind them with a solemn expression. His eyes narrowed at Natsuo.

“... We’re home.” Enji said.

“W-wel...” Fuyumi cleared her throat and pulled herself from the couch. “Welcome home.”

If the girl sensed the mounting tension, she didn’t express it. Instead, she folded her hands on her stomach and bowed a full 90 degrees.

“My name is Yaoyorozu Momo. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is ours, Momo-chan.” Natsuo threw on a warm, genuine smile. “The names Natsuo!”

“Fuyumi.” She bowed her head as Momo righted herself. Fuyumi gently placed both of her hands on Momo’s shoulders. “You look exhausted, dear. We have some hot springs out back. How about we soak for a bit and then I can show you to your room? You need to rest.”

The family springs at the back of the manor. Quiet. Sound proof. The upcoming shouting match wouldn’t penetrate its walls.

Momo rubbed her eyes, but smiled. “That sounds lovely. Thank you.”

Fuyumi locked arms with Momo and led her away, but she threw a look at Natsuo over her shoulder. *Be civil* . With that, the girls left.

Shoto set a duffel bag on the couch, his eyes flicking in between them.

Natsuo scowled. "I don't get what game you're playing at-"

"I am not playing any games, Natsuo." Enji kept anger out of his voice. "I'm only trying to help."

"Help. 'Help'. *Help* ." The word was venom on Natsuo's tongue. "Let me get this straight. First, you barely talk to us after you shut yourself up in your office for *weeks*, and now you're suddenly playing all nice!? I'm not buying this bullshit!"

"I understand that you're angry-"

"You're damn right I'm angry!" Shoto flinched when Natsuo grasped his shoulder. "I'm angry that I never got to know my little brother. Angry that mom's still in the hospital because of you. *Angry* because you finally decided to pull your head out of your ass and help someone in need, but you still neglect your real family!?"

Natsuo was panting. Enji's eyes widened, but whatever rage he harbored died like embers gasping for air.

"You have every right to feel this way." Enji stared at the ground, unable to take his sons' piercing stares. "And I'm not asking for your forgiveness, but what I *am* trying to do is be a better person. A better hero. A better... father."

"Why after all of this time?" Natsuo snapped, his voice breaking.

"Because I learned what's really important. A certain vigilante proved that power isn't everything, and he forced me to take a good look at myself. I saw myself for what I really was."

Natsuo scrubbed his face, before he pulled his hands away, eyes watery.

“Don’t drag Joker into your pity party!” Natsuo walked up to Enji and jabbed him in the chest. “I’ll be watching you. I’m sticking around to make sure that you won’t hurt Momo-chan.”

Natsuo stormed out, but not without jarring Enji in the shoulder. Awkward silence doused the room. Shoto fidgeted. He saw Momo’s duffel bag on the couch, his only escape.

“I’m going to put this in Yaoyorozu’s room.”

He picked it up and tried to walk out without looking at his father.

“Shoto, wait.” A heavy hand on Shoto’s shoulder froze him in place. Enji let it drop. “I’m going to be a hero that you can look up to. I promise.”

Shoto remained silent as he walked away, oblivious to the resolve hardening in Enji’s heart.

Ryukyu’s hand flew to her mouth.

Today was a nonstop storm of breaking news. Fraud, lies, the mayor forcing a mass exodus of heroes from Musutafu. But the newest articles had sent ice through her veins and a churning chasm of guilt gnawed at her entire being.

BREAKING NEWS: U.A. Reveals Joker’s True Age!!

Heroes Vs. A Teenage Vigilante: Who Is In The Right?

Many Express Outrage Over Drastic Use Of Force Against Teenage Vigilante Joker!

She had attacked a *child*. A cocky one at that, but still a child! She reached for her new phone and dialed her PR manager, who picked up after a single ring.

“You saw the news?”

“Yeah.” Ryukyu swallowed back her pride. “Please arrange a press conference. I’ll do the apology.”

“You... you’re actually serious?”

“Of course I am! If I knew he was a kid...” She shook her head. “No, that’s no excuse. When’s the earliest you can schedule it?”

“Hmmm,” Rapid typing overtook the line. *“I can squeeze you in this afternoon if I call in a few favors. Does that work for you?”*

“Perfect. Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. Good luck, Ryukyu.”

Ryukyu hung up and grabbed a notebook and pen to scribble down her thoughts. This apology *had* to be done right. Not just for her sake, but for Joker’s too.

Scrape. Scrape.

Akira studied the cork boards swarming the lounge. Missing posters, various smuggling groups, and maps dotted with vibrant red circles were splayed around him. The eyes of the missing people pinned him with weighty expectation, and he could almost hear them crying out for help.

Kaito was helping him sort through everything.

Scraape. Scraape.

Akira didn’t feel bad for swindling Giran last night.

“You have the goods?” Giran had that sleazy smile, but Joker kept his irritation from showing. *“I have to say that the video was wildfire.”*

“You first.”

“Alright, alright.” The table between them groaned as Giran set down a bulging brief case. The man tapped the lid. “Here’s everything I could find on such a short notice. Your missing people, the groups responsible, and their hideout locations. It should be satisfactory.”

Joker opened it and scanned the contents. There was a mountain of information to sort through. With a grimace, Joker closed the lid and grabbed it from the table. He reached into his pocket with his other hand and tossed the bag of jewels at Giran.

“These were in their vault.” He said evenly. “See ya.”

He left. Joker didn’t say a single word about the fakes, but Giran deserved to find out the hard way. Courtesy wasn’t warranted.

Akira shook his head to clear his thoughts.

“Ooh!” Manami giggled and kicked her legs in excitement. “Gentle! Our video already surpassed 8 million views! So many new people are flooding the channel!”

“That’s wonderful!” Tobita’s bubbly energy thrummed through his whole body. “I say we propose a toast to a heist well executed!”

Morgana snickered. “I’m glad that you’re excited, but we still have work to do. Don’t forget *why* we did that video in the first place, so don’t get too comfortable.”

“I know.” Tobita’s eagerness withered. “Still, it can’t hurt to have a small celebration! I’ll brew my best tea!”

Tobita rushed to the kitchenette as Akira turned around to grab the next pile-

Scraape. Scraaap- Ting.

Akira blinked as a broken half of a lock pick bounced onto the posters.

Hitoshi sheepishly grinned. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Akira picked up the metal bit between his thumb and pointer finger. "You're not doing too bad for your first try, but go lighter on the pressure. These things snap easily."

"Right." Hitoshi frowned at the tools in his hand, and sighed. "How long did it take you to make a lock pick? One that didn't break."

"He did it on his first try." Morgana chirped.

"What!?" Hitoshi playfully glared at Akira. "Cheater."

Akira set the metal piece aside with a smirk. "Keep practicing and you'll get there before you know it, then we can work on the more complicated things."

Hitoshi nodded and got back to work. Akira tuned the other lively conversations out as he hung up the posters based around Kyoto, Kaito just finished with the ones from Kagoshima. A fragrant tea tickled his nose, but he ignored it as he scanned the boards.

Kyoto. Tokyo. Hiroshima. Kagoshima. Shizuoka.

And... Musutafu.

Kaito leaned in and whispered. "Something doesn't feel right."

"What you mean?"

"I don't know." Kaito narrowed his eyes at the Musutafu board. "I just feel like something's missing."

"Did you see any quirkless posters anywhere?"

Kaito's eyes widened. "No."

"... Any information on the League?"

“No...”

They scanned the myriad of posters. Nope, no quirkless people or any of groups affiliated with the League Of Villains. Akira reached into his pocket for the worn down poster of Shirogane Kaien. The boy's worn eyes stared into his.

Did Giran not care? Did the man view quirkless people as less than nothing like everyone else? How many other people did Giran 'happen' to miss? Or did the man swindle them just as Akira swindled him? Akira hung Kaien's poster at the very top of the Musutafu board.

Kaito put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Akira grimaced, but he appreciated Kaito's support.

“Akira?”

“What?” He said, half distracted by anger.

“A lot of articles have come out since they announced your age.” Manami said as she put her teacup down. “Did you want to read some of them?”

“Maybe later.”

She squawked. “‘Maybe later’!? People are freaking out over it and you don't care?”

“Yeah, you seem pretty chill about today's chaos.” Hitoshi said. “My Herocord server has been flipping about everything nonstop.”

“It's not that I don't care, *I do* . But remember that we're still on a mission.” Akira turned his back on all of those blank, staring eyes. “Just because everyone knows my age, doesn't mean that it makes our job any less important.” He gestured towards the posters. “Saving these people is what matters right now. We can relax and digest everything after we're done.”

“You’re right about that.” Morgana said as he stretched out across the couch. “Still, that conference was crazy. I hate to say it Akira, but U.A. *did* hold up their end of the bargain. We don’t have to worry about all of those heroes anymore!”

“Yeah.” Manami looked at the laptop sitting on the table. “Around fifteen percent of the raid heroes have already left since this morning! They’re showing footage of it on the news.”

Akira stamped out his mixed feelings over Aizawa. He was a teacher at U.A., Nezu its principal. It wouldn’t be too far fetched for them to use this as a trap to lure him in. Maybe he regretted telling Aizawa his age, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now.

Hitoshi looked in between Manami and Akira, who tacked the final posters on a board as if it owed him money.

“Did you find out anything about those two that attacked us?” Morgana asked over the tension.

“Some.” Manami switched tabs. “According to this, Toga Himiko is a suspect in a murder case, and she’s been on the run since then. Mr. Compress, while his real name is unknown, is responsible for a string of heists scattered around Japan.”

“But why did they team up for a heist?” Morgana’s eyes narrowed. “Something isn’t right.”

“Who knows?” Tobita set the tea out on the table. “Perhaps they were paired together by Giran?”

“Guessing won’t get us anywhere.” Akira muttered.

“I suppose you’re right...” Tobita said.

The lounge was silent, save for the clink of delicate cups. Hitoshi spoke up after a few minutes.

“So, what are you planning to do about all... *this* ?” Hitoshi asked.
“That’s a lot of ground to cover.”

“I don’t know.” Akira scratched the back of his head and released a frustrated sigh. “If we invade them one by one, then the other groups will hear about it and move. We can’t risk that.”

Hitoshi sulked. “I wish I could help.”

“I don’t think that’s smart.” Morgana looked at him, frowning. “You should leave this to us. We don’t want to risk you being exposed if this makes the news, after all.”

Hitoshi’s shoulders sagged. “But I got a cool mask.”

Akira perked up. “Do you have it with you?”

Hitoshi smirked and dug into the bag at his feet. He held it up to the light with pride. Akira’s heart dropped. It was a black mask. More importantly, it was a black *fox* mask. Gold accents were painted under the eyes and a crescent moon shone on the forehead.

“Ooh, it’s pretty!” Manami said.

“And quite mysterious.” Tobita placed a hand on his shoulder. “It fits you well.”

“... Yeah, it sure does.” Morgana muttered as he looked away, ears drooping.

“Can I see it?” Akira asked.

Hitoshi frowned at Morgana, but handed it over.

“Don’t mind him. I think it looks cool.” Akira stared at it.

A moon, huh? He was reminded of Mishima Yuuki, who had gone through his own inner battles. Self doubt and fear plagued him, but he eventually broke through those debilitations with a little help from

Akira. He felt that same sort of bond with Hitoshi. A smile slowly broke through as he handed the mask back to him.

“The Moon fits you.”

“Uh,” Hitoshi blinked. “Thanks?”

“You were really going to wear it?”

“I wanted to one day.” Hitoshi stared into the mask’s eyes. “I still want to help somehow. I feel... useless.”

Morgana’s eyes softened.

“H-hey!” Manami grabbed his hand. “Don’t feel down! How about I teach you how to hack?”

“Really?” Hitoshi asked, wide eyed.

“Why not?” Manami smirked as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Akira and Morgana are teaching you loads of stuff, so why don’t we add hacking under your belt!? I can teach you how to sneak through police networks, or how to get into a somebody’s personal accounts.”

“I-isnt that illegal?”

“You’re worried about that *now* ?” Manami chuckled. “It’s a good skill to have and it could save your life one day! Besides, it could be fun! Pretty please?”

“Alright.” Hitoshi smiled back. “I’ll do it.”

“Yes! Okay, here’s what we need to get you started....”

Akira and Tobita exchanged amused glances as Manami spewed off a bunch of jargon they had no knowledge of. Hitoshi, on the other hand, seemed excited.

“Here, I’ll even set you up with parts, and we can build a spare laptop from there!” Manami whirled around to her laptop, but blinked. “Oh?”

Hitoshi peeked at the screen. “What’s wrong?”

“Akira, you need to see this.” She said.

Morgana hopped over from the other couch as the others approached.

Akira’s eyes widened as he recognized Ryukyu’s human form. Her expression was stained by regret. She sat at a table, and like Nezu’s conference from earlier that day, it was swamped by microphones.

“Thank you for your time. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’ve set this up.” She folded her hands on the table and peered into the camera. Her stare sent prickles down his spine. *“I want to apologize. Not just to the people of Musutafu as a whole, but to Joker as well.”*

Akira stiffened. Morgana’s tail twitched.

“As humans, we make mistakes. As heroes, I feel like we’ve failed on several levels. However, we never did have all of the information about Joker before we launched the raid. Could things have been different had we known his age? Possibly. But talking about what might have happened never solves anything, instead we should learn from our mistakes and focus on what we can do better in the future.” Several gasps were heard as Ryukyu bowed, her forehead touching the table. *“In the end, we were only chasing after him for our own personal gain. I sincerely apologize for all of the damages caused in Musutafu, and for how I mishandled the situation as a whole.”*

“Ryukyu, how do you think Joker will respond!?”

Ryukyu raised her head. *“I don’t know. Maybe we can move on and work towards a better future. I want him to know that there are*

resources that will help people like him, no matter what situation he is in. If he doesn't accept, then I completely understand. It's not often that a hero apologizes like this."

"What do you plan to do now? What about Joker?"

"For now, I'll leave him alone. I have finished cleaning up the warehouse district in Musutafu. Now that I have no more business here, I will be returning to my agency in Shizuoka-

An idea crashed into Akira like a raging tidal wave. He whipped towards the boards, a plan blossomed as he stood in front of the map of Shizuoka.

"Kaito, you said that some heroes would work alongside a vigilante?"

"I... have said that before." Kaito asked, frowning. "Why?"

His personas buzzed with activity.

"That... could work." Arsene said hesitantly. "But is it wise, Trickster?"

"After everything those heroes put us through?" Byakko bared his fangs. "I don't think so."

"But this isn't about us, Byakko. Look at all of these lost souls who were stolen away from their lives. We must look past ourselves."

"Shiva is right." Kohryu said. "The Hierophant stayed true to the Trickster. Now, it is our turn to extend an olive branch. We cannot accomplish this feat by ourselves."

"So we strike against these wretches in a single sweep. The ultimate All-Out-Attack." Titania twirled a lock of her hair and smirked. "I like it."

"If Big Brother goes ahead with it, then I will follow." Alice said "But if this plan backfires and the heroes attack..."

"Then my claws will flay them!" Cerberus shouted.

"My poison shall reap them of their lives." Vasuki hissed.

"There'd be nothing left once I'm done with them." The Bubbly One giggled. *"Not even one spec of dust!"*

"Come now, let us not threaten them when we've yet begun." Kohryu grumbled.

"If I may, Trickster." Ishtar ignored Titania's sneer. *"I know who we must speak with to enact this plan."*

"Who?" Akira asked as concerned whispers were at his back. *"It better not be Aizawa."*

"No, he is not the right man for this job. In fact, I was referring to Ingenium."

"Ingenium? The senior, not the junior?"

"Indeed. That man may have a debt to us in which he feels he cannot repay, and he has always supported us publicly. We can use that. He could be the fulcrum with which this plan relies on."

"He's a natural leader. Other heroes would listen to him." Arsene ran a claw under his hat. *"And thus... listen to you, Trickster."*

"We will have your back, Trickster. Now and always." Ishtar's soothing power washed away his trepidation. *"But we must take this first step."*

He slowly let out a breath. Akira turned towards his comrades. Morgana's fur bristled at the sheer determination lighting up Akira's eyes. Hitoshi and the others gaped.

"I know what we have to do." Akira stated. *"But you're not going to like it."*

Manami closed her laptop and sat at the edge of her seat. "We're listening!"

Akira grinned when his personas' strength flowed into him, and he explained his plan.

Tensei had a new appreciation for the people who worked behind the scenes, standing in the shadows of heroes who claimed all of the glory, never to be named. He was now one of them. Tensei directed his sidekicks to fires, villain attacks, accidents. The works. All within the safety of his own agency.

"Hey boss?" Tensei look up as a woman knocked on his desk. "I'm off. Don't stay here too late, okay?"

"Don't worry about me, Miya-san." He chuckled. "I know my limits."

The woman smiled, but she hesitated. Her eyes darted between him and the floor.

"Is something wrong?"

"N-no. It's just..." Her smile turned sheepish. "We'd understand if you wanted to go back to being a daylight hero. You don't have to hold yourself back for us."

"I'm not holding myself back for anybody. I made my decision. Besides, Tenya will inherit the Ingenium name once he graduates." Miya bit her lip, but she nodded. "Good night, Miya-san."

Her face softened. "Good night, boss."

He watched her leave. The people for the next shift would arrive in a few minutes, but he stayed put. Someone must remain on call at all times. He didn't mind it. He reached over to take a sip from his water bottle, but it was forgotten when a call came through. Strange, it wasn't from any emergency service in Hosu.

“This is the Idaten Agency, what’s your emergency?”

“Good evening, Iida Tensei.”

That voice commanded attention. His eyes widened as a chill overcame him, but he refused to let this stranger frighten him.

“Who is this?” He said, voice firm. “If this is a prank call-”

“I promise that this is no prank.”

“Then who are you? This line is reserved for emergencies only.”

“Is this how you treat the person who gave you your life back? For shame, Tensei.” A breathy chuckle. *“Did you tell your little brother that I said hi?”*

Shock. Disbelief. Exhilaration. Color drained from his face as all of these emotions and more swirled around in a dizzying array. The man... no, *minor* responsible for today’s madness was on the other end of the line!

“... Joker?”

“Is there another vigilante who mended your severed spine?”

“N-no.” Tensei cleared his throat, suddenly feeling small. “Why did you call me?”

“I’m looking for help on a mission.” A long sigh. *“It turns out that you’re the perfect person for the job.”*

“Wha- Me?”

“You’re not a daylight hero anymore, but you still have that heroic spark, right? What if I told you that the lives of innocent people were on the line?”

Tensei went rigid. “What are you talking about?”

"Kidnappers, villain groups, smugglers. They are an underground plague that has grown rampant all across Japan, and yet nobody has taken it upon themselves to investigate them. My associate just sent you a dossier of all the heroes who are likely to join the hunt and will not be as... openly hostile as others."

His eyes were blown wide as his computer pinged.

"... What exactly are you planning?"

"One dashing vigilante and a group of heroes band together and rescue scores of missing civilians in a single night? Entire criminal groups dismantled? Human traffickers sent to prison? Need I go on?"

"But what do you want me to do?" He asked, his voice just above a whisper.

"Gather these heroes together. They'd sooner listen to a request from you than me. I'll send a meeting location once our roster is filled."

"Wait-"

"Time stops for nobody, Tensei. The clock is ticking and many lives hang in the balance. I expect a lot from you. Good luck."

Tensei jumped from his chair. "Wait!"

The line was already dead. His mouth went dry as he slowly sank down, his heart was like a red hot hammer pounding in his chest. He opened the email and gaped at the list of heroes, his eyes locked onto the very top name.

Ryukyu.

Tensei shook his head. This vigilante really was crazy, wasn't he? But if what Joker said is true, then time was of the essence.

Determination arose within him, and he promised that he wouldn't fail the person to whom he owed *everything* .

"Are you sure you want to work today?" Morgana asked as he trailed beside Akira's feet.

"You know the routine." Akira scanned the alley. "We have to pretend that everything is normal. We can't stand out."

"I know." Morgana sighed, his fake green eyes softening. "Just try and take it easy today, okay? I know you didn't sleep well last night."

"I'll be fine."

"You *always* say that."

"Because it's always true." Akira grinned at his companion, who wasn't buying it. "See you in a few hours?"

Morgana sat down and curled his tail around his legs. "Yeah, see you."

The not-cat stayed within the alley's shadow as Akira stepped into the light.

The ringing bell echoed over Toshinori's head, and his senses were flooded by warm cinnamon and the tantalizing smell of freshly brewed coffee. His mouth watered, but he knew he couldn't partake in any of it, not without his insides rejecting everything in a crimson mess. He ducked his head and shambled into a small booth by the window.

He took a shaky breath and clasped his sweaty hands together. A shadow fell over his table, and he turned to see the smiling barista. The boy's fluffy, raven black hair made his pale complexion even

more so. The amber specs within his silvery eyes glittered as if made of real gold.

“What can I get you today?” The boy, his name tag reading ‘Kurusu’, asked.

“Ah, nothing. I’m just waiting for a colleague to show up.”

“Oh. Are you sure?” Kurusu grinned, “I can make a wicked cup of coffee, and today’s special curry has a dash of honey for added sweetness.”

Toshinori chuckled. “While that sounds lovely, I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to eat it.”

Kurusu blinked as innocently as a doe. “Why not?”

“Work accident.” Toshinori’s hand involuntarily clutched his side, Kurusu’s eyes followed it. “I’m afraid my body cannot handle most food. I’m... sorry for wasting your time.”

Shame coursed through him. Maybe he should’ve just waited outside-

“You’re not wasting my time.”

Toshinori felt a shift in the air. It was warm and gentle, almost like a mother’s embrace. He looked at Kurusu, eyes wide. The boy didn’t have that look of disgust or pity that other people gave him whenever he was in this skeletal form, instead his eyes were soft. Understanding.

“I have some tea that will be easy on your system. My treat.” Kurusu winked. “I’ll be right back.”

He was gone before Toshinori could protest. However, any thoughts of tea were thrown out the window when the cafe door opened. It’s bell rang, and a tall man in a business suit lingered for a moment, his eyes sweeping the cafe. Toshinori stiffened as Mirai’s eyes met his.

Mirai looked down as he adjusted his glasses, and hesitantly went to the table.

Toshinori felt a rock fall in his non-existent stomach when he sat down on the opposite booth. His former sidekick said nothing, only placing his hands on the table in lieu of a greeting. He still wouldn't look at Toshinori. The warmth of Kurusu's presence died like a withering flower.

Toshinori tried to think of something, *anything*, to say that would shatter the awkwardness stifling the table. His rescue arrived in the form of Kurusu.

"Here you go." He said as he placed a cup of steaming tea in front of him, then Kurusu's eyes trailed to Mirai. "Can I get you anything, sir?"

Mirai's voice held an icy timbre. "No."

The coldness didn't bother the barista. It was a small thing, but Toshinori noticed Kurusu's head tilt as he studied Mirai. Then, his eyes lit up with a devilish smile.

"Are you sure?" Kurusu asked. "It's not too *latte* to have a cup of coffee. We always *ground* the beans in house, and the freshness keeps a rather *brew-tiful* flavor if I do say so myself."

Toshinori held his breath. The boy had unknowingly struck one of Mirai's weak points.

Puns.

Seconds pass. Then, a miracle. A light *huff* escaped the stoic man, and his shoulders relaxed. He adjusted his glasses and looked up at the barista, quickly scanning him from head to toe.

"Fine." He said, that ice melting a tiny bit. "I'll take a house blend."

Kurusu nodded and slinked off like a satisfied feline. Mirai idly watched the boy as he rounded the counter to make the brew, and he returned within minutes. Kurusu placed the cup in front of Mirai.

“Let me know if you gentlemen need anything else.” Kurusu held eye contact with Toshinori for a few seconds, and then left them in peace.

Mirai took an experimental sip of coffee, his eyes widened by just a fraction. He set the cup down and the small *clink* was somehow loud.

“How long has it been since we’ve had a simple conversation?”

“... About five years.”

“That long already?” Mirai pushed up his glasses. “Why did you call me so suddenly after five years of silence?”

“I hope it doesn’t sound presumptuous of me, but I need your help with something important.” Toshinori sighed, his lung throbbing in pain. “It’s about-”

“I tried to help you five years ago. You didn’t listen.”

“That wasn’t helping.” Toshinori’s hands tightened around the tea cup. “That was you telling me to give up.”

“No, it was to pass on the torch so you could retire and live in peace.” Mirai’s eyes turned razor sharp. “Now look at what you’ve become, Toshinori. You’re literally working yourself to the bone! If you had taken my advice-”

“Mirai.” Toshinori’s heart ached. “I had every right to make my own decision. I wouldn’t be happy if I had to retire after... after what happened. It was only recently that I found a successor-”

“Yes. A *quirkless middle schooler*. ” Mirai hissed. “I don’t know what you saw in *him*, but it was a mistake. I can’t believe you chose him when I had the perfect successor lined up.”

“Young Midoriya wasn’t a mistake.” Rage pooled with the sharp pangs in his lung. “Last time I checked, this power wasn’t *yours* to pass down. Do I need to remind you of when Nana took in a *quirkless middle schooler*? A quirk doesn’t make the hero, Mirai. Young Midoriya has proven himself time and time again. He will be a fantastic hero.”

“I...” Mirai paled as several emotions flashed through his eyes. He opened and closed his mouth several times before sighing sharply through his nose. “Coming here was a mistake after all.”

Toshinori startled as Mirai placed some bills on the table and stood. He staggered after Mirai as he stormed out of the cafe.

“Mirai!” Toshinori called as he marched down the street. “*Sasaki!* ”

The man froze, his back towards Toshinori, who was wheezing when he finally caught up.

“*Please,* ” Toshinori grabbed Mirai’s wrist. “Let’s not have this argument all over again. What I need help with is bigger than you and me, possibly as big as... my power.”

“What are you talking about?” Mirai gently pulled his wrist free and glowered at Toshinori over his shoulder. “What could possibly be bigger than that?”

“This vigilante is all over the news.” At this, Mirai’s eyes narrowed, but he continued. “This is a young man who needs our help. Nezu thinks that the boy could be an experiment from...” Toshinori’s eyes darted around the empty sidewalk. It was barren, there wasn’t even a breeze. “From you-know-who.”

“That’s impossible.” Mirai shook his head. “He’s supposed to be dead, and I thought we dismantled all of his laboratories.”

“I thought so too, but recent events say otherwise. The Nomu at the USJ and Hosu had multiple quirks. You know only *he* could’ve done

something twisted like that. We've sorely missed something with Joker." Mirai stiffened, his expression going slack. "That's why we need to find this boy."

"Why?"

"It would be easier if we had your talents?"

"No, why did *you* ask to meet with me over this? What's your angle on this vigilante?"

"I..." Toshinori's eyes widened. "I won't lie to you. At first, I accepted the fate your quirk predicted for me. But, as I raise my successor and.... and as Joker continues his daring feats, I can't help but feel hopeful again. For the first time in five years, I want to fight against that fate you predicted."

"That's ludicrous." Mirai scowled. "You know how many times I've tried to change the future that my quirk shows me. *Every* single time it returns to the same conclusion."

Toshinori held out his hand. "There's one way to find out."

Mirai raised his hand, but he stopped. He curled it into a fist and dropped it at his side.

"I can't. I refuse to see you die all over again."

"You don't have to. Don't you find it strange that your quirk never revealed Joker to you? *Something* is different in the world, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Isn't that a sign that fate can change?"

"No." Mirai took a step back. "Everything is the same. Everything... *should be* the same..."

"Are you alright? You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine." He turned his back on Toshinori. "I've wasted enough time here."

“W-wait!” Toshinori latched on to his arm. “If you won’t do this for me, then do it for a young man in need. Would you really turn your back on a child, Sasaki? This boy is possibly younger than Mirio.”

“I...” Mirai stared at the ground, his lips twisting into a frown. “There is a lot between us, Toshinori, and you’re asking for a lot. Give me some time to think about it.” The man sighed. “That’s all I can promise right now.”

“I understand.”

Awkwardness hung between them as Toshinori let go.

“I should return to my agency.” Mirai said as he turned on his heel. “Despite everything, Toshinori, it was nice to see you.”

With that, the man left.

Toshinori watched until Mirai turned a street corner. He sighed, his heavy heart weighing him down as he dragged himself back to the cafe. He practically collapsed in the booth. Kurusu’s shadow fell over his table once more.

“I’m sorry it didn’t go well.” Kurusu said as he glanced at the payment. “Would you like a fresh cup of tea? That one is probably cold by now, and it looks like your friend left enough for another cup.”

Toshinori smiled. “Yes, thank you.”

Kurusu nodded as he took the bills and cleaned Mirai’s mug. The next cup of tea was warm and comforting, and he idly watched the rest of the cafe’s bustling activity as he waited out the sharp pain in his lungs. This cafe was nice.

Toshinori promised to come by more often.

"Finally!" Morgana cried as Akira wandered down the alley. "What took you so long?"

"More people came for the dinner rush, so there was a lot to clean up. It's not my fault. Anything exciting happen? Yatagarasu said that U.A. is pretty quiet without the students."

"Not really. It's pretty boring now that there aren't as many heroes to watch. I even took a cat nap to pass the time!" Morgana climbed up to Akira's shoulder when he walked by. "Any word from Idate?"

"I was about to check." Akira retrieved the burner, his eyes widening. "It looks like he has an update already. Did he even sleep? I'm going to call him."

Morgana leaned in so he could hear. The hero picked up after two rings.

"It's me." Akira donned his best 'Joker' voice. "Do we have any takers?"

"Some. I told them to be on immediate standby so we could meet up." The man said, *"Others wouldn't come without specific details for the mission. A few never responded at all."*

"That's fine. We can pull it off as long as we have enough manpower. I'll send you the meeting location."

"Wait. Are we meeting tonight?"

"Yes." Akira looked up to the fiery sky. "Midnight should be enough time for everyone. Is there a problem? Need I remind you that time is our enemy?"

"Of course not. I'll let everyone know." The man hesitated.

"Is there something else?"

"No. I'm just worried about you, that's all."

“You’re concerned about me? Why Ingenium, I’m actually touched.”

“Of course I’m worried. We’re setting up an illegal meeting between a vigilante and a group of heroes, even if the heroes don’t know it yet.” Tensei snorted. *“Are you sure you want to do this? What if it all goes down hill? What if you get hurt?”*

“I did my research and chose those who are more open minded towards vigilantism. Some newer to the concept than others.” Akira frowned. “If they can’t see the bigger picture, then I’ll handle it. You don’t need to worry.”

“... I hope you’re right .”

“I’ll send you the meeting location. I’m counting on you, *hero* .”

Akira hung up without another word. Morgana stayed quiet as he sent the address for a familiar abandoned building in Hosu. Neutral ground away from Musutafu.

“Well, we better get going.” Morgana said. “We don’t have much time.”

“I know. Manami called over my lunch break, and they’re packed up and ready to go. Although...”

“What is it?”

“Taneo hasn’t seen any action for a while. I might invite him.”

“Y-you...” Morgana rolled his eyes. “You’re serious, aren’t you? Why him?”

“I don’t see why not. He’s probably bored without us, we could just tell him to meet us in Hosu.”

“Ugh, whatever. Do what you want.” Morgana shook his head. “But we’re on the clock here, so you better hurry up!”

“Yeah, yeah. Slave driver.”

“What did you just call me!?”

“Nothing.” Akira oozed sarcasm. “I’ll get you sushi before we board the train. Extra fatty tuna. Sound good?”

Morgana’s mood lightened and he yammered on about tuna the whole way to the station.

Oho, the Caped Warrior gets their reveal next chapter! ;)

Hunt

Chapter 49: Hunt

“Nice to meet you, too.” Joker, ever the daring vigilante, smirked despite the danger. “Why don’t you hear me out before my friends turn violent? You know what I’m capable of, Hakamada Tsunagu. Make your choice.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, its a promise of mutual assured destruction.”

I'll put a trigger warning on here just in case, because while it doesn't go into explicit/graphic details or anything, this chapter does have a lot to do with human trafficking. Which is... not pretty.

On a happier note, we've reached some more crazy milestones!! Over 200k hits and 1k bookmarks?? I can hardly believe how much this story has grown, thank you guys so much for sticking with me through this journey! :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Izuku feverishly scribbled in his notebook as the light of his computer painted the room. He tapped his pen on the paper as he rewound the video, pausing at just the right moment to see Arsene’s strange attack.

“I wonder if that is some sort of dark energy? It’s different to anything Joker’s summons have done before.” He fast forwarded to Joker opening the safe, the vigilante had a subtle smirk as lightning

danced from his hand. “And now lightning, too. It doesn’t seem to hurt him, so he must have some sort of immunity or perfect control over it. How does he have such perfect control of his quirk when he’s only a teenager...? Just what did he have to go through?”

Izuku gripped his hair as he flipped back to a short list.

Seth, Egyptian God Of Storms and Chaos

Cerberus, Guard Dog of Hades

Titania, Queen of Faeries

Possibly Kohryu/Huang Long

Similarly a White Tiger, perhaps Byakko/Bai Hu of the Suu Ling?

‘Hee Ho’? Impish voice - who could it be??

‘Floating woman’ who healed Stain's victims

Arsene Lupin, Master Gentleman Thief

He was certain that there were more he was unaware of.

“Lightning, physical immunity, dark energy, ice-” He glanced at Titania’s name. “... Ice?”

Izuku opened a new tab and went to Joker’s infamous debut video in Hosu. Titania and Joker stood together, grinning as they were surrounded by beautiful crystal glaciers that smothered the flames. It didn’t seem to bother him.

“But...” Izuku furrowed his brow. “Todoroki’s ice really hurt him at the USJ. Why would Joker risk being around something that hurt him so much? Sero wasn’t in that much pain during his match with Todoroki at the Sports Festival. Wait, *Cerberus* .” His brain lit up with a hail of new theories. “Cerberus was the one who saved me from the USJ Nomu and disappeared after. If Joker still had Cerberus ‘active’ when

he vanished, then does that mean it was *Cerberus* who was weak to ice, not Joker? Does Titania have some ice immunity then? W-wait...”

The pen dropped from his hand. Izuku stared down at his notebook in shock.

“Vastly different powers. Different strengths and weaknesses. Different mythological beings. Then... that would mean that *each* summon has different abilities, different weaknesses. It’s so obvious looking back! That would provide so many different options for all sorts of scenarios! He’s already shown crowd control, solo battles, healing and support, the possibilities could be endless. A true jack of all trades!!”

A knock at his door made him jump, and his mother opened the door.

“Sweetie, it’s almost midnight!” She said with a stern face. “You should be in bed!”

“Already!? S-sorry, mom!” Izuku waved his arms as his face turned red. “I’m almost done, then I’ll go to bed.”

Inko sighed and shook her head with a smile. “Alright, but I’ll check on you again in ten minutes. If you’re not in bed then we won’t have katsudon for dinner tomorrow.”

Izuku chuckled. “I’ll be in bed! Promise!!

“Alright.” Inko’s smile filled his heart with warmth. “Good night, sweetie.”

“Night!”

Inko closed the door.

Izuku sighed in relief. He picked up his pen and wrote in bold letters at the top of the page. The *perfect* name had popped into his head.

Joker's Quirk - Wildcard

Keigo pulled the hood on tighter. His back itched from half of his feathers being so compacted under his 'disguise'. The other half were scatted in the sky, so as to not draw attention.

"I still think this is a bad idea, Rumi." He muttered. "How did you even get approval for this?"

Usagiya Rumi, AKA the hero Miruko, was equally disguised. She had tied her snow white hair in a bun and somehow, her fuzzy rabbit ears were squished beneath a black hat. Keigo pretended not to notice Joker's mask marked on the back. The oversized hoodie she wore looked comfortable, at least.

"Approval!? What's that?" She threw an arm over him and cackled. "Please, you don't need approval to have a fun night out with your best friend!"

He shrugged her off. "You know how they are, they wouldn't let me go out unless I had permission."

Rumi frowned. "You really need to get out from underneath their thumb. That's totally not fair... or *healthy* ." She sighed when he didn't say anything, instead he kept his eyes forward. "Fine. I asked Ryoto nicely, so he's covering for you. You know he won't tell anyone where we went!"

Keigo's mouth dropped. "Rumi-"

"You don't need to thank me!" She punched him in the shoulder. "Now c'mon! We're gonna be late!"

"Late for *what* ?" He squawked. "Why won't you tell me why we're in Hosu of all places? Why do we have to wear disguises? You know these clothes don't have my colors!"

Rumi looked up and down the street. She captured her bestie in a headlock and dragged him down an alley, knowing it was a shortcut to the meeting location. The bird struggled uselessly in her arms.

“Because I heard from the grapevine that there’s a secret mission!” Keigo finally wrestled himself free, and she cackled as he puffed his cheeks at her. “Nobody knows what it is, but it sounds fun! I heard that some other pros will be there too!”

“Let me get this straight.” Keigo pinched the bridge of his nose. “You accepted a mission but you don’t know the details? Are you sure this isn’t a stupid prank? Or, I don’t know, an *obvious trap* ?”

“The message came from Ingenium. Well, the former Ingenium.”

“I don’t know about this-”

“Crap!” Rumi checked her phone. “We’re gonna be late if we don’t hurry!”

Keigo yelped as she latched onto his arm and vaulted down the alleyway. He didn’t know why she was so excited about this, but at least his feathers would let him know if this turned into an ambush.

Joker stared at his trembling gloved hands, which hid how sweaty his palms were. He knotted them into fists before shoving them into his pockets. His heart pounded so loud that Mona could probably hear it. If not his heart, then perhaps his roiling stomach and how nausea crept at the back of his throat.

“Hey, we’ll get through this.” Mona whispered as he rubbed against Joker’s hair. “We totally have this in the bag! I have your back.”

Joker smiled. “Thanks, Mona.”

“Everyone will be gathering soon.”

Joker turned towards Tensei. La Brava, Gentle, and Taneo stood in the shadows behind him. The man himself didn't *seem* nervous, but Joker could tell that he was on high alert. Tensei glanced at the mouth of the alley, then smiled at Joker.

"I should say this first. I'll never be able to repay you for what you did for me and my family." Tensei bowed his head. "Thank you."

"You don't have to repay me for anything." Joker smirked. "Doing this is enough. It's not just Mona and I risking everything, but you're staking your entire livelihood to make sure that these people get rescued. That is what a real hero would do."

Tensei blinked several times. "I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything." Joker gently punched him on the shoulder. "Focus on the job instead."

"Right." Tensei's expression turned serious. "I'll go in first and give you a signal when it's your time to come in."

Joker nodded, and then Tensei ventured out to the streets.

A familiar half-finished apartment building was down the block, the same one they used as shelter during their hunt for Stain. It was a bit more filled out now, but far from completion.

Between using one full canister of Stealthanol to hide their presence, everyone having a spare Smoke Bomb, and Mona protected with both Magical and Physical Ointment, he felt as if they were ready. Well, as ready as they could be. This plan could still backfire. Joker himself donned the Caped Warrior as his current mask for extra protection, for the automatic buffs he carried might be a lifesaver.

"Would you stop fidgeting?" Mona whispered in his ear. "That's driving me crazy!"

"Sorry." He stopped tapping his foot. "I hope this goes down well."

“It will.” Taneo stated. “These heroes should cooperate once they know what’s at stake. But I gotta ask why you invited me to this party? You gave me quite the scare, you know.”

“Why not?” Joker tilted his head to the side. “We haven’t had a nice chat in a long time, and you could use some interesting news, no? You’ll have to stay back here with Gentle and La Brava, but the comms will let you listen in.”

“I wouldn’t be able to publish this without getting questioned, though.”

“Did you forget your alias, *T-san* ?” Joker teased.

Taneo scratched the back of his head, chuckling. “No.”

“I can help you set up a blog if that’s how you want to do it.” La Brava said. “It could be just as popular as Joker’s Spotlight account!”

“... I don’t know. To be honest, I thought you called me here for a much different reason.”

“What do you mean?” Mona narrowed his eyes. “Are you hiding something from us?”

Taneo gawked at the cat. “Huh, so rumors of your talking cat *are* true.”

“I’m not a cat!”

“Mona.” Joker scolded, but Mona didn’t relent. “He means no harm, really.”

“It’s okay, the little guy has every right to be suspicious. It’s not that I’m hiding anything.” Taneo leaned against the cold wall. “I feel responsible for part of this. You see, years ago Juzo News did a piece about a smuggling ring in Musutafu, which ended up in the group going underground before the heroes could take them down.”

“Do you think it’s the same one we’re after?” Joker asked.

“Possibly. It’s hard to imagine a crime group hiding under the shadow of the top hero school, but villains slip through the cracks more than people think. Soo, why did you invite me along for this party?”

“It depends.” Joker frowned. “Did you want to make an article about this? The heroes and I teaming up, that is.”

Taneo tapped his chin, frowning. He shook his head with a sigh. “No, having another big story about you this early wouldn’t be smart. It might be too much for people to handle.” Taneo looked to the ground and shoved his hands in his pockets. “The Yaoyorozu case is still fresh and it wouldn’t sit right with me if I repeated a mistake I made years ago.”

“I see your point.” Mona said as he flicked his tail. “Usually we’d wait for things to cool off before we do anything else, but it isn’t an option this time.”

“We could always do something else.” Taneo suggested.

Joker raised a brow. “What do you propose?”

“Depends.” Taneo scanned Joker from head to toe. “What do you want out of this? Why are you going so far that you are attempting to team up with *heroes* ? Heroes that could easily make this whole thing go south.”

Joker and Mona exchanged glances.

“We started our group to help people.” Joker’s eyes turned to the sky, smiling at some far off memory. “That’s been our goal all along.”

“I see.” Taneo sighed in relief, and Joker wondered if he didn’t just pass some secret test or something. “Then you already have your answer. We keep your involvement as quiet as possible.” Taneo

smirked at Joker. "Not that you need any more fame. Well, *infamy* in some people's eyes."

"Hmm, but doing absolutely nothing doesn't sit right with me." Gentle Criminal frowned. "We are trying to rescue people in dire straits. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"Good point. How about we raise awareness instead? Knowing the extent of human trafficking, and what dangers to look out for, could help people long term." He grinned at La Brava. "I could use this blog idea to do it."

"Given the lack of attention the missing people have received," Gentle said as he stroked his chin. "Something like this is sorely needed."

"Oh!" Mona's eyes sparkled. "That's a good idea!"

"And smart." La Brava matched Taneo's grin. "Doing an article might be too risky for Joker and these heroes anyway."

"Yep. Speaking of which," Joker raised a brow as Taneo's smirk widened. "I've been meaning to ask you if it was alright for me to write special reports about your exploits. It'll cover everything from the USJ to the present. This would be kept separate from this human trafficking case, and it'll be published long after things cool down."

"I don't see why not." Joker said with a half shrug.

"Sweet." Taneo laughed. "The return of T-san is at hand! I can't wait."

Joker turned his back on them. "It might be nice to be remembered once we're gone."

Joker said it under his breath, but not quietly enough. They didn't see the others stiffen as Tensei's voice shattered the shocked silence.

"*Everyone's here.*" He whispered. "*Are you ready?*"

“As ready as we’ll ever be.” Joker grabbed the briefcase at his feet. “Mona and I are on our way.”

“Okay.” The man took a breath. *“Just wait for my signal.”*

Tensei scanned the other heroes.

Ryukyu, Best Jeanist, Miruko, Hawks, and Gang Orca stood around in a group, whispering to one another, their eyes alert and bodies ready for action. He walked to the round table in the middle of the room and clapped his hands.

“Welcome, everyone.” Tensei said as they gathered around. “And thank you for coming on such a short notice.”

“Think nothing of it.” Ryukyu crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “But I believe I speak for everyone when I ask what you called us here for. These peculiar circumstances are suspicious.”

“Indeed.” Best Jeanist twirled a comb around his fingers and ran it through his immaculate hair. “I was curious because the details were so vague, but I know of your agency’s reputation. This must be important.”

“Hell yeah!” Miruko grinned and punched the air. “You have some sort of top secret info or something, right!?”

Hawks and the hulking Gang Orca remained silent.

“Yes, but this is a highly delicate matter. I appreciate that you’ve kept your discretion.” Tensei’s face hardened, and the others turned serious. “You already know that an informant came forward, he will explain everything in detail. I want everyone to keep an open mind when he comes in, alright?”

There was a general murmur of agreement. Tensei pressed a button on his communicator.

“We’re ready, you can-”

“I’m already here.”

A smooth, velvety voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. The other heroes paled as a figure emerged from the darkness, his long tailcoat blending into the shadows as if it were one and the same. A tiny feline was perched upon his shoulder, sharp intellect glimmering in its eyes.

Best Jeanist acted first.

The fabric of Joker’s tailcoat came alive like wriggling serpents, binding his arms and legs together, but he surprisingly kept his balance. Mona hissed as he jumped from Joker’s shoulder to stand in between them, a sharp whirlwind swirling through the room. The trio of colors flashing across Joker and Mona’s bodies were overlooked as a great blue pyre exploded behind Best Jeanist.

A dauntless young warrior in pure white armor twirled his legendary spear and jabbed it towards Best Jeanist’s neck, just a few millimeters from drawing first blood. His cape billowed and the embers dancing on the sudden breeze highlighted his dark hair with blue streaks, sparking the mad bloodlust in his eyes. The heroes fell into battle stances, but remained rooted to the spot.

“Stop!!” Tensei bolted beside Mona and held his arms out. “Everyone stand down! Best Jeanist, *please* .”

“First, tell me why *Joker* is here.” Best Jeanist’s eyes were at the spear tip at his neck. “Are you insane, Iida? Do you expect us work alongside *him* ?”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Joker, ever the daring vigilante, smirked despite the danger. “Why don’t you hear me out before my friends turn violent? You know what I’m capable of, Hakamada Tsunagu. Make your choice.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, its a promise of mutual assured destruction.”

The spear was as cold as ice, spreading frigid dread through his bloodstream. Nobody would be able to move fast enough if the blade sliced open his jugular. Slowly, the hero relaxed, his quirk with it. Joker rolled his shoulders and dusted himself off, but the summon was still there, his merciless eyes pinning the hero with absolute hatred.

“Joker.” Tensei turned to him with soft eyes. “You too.”

“Mona, Cu Chulainn, stand down.”

Mona, with hackles still raised, let the winds die.

The heroes breathed a sigh of relief as Cu Chulainn pulled his spear back. He jabbed the other end of the spear into the concrete with a sharp *clang*, bowed to Joker, and disappeared in a shower of azure embers. The overwhelming bloodlust lifted.

“Well,” Joker grinned as he stepped forward. “I was hoping for a warm welcome party, but not one *that* exciting.”

Tensei face palmed, but another hero walked towards them.

Mona arched his back and hissed as Gang Orca stopped in front of Joker, towering over him by several inches. Gang Orca crossed his arms and stared down into Joker’s golden eyes, his own blood red gaze unwavering. Joker craned his neck up to meet him head on, grinning. One heartbeat passes, then two. Tensei felt the sweat beading on his neck as the staring contest went on for an age.

“Hey,” Miruko stage whispered to Hawks. “What do you think they’re doing?”

Hawks was too locked in shock to guess.

Finally, Gang Orca relented with a toothy smile. "Can I ruffle your hair?"

Any remaining tension popped like a balloon. Miruko stifled her cackles as other jaws went to the floor.

Joker's expression faltered. "Run that by me again?"

"Your hair." Gang Orca hummed and flexed clawed hands large enough to crush skulls. "It's a lot fluffier than it appears to be on Spotlight. It looks soft, too. I'm happy that you take your hygiene seriously. Hair like yours requires a lot of care. Isn't that right, Jeanist?"

Joker could practically feel Mona's soul leaving his body. He scanned the other heroes. Best Jeanist didn't answer, his eyes piercing through Joker, while the others were about to pass out from shock.

"Perhaps showing a bit of softness would calm them down?" Arsene suggested.

"Arsene is right. The hero before us is also tense, but he is allowing both parties to be open and vulnerable without conflict." Kohryu whispered as soft as a roll of thunder. *"Show him a bit of trust and the rest should lower their guard."*

Joker cleared his throat. "Knock yourself out, big guy?"

Tensei said nothing as he noticed Joker's hands shaking.

Joker stiffened as one of Gang Orca's gargantuan hands lay atop his head, almost consuming his floofy hair entirely. Gang Orca bore an oddly soft gentleness as he ruffled Joker's hair. A spark of warmth settled in both of their hearts, but Joker would be the last to admit it.

"Yes, just as soft as I thought it would be." Gang Orca's hand rested on Joker's shoulder as he looked to the other heroes. "I will listen to

what this brave young man has to say. What about the rest of you?"

Ryukyu gawked at them. Hawks was bone white, eyes wide, and thankfully nobody else saw the sweat on his brow. Miruko, however, matched Joker's grin with one of her own.

"Hell yeah!!" Miruko stomped towards them, literally bouncing with excitement. "I can't believe you're the one that actually called us here, Joker! Can I pet Mona!? Can we spar!?"

Mona's icy glare stabbed Miruko, but she didn't notice.

"Mona doesn't like to be petted, and I would usually accept sparring with such a beauty," Joker said with a wink. "But unfortunately we're here for business."

"Aw, fine!" She walloped him on the shoulder. "I'll take a rain check, but I'm not gonna back down from a challenge!"

"Noted." Joker chuckled as he rubbed his arm. Mona scrambled up to Joker's shoulder as he walked towards the round table. "Oh, and Ryukyu?"

Ryukyu flinched as Joker stared at her.

"I saw your conference and I accept your apology. It means a lot that you're here tonight." He held out his hand over the table. "Truce?"

Ryukyu's jaw dropped to the floor. She looked from his open hand and into his golden eyes. This boy was being genuine. There wasn't an inkling of that cocky brat she encountered on the rooftops in Musutafu. A strange warmth flooded her heart as she took his gloved hand.

"Y-yeah." They firmly shook. "Truce."

"Great! Now, to business." The others gathered around as Joker set the briefcase on the table, Orca was a stout pillar between he and

Jeanist. "I have a folder in here for each of you. I'll explain the details of the mission-"

"Mission?" Best Jeanist asked. "What sort of mission?"

"Rescue." Joker said as he popped it open. "More importantly, we'll be dismantling several illegal smuggling rings and saving people they kidnapped. But before we start, does anyone want to leave? I wouldn't blame you. Like Tensei, you could be risking your entire livelihoods by just being here."

Nobody moved. If anything, Hawks stared at him as if he had hung the moon.

"Good." Joker handed the first folder to Ryukyu. "This one is an illegal fighting ring in Shizuoka. Their usual targets are beggars, teenage runaways, people in poverty. They use them as..." Disgust fell over Joker's expression, "'Entertainment.' It doubles as a gambling ring where people bet on the winner of the death matches."

Ryukyu swallowed as she took the folder. Joker glanced at Gang Orca beside him, his expression grim.

"Child prostitution ring in Kagoshima." He said. "I shouldn't have to explain."

Gang Orca's growl rumbled the whole table as he accepted the folder and tore it open. The whale man exhumed silent fury as he flipped through the information. It was the sort of deceptively calm, quiet anger that could bring down a mountain. Joker didn't feel sorry for these villains as he slid the next file towards Best Jeanist.

"Another smuggling ring in Hiroshima. Their favorites are tourists coming from overseas. They strip them of their identity and ship them out of the country for all sorts of vile reasons."

Best Jeanist furrowed his brow as he took the folder, and Joker turned towards the final two.

“Miruko, Hawks.” Hawks nearly jumped out of his skin. “Yours will be part of the same group of black market organ harvesters. Their main hubs are located in Kyoto and Tokyo. They keep their captives alive as long as they can, but new ‘donors’ are never in short supply.”

“I’ll kick their ass!” Miruko swiped one of the folders. “Just point me in the right direction!”

Joker smiled as he held out the last folder to Hawks. A moment passed, but Hawks didn’t take it. The man was the personification of a blue screen.

“What’s wrong, Hawks?” Joker gestured to Mona. “Cat got your tongue?”

Mona huffed as Hawks snapped out of his stupor. He slapped on a grin as he grabbed the folder with both hands.

“Of course not!” He chirped. “I’m just thinking how I’ll be able to take them down before Miruko.”

“Like hell you will! You want to bet!?”

Hawks felt a prickle down his spine as Joker’s eyes sharpened. It was the same sort of look he got from Kunikazu, full of daggers that pierced through any facade he put in place. It was gone as fast as it came, leaving Hawks a bit off kilter.

“This mission will commence in 48 hours.” Joker said as he looked across the table. “It’s a simultaneous attack that will eliminate all groups and ensure the hostages’ safety. I’ve included communicators in each of your files so that we can stay in touch. You will check in one hour before go time, and I’ll give the final signal to attack.”

“Wait a second.” Hawks glanced at the briefcase. “I see one more file. What will you be doing during this?”

Joker smirked. "The final group is a quirk smuggling ring. I'll take care of it. Any other questions?"

"Yes." Best Jeanist flipped through the missing posters in his file. "How do we know that this information is accurate? This could be a wild goose chase, or a trap for all we know."

"There are detailed blueprints of their hideouts, alongside the names of most ringleaders. Contacts. Possible safe house locations. Search up each and every one of these missing people yourself. You'd be the first heroes to actually give a damn about them." Joker lost his mirth. "I made sure that my intel is genuine."

"Then you're doing this to get more fame?" Best Jeanist asked. "Wasn't taking down the Yaoyorozu family good enough for you?"

Ryukyu looked up from her files, eyes wide. "Jeanist!"

"What? It's an honest question."

"You're right to be concerned." Joker shook his head. "But I want to keep my involvement in this case as quiet as possible."

"Why did you target the Yaoyorozu family?" Gang Orca asked, his voice lacked any hostility.

"Let me ask this instead. What's the price you would pay to save your loved ones?" Joker placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "Would you go bankrupt to pay a ransom? Sell your soul to the devil for power? Work yourself to the bone trying to rescue them by yourself?"

The heroes tore their eyes away from the files to stare at him.

Tensei furrowed his brow as Joker looked these heroes in the eye. The golden brilliance of his gaze shown that he was no mere minor, this was someone who was wise beyond his years, most likely forced to grow up far too early. His stomach churned as he

wondered how Joker came to be this way. He pushed the thoughts aside to listen.

“When I look around this table, I see some of the best heroes that Japan has to offer.” Joker held up his arms. “Will you work alongside me, or will you turn your back on those who need help? Can you throw yourselves down in front of their loved ones, *beg* them for forgiveness if you choose to do nothing?”

Silence. A crunch of paper broke the spell as Ryukyu tightened her grip on her folder.

“I’m in.” Miruko announced as all playfulness melted away. “I won’t turn away from people who need help!”

“Same.” Ryukyu tucked the thick file under her arm. “I’m not letting them get away with this.”

Gang Orca’s piercing red eyes smoldered. “These wretches will pay for harming innocent children!”

“... Alright. I’ll lend my aid.” Best Jeanist said. “But I find it hard to believe that all of this was happening right under our nose.”

“I can.” Hawks glowered at his folder. “People pretend that these problems don’t exist so that they can continue living their lives in peace, even if it is fake.”

“You’ll join in too, birdie?” Joker asked, grinning.

“Yep. And Birdie? *Really* ?” Hawks winked at Joker. “At least call me something cool, like Raptor.”

“Raptor sounds lame!” Miruko cried.

“How dare you! It’s totally a cool name!”

“Enough.” Gang Orca sighed. “We’re not here to play games.”

“I agree, but I have one last question.” Best Jeanist took the black device from his folder. “How would these cover such long distance? We’re talking about the distance between entire prefectures.”

“That’s where I come in.” Tensei said. “My agency will be a hub to manage our communications.”

“We’ll be using my specially encrypted network. We’ve already tested it with Tensei, so I promise that it works. Anything else? No? Then let’s adjourn for the night.” Joker grabbed the briefcase. “Oh, and if you thought you could keep these little trinkets or use that program against me, you’re wrong. Those will self destruct after the mission is cleared and the virus will delete all traces of itself. Have fun!”

Tensei already felt the growing migraine as the heroes held the folders away from them. Joker turned on his heel to leave, smirking.

“Joker, wait.” The vigilante glanced at Ryukyu with a raised brow. “Could I talk to you... alone?”

Joker narrowed his eyes. Mona tapped his tail against Joker’s back. He wouldn’t allow his partner to be *completely* alone, and their personas wouldn’t allow them to be harmed.

“Sure.” Joker gestured at the exit. “Shall we?”

Tensei watched them leave with a knot in his stomach.

Joker walked beside Ryukyu as they trekked down an alley. The hero stayed silent, but she could tell that Joker was watching her from the corner of his eye. The feline was no different, except it stared her down head on.

“Joker,” Ryukyu ducked her head. “I’m sorry.”

“I already accepted your apology.” Joker smirked. “Or did you forget our truce already?”

“No, I felt that I had to tell you in person.” She sighed. “To be honest, I believe a lot of heroes forget the human element that comes with our job as heroes. When it was revealed that you were only a *minor*, well...” She shook her head. “It was earth-shattering, to put it lightly.”

“What’s your point?”

“Tell me the truth, kiddo.” She stopped at a fork in the alley. Joker froze beside her, eyes wide. “Is somebody forcing all of this on you?”

Mona flicked his ears, his blue eyes sparkling.

“No?”

“Are you getting enough to eat?” She looked him up and down. “That fancy costume of yours makes it hard to tell.”

“I have a decent diet, thank you very much.”

“Uh huh, sure. Do you have a safe place to stay? You *are* getting enough sleep, aren’t you?”

“What are you, my mother?”

If she didn’t know better, she would think that Mona was shaking with suppressed laughter.

“No, of course not! I’ve been told that I have a soft spot for kids.” She gently smiled. “My intern is about your age, and if she were in your position then I would worry for her all the same.”

“You don’t need to worry about me, *hero* .” Joker turned away and faced the right fork. “Just focus on the job at hand, alright? This was a nice chat, but we have to part ways here. See ya!”

Ryukyu almost reached out to him, but thought better of it. She watched him until he melded into the darkness. Ryukyu turned to the left fork with a long sigh.

“I’m sure you make a lot of people worry, kiddo.”

“You okay, Birdie?” Rumi teased. “You usually make that face when you’re constipated.”

“I’m not constipated!” Keigo stammered as he hugged the folder to his chest. “I’m just thinking about Joker.”

“Right!? He was *awesome*! I didn’t think he’d be so terrifying in person. I got actual goosebumps, Keigo! *Goosebumps* !! Too bad I couldn’t fight him. He even let Orca ruffle his hair! I’m so jealous.”

“Of course you’d want to fight him.” Keigo huffed.

“So what about him makes you have...” She gestured to his whole body. “*That* all over your face?”

He stopped, and she walked a few more steps before doing the same. Her brows furrowed as he looked skywards.

“My feathers. You know how they work?”

Rumi rolled her eyes. “Of course, I’ve heard the explanation a dozen times over!”

“They never detected him. At all.”

Rumi blinked, her eyes widening.

“His footsteps, breathing, heart rate, even his *voice* were all non-existent for my quirk. Same for Mona and... what was it, Cu Chulainn? I scrambled my feathers around the building when they left, but they were *gone* . It sounded as if Ryukyu was having a conversation with herself.” Keigo looked at Rumi, hints of genuine astonishment struck his eyes. “As if he was never there in the first place.”

“Ooh? Do you think Joker’s a ghost!? Oh my god, he’s literally a *phantom thief* !”

“Rumi!” Keigo threw up his hand. “This is serious!”

“Calm down.” She walked over and nudged him on the shoulder. “I’ve heard from other reports that Joker has a way to completely mask his presence. Not even Hound Dog could pick up his scent at Musutafu General.”

“It’s one thing to hide your *scent*, but it’s a whole other ordeal to completely wipe your presence. What if…”

A moment passes. Rumi tilted her head to the side.

“What if… what?”

“It’s nothing.” Keigo shook his head. “Can you do me a favor?”

“What?”

He shoved his folder in her arms. “Whatever happens, make sure that you burn these for me.”

“Uh…” She blinked several times. “Don’t you need this?”

“No, I’ve already memorized everything.” He hunched in on himself as he looked to the sky. “Come on, it’s almost day break already.”

“Sweet!” Her confusion was thrown aside with a bright grin. “Are you up for pancakes!?”

“I’m more of a waffle person.”

“How dare you!! Let me explain why pancakes are obviously the superior choice!”

Rumi’s tirade of Waffles Vs. Pancakes fell deaf on his ears. Instead, his thoughts swirled back to Joker. The vigilante accomplished the

impossible . His quirk was supposed to be infallible for detection, from the calmest heartbeat of a shadowy assassin to the ragged breathing of a civilian buried thirty feet under rubble. *How* did Joker bypass it?

It left him... unsettled. Worse yet, Kunikazu is going to be *furious* when he learns of what happened tonight, and of what's to go down within two days time. Keigo already felt the heat cooking his insides. He'd keep it hidden as long as he was able, but...

As the weight of several lives hung within his grasp, he knew that any torture Kunikazu came up with would be worth it.

Akira yawned as the morning crowd died down.

"You look exhausted." Risumi frowned. "Are you sure you don't want to call it a day and go home?"

"I would rather be working." Akira shook his head. "I'd be too restless if I stayed home. I'll get some good sleep tonight, I promise."

"... If you're sure."

Akira kept himself busy with his usual duties. The constant chatter of a full cafe set his heart at ease, and the way Sojiro's curry made people smile gave him the energy he needed to keep working. He wondered how Sojiro would react to this place. He would probably be in disbelief. Then again, he might get a bigger kick when he found out about a world full of super powered people.

Unfortunately, his thoughts of Sojiro were rudely interrupted.

Akira froze at the happy, twinkling song outside. Yesterday, he convinced Risumi to hang some wind chimes outside of the shop. Summer steadily approached and it would make the customers happy, at least that's what he told her.

In truth, it was for another reason. They were *especially* loud when the wind hit them just right. On cue, familiar figures walked down the sidewalk, visible through the window.

Aizawa and Tsukauchi trudged in. Aizawa's eyes swept through the cafe until he landed on Akira. He didn't know what to feel when Aizawa's eyes softened before he followed Tsukauchi to table sixteen. Akira felt a hard stare prick on his scalp, and he turned his head to see Risumi glancing between he and the new customers. Fury lay hidden in her eyes.

Akira swallowed as he forced himself to step towards table sixteen.

"What do you want?" Akira asked, his smile sharp enough to draw blood.

"I'll take whatever you recommend." Aizawa said as he leaned back into the booth. "But hold the sugar."

Tsukauchi smiled kindly. "I'll take the same."

"Fine."

Akira's heart pounded as he went back to the counter, hands shaking as he prepared the drinks.

"Akira." Risumi put a gentle hand on his, warmth spreading over his clamminess. "Say the word and I'll kick them out."

Akira froze, wide eyed. "What?"

"I remember what happened last time they came in." Her cheeks grew red, her hands hot with subdued rage. "I won't allow you to be harassed. I don't care if I have to throw out All Might himself, but know that you are *safe* here. They have no right to intrude on that."

"They're fine for now." His other hand squeezed hers. "I can handle it."

“Are you sure?” He nodded. Risumi pursed her lips. “Alright, but I’ll be watching your back.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem, sweetheart.”

The pressure crushing his lungs abated. He went back to table sixteen with darker roasts, bitter without the aid of cream and sugar. Much like Aizawa himself. Akira set the drinks at the edge of the table and walked away without so much as looking at them.

“Wait.” Aizawa said. “A word.”

“The nerve!” Titania said. *“Are you sure they don’t need Atomic Blasts to the face, Trickster?”*

“Be calm.” Arsene whispered. *“We don’t know what they want.”*

“Ooh, how about we play with them instead!? Please?” The Bubbly One fluttered. *“C’mon! It could be fun!”*

Akira swept their voices aside.

“What do you want?” Akira glared at them. “You know the regulars won’t sit by and let someone harass their favorite barista. I can get you kicked out. Understand?”

Tsukauchi looked out across the buzzing cafe. The whole room would rally against them in the blink of an eye, and not his detective badge nor Aizawa’s hero licence would save them. He gave Aizawa a warning glance.

“We understand, Kurusu.” Aizawa kept his voice low so that the cafe ambiance covered it. “I promise this cafe is a safe place for you. Haven’t I proved that I don’t make promises on a whim?”

“You can say that your promises aren’t empty when you have nothing to gain from them.”

Aizawa raised a brow. "What would I be gaining?"

"Please." Akira rolled his eyes. "That whole spiel with Nezu and the mayor was to gain my trust, wasn't it? It's some grand ploy so that I can come along whenever Nezu gets that fancy program approved."

Tsukauchi shook his head. "That's not what we-"

"No?" Akira's eyes flicked to Tsukauchi. "So I'll have a choice? I'll be able to come and go freely, and my *friends* won't be hampered by suppressants?"

"We can work it out with Nezu." Aizawa said. "I'm sure he would let you-"

Akira's patience finally snapped.

"You don't get it, do you?" Akira spat, his golden eyes stabbing into Aizawa. "You said U.A. was a safe place, but when I look at that school all I see is another prison. I'm not some damn charity case that needs to be *protected*. So either you start treating us, *all of us*, with the respect and basic human decency we deserve, or you can kiss your little master plan goodbye."

"Listen here, Problem Child. *You're* the one who targeted one of my students. *You're* the one who's causing this chaos." Aizawa said, brows furrowed. "U.A. is your only chance to avoid a prison sentence. You can throw whatever temper tantrum you want, but you're the one who's breaking the law. You can't avoid the consequences forever."

"Aizawa!" Tsukauchi hissed under his breath. "That's enough. Kurusu-"

"Everything has a price, Eraserhead, and it was about time they paid their dues."

Tsukauchi paled. "What do you mean by that?"

“Look, I’m sorry for what Momo has to go through. But I’m *not* sorry that I’m doing your jobs better than you.” Akira reached into his pocket and flicked something on the table. “Here, you forgot this last time.”

Whatever Aizawa was about to say died when a wad of bills, 5000 yen to be exact, landed under his nose. The clip holding the money together glimmered dangerously, reminding Aizawa of the tip of Joker’s dagger.

Aizawa blinked at him. “Kid, this is yours.”

“I don’t want it.”

Maybe Akira said it a bit too loud, maybe he didn’t care. Multiple eyes were upon them. A few sized up Aizawa and Tsukauchi, and the two men felt as if they had wandered into a lion’s den. One red haired woman held a caustic glare from her booth.

Then, the unexpected happened.

Akira turned to the crowd with a sunny grin and waved his hand, not an ounce of the vitriol was on his face. Wiped clean like a fresh mask.

Tsukauchi had to keep his jaw from dropping as the rest of the cafe settled back to normal, and Akira turned back towards them. A shadow had fallen over Akira’s face as he adjusted his glasses, his sunny smile honed into a razor sharp smirk.

“Enjoy the coffee.”

He left them alone with the grace of a phantom weaving through the shadows. Akira had righteous vindication in his heart. Most of his personas brimmed with satisfaction as Aizawa released a long, tired sigh. Another, however, bore disappointment. Kohryu’s discontentment trickled through their bond and a sourness invaded Akira’s chest.

For some reason, it stung worse than Sojiro's anger.

The vindication died, reborn as shame when he returned to the counter. It didn't escape Risumi.

"Are you alright?"

"*Fine* ." He busied himself with washing dishes.

"Dear, that plate will break if you scrub it any harder." Risumi leaned into the counter next to him. "Your conversation didn't look happy, and don't think I didn't notice the sudden change in atmosphere. I'm serious when I say I'll kick them out."

"It's fine. As long as they pay for the coffee."

"They better, otherwise they'll never step foot in this establishment again. Not without some bodily injury."

Akira snorted. "One of them is a licensed hero, you know."

"Doesn't matter." Risumi rolled up her sleeves. "It never stopped me from kicking out rude customers before. Maybe I'll drag Ayumu into the fight. What say you, Akira? Do you think we could take them?"

Akira looked over his shoulder to table sixteen.

An all too familiar, tired expression donned on Aizawa's face. He saw it before, on...

Akira narrowed his eyes at the man who was supposed to be... the Hierophant. Sojiro. His *real* family. He who taught Akira to make coffee and curry. The one who pretended to be brash and not give a damn, and yet the man never left his side after Sae brought him back, drugged and beaten. He didn't know if he felt the man's hand resting on his head while he was sleeping off the drugs, or if it was just a figment of some dream.

"Akira?"

"It would be an entertaining battle." Akira said.

Risumi chuckled, but her face softened. "Do you need a break?"

"... Yes, please."

"Alright, the office is always open."

"Thank you."

Akira dried his hands and disappeared down the hallway.

Meanwhile, the two men stared down at their lukewarm mugs, fully feeling the pointed stare of Shinsou behind the counter. It was as if they were insects to be pinned on a board. Aizawa sank lower in his seat.

"He wasn't kidding when he said they were protective." Aizawa muttered.

"Nope."

"What did we get ourselves into?"

"I don't know. You're the one who made him mad."

"I was only telling him the hard truth. It's illogical to tell him pretty lies when we know what's at stake." Aizawa swirled his cup around. "And yet he still played us like a damn fiddle."

"Yep. As always."

"Are you going to drink your coffee?"

"Aizawa." Tsukauchi snatched his cup away. "We should just leave."

"I'm not going anywhere until I finish this coffee." Aizawa huffed.

"We'll need it for whatever this kid has cooked up next."

Tsukauchi massaged his forehead with a sigh. They were already weary because of the budding Yaoyorozu case, but he felt in his bones that Joker already had something new up his sleeve. What did he mean that everything had a price? What did that have to do with whatever he has planned next?

This was going to be *long* week.

“You’re sulking again.”

Arsene looked up to Yatagarasu, who was perched atop his hat.

“I am not... *sulking* .” Arsene said. “I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

“You should already know. I am thou, thou art I.”

“Yes. But it might sooth your worries if you speak it aloud, no?”

“Alright. Suspicion plagues my mind. While the information Giran supplied was satisfactory, and we have the manpower to take these crooks down, he did not give us the full picture. What of the League? What of the missing Quirkless people?” Arsene shuffled his wings and glanced over the mindscape. “We’re sorely missing something with that shady swindler.”

“I know. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” The Trickster’s voice floated through their minds. *“For now, we focus on rescuing Haru-san and the others.”*

“Of course.” Arsene’s heart was alight with excitement. “The hour of their reckoning draws near.”

“I’m about to check in with the other heroes. Yatagarasu, can you scout around the location in the meantime?”

“At once!”

A shower of glittering sapphires vaulted Yatagarasu into reality.

Arsene studied the others as palpable excitement tingled on their nerves. Although Alice, Seth, and Cu Chulainn were one with curdling bloodlust, the others looked upon Arsene with united determination. Even Orpheus, as shy and reserved as he had been, inched closer to the center of the mindscape.

It was showtime once more.

They waited on a rooftop in the poorer district of Musutafu. Their targets lay inside a small, shabby warehouse. A few thugs walked the perimeter, unaware. Guilt poured over Joker's heart. They had passed through this area on their way to meet Giran, unknowing of the suffering that occurred right under their noses.

Mona nudged him and gestured to La Brava with a flick of his tail.

La Brava looked up from her screen and gave him a thumbs up.

"The program is online." Tensei said. *"All sides are in the green."*

"Is everyone in position?"

"Raptor, checking in. Some of my feathers are inside the building, just awaiting your signal, Joker."

"Wow, you're using that name!?" Miruko cackled. *"I'm ready too! Just say the word and I'll kick some ass! You better pay for my dinner tonight, 'Raptor!'"*

"Nah, you'll be paying for mine." Hawks' voice seeped with a sarcastic grin. *"I'll take three orders of fried chicken."*

"You-!"

"Please, can we be a little serious?" Best Jeanist whispered. *"I'm in position, and my sidekicks are quietly surrounding the building. We'll*

be ready to strike within minutes.”

“Any trouble on your end, Jeanist?” Joker asked.

“No. A few of my sidekicks were concerned when I explained this plan, but I did as you asked and researched the missing people. It... checked out.”

“Ryukyu, reporting in-”

“Is that them!?” A girl's voice trilled through the comms. *“Can I ask questions? How did Joker get this information? Why did he choose to partner with us specifically? Will we get in trouble for this? Can you tell them I said hi? Can I get Joker's autograph for Suneater!?”*

“Nejire-chan, enough.” Ryukyu scolded. *“We're on an important mission.”*

“Oh, alright.”

Ryukyu sighed. *“As I was saying, we're in position. I called in a favor and have the aid of the police, too.”*

Joker snorted. But one hero was silent.

“Orca, are you there?” He frowned. “Orca?”

Static crackled as the hero let out a frustrated breath.

“I'm in position with my sidekicks.” Gang Orca's growl was as deep as Kohryu's. *“We witnessed these villains bring in a fresh 'shipment'. How much longer must we wait to enact justice?”*

“Not long. Hang in there, big guy.” He shut off his side of the link and smiled at Gentle. “You remember the plan?”

“Yes.” Gentle knelt on the edge of the roof. “You and I will take out any guards on the streets. You'll infiltrate the building while I wait outside and make sure that none of the villains escape.”

“I’ll support you from up here!” La Brava said. “There’s not much for security around here, but there are some surveillance cameras. I’ll be helping Ingenium with my program, too.”

“Right. I’ll stick with Joker.” Mona turned grave. “Our top priority is rescuing the hostages. Don’t forget that.”

Gentle and La Brava nodded. Finally, the bell tolled on midnight. Joker took a breath and grinned, tapping back into the comm link.

“It’s time.” He waved an arm, a signal that heralded the villains’ doom. “Everyone, commence the attack!”

Gang Orca’s first sound wave blew a hole in the side of the building, where dust plumed alongside the march of his sidekicks. His hulking shape appeared like a herald of doom. The warehouse was frozen in a moment of time as he quickly scanned the room.

The warehouse smelled of filth. Children, shackled, chained, dirt stained, were cramped together as if they were mere cattle. Tags were punctured into their ears. Dull embers of hope sparked in their eyes. On the opposite end were several thugs in all shapes and sizes, looking on in horror.

Time resumed as a man let out a battle cry and charged, his arm morphing into a metal hammer, but he was no match for Gang Orca’s second sound wave. His heart hurt when the screams of children accompanied the destruction and crackle of broken pavement.

“Alpha team, secure the children!” Gang Orca’s voice boomed. “Beta team, hold off the villains and cover Alpha team!”

“Yes sir!!”

Chaos consumed the warehouse with a bout of flashing, deadly quirks. Gang Orca leapt forth and countered a hulking villain made

completely of stone as he charged towards team Alpha. Their fists clashed with tremendous force, and they were locked in a battle of attrition, other bodies sped past them as the ensuing battle continued.

“What sort of villain targets children?” Gang Orca growled. “Only true cowards go after the young ones.”

The villain only licked his lips, and disgust coursed through the hero. Rage set his blood aflame as stone skin was broken by a blast of sound.

Truly, these heathens would experience the wrath of an unstoppable tsunami.

“Commence the attack!”

He clicked the Emergency Location button on his wrist. Authorities and ambulances would arrive within minutes.

Then, Hawks dropped from the sky.

The wind whistled around him as he plummeted, a swarm of fiery feathers twirled around him at his beck and call. Screams echoed from inside the building as villains were attacked by the darting feathers already inside.

He grinned as he rolled into a landing, wielding two of his largest pinions like blades. The back door to the ‘abandoned’ building was sliced open to reveal the chaos. People were scrambling around in a fruitless effort to escape his feathers. A man turned to him, and shouted. A sound that was silenced as his feathers pinned him to a wall.

“Sorry, I don’t have time to deal with any of you.” He casually walked past. “I have a bet to win.”

He crossed a hallway and into the next room, following the two dozen panicked heartbeats thrumming against his senses. A rusty door with screeching hinges led to a basement. Damp, humid. Oddly sticky. Uncomfortable for any feathered folk. He got to the bottom of the stairs when a cry rang out.

“Don’t move!!”

Hawks stopped in front of a man holding a young girl. He wore a sorry excuse for a doctor’s robe, the ends of his sleeves lightly splattered with a dark brown color. The tips of his fingernails were long and hollow like needles. The points were jabbed into the girl’s neck.

“Hey, now you don’t really want to-”

“Shut up!” The man’s eyes were wild in desperation. “I-if you value this girl’s life, then you’d pack up and leave us alone!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, buddy.” Hawks shook his head. “Both of your operations are busted. The one in Tokyo is being dismantled as we speak.”

“What!? How did you even find us?” The man took a step back, dragging the girl with him. Hawks kept a neutral face as her eyes were watery and pleading. “We’ve been covering our tracks for years.”

“Who knows?” Hawks shrugged. “Maybe you weren’t as careful as you thought, maybe somebody sold you out.” His eyes flicked down to the girl, then back to the man. “I’ll give you a choice. Let the girl go and turn yourself in. Work with me, and maybe your jail time would be lessened.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then we do it the hard way.” Hawks took a step, and the man startled.

“D-don’t! Take one more step and I’ll pump this little girl so full of drugs she’ll be dead within minutes!”

“Go ahead.”

Both the man and the girl paled.

“Wh-what?”

“I said go ahead.” There was a rustle overhead, and they looked up to see scores of feathers floating above, their jagged tips aimed at the man. “Trained medics are waiting just outside this building. She’ll be in safe hands the minute you inject her, and then you’ll be reduced to a bloody pin cushion. Is that what you want? Is your life really worth it?”

As if to prove his point, the feathers inched closer. The call of sirens echoed overhead.

“Well?”

Hawks saw it. That mad gleam that appears in a villain’s eyes when they’ve lost the fight, and didn’t care who went down with them. His feathers acted first. There was a *crack* of broken metal as the villain’s syringe fingers were shattered, a hail of vibrant crimson separated the villain and his hostage.

Hawks rushed forth with open arms to catch her, while the villain was pinned to the wall by his clothes. The man struggled before the fight slowly left his body, and tears slowly streamed down his face. Hawks spared the man no pity as he set the girl down and gently ruffled her hair.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, you were very brave. Are you injured?”

“N-no.” She wiped her eyes and sniffled. “What now?”

“Now we’ll rescue the others. Do you know where they’re being held?”

She nodded, and he took her hand in his as she led him deeper into the basement. He already knew where they were, but he wanted to get the girl away from her tormentor. The next room was dark, and the scent of rusty metal assaulted his senses.

People were kept in cages like animals, but their dirty faces brightened when he entered with the girl. The remaining feathers clinging to his back shot off to undo the locks. Hawks did a quick sweep of the victims. Most of them seemed to be in one piece, but he didn’t know what internal damage there might be.

“It’s alright, everyone.” Hawks said as the doors screeched open. “You’re all safe and sound, now. Does anybody need help walking to the surface?”

A woman that was all skin and bone was the first to approach.

“W-we’re missing one.” She pointed to a door at the other side of the room. “They took him in there a few hours ago. Th-that’s where they.... where they...”

Hawks slowly placed a hand on her shoulder, and smiled. “It’s okay. I’ll check on him. Wait here.”

She nodded, and Hawks ventured forth on his own. A rock settled in his stomach when he approached the door, his hand reaching for the doorknob. Hawks stepped inside. There were horrific tools and instruments littered about, and a still shape was covered on an autopsy table.

Hawks didn’t need his feathers to tell him that there were no signs of life.

He turned away with a lump lodged in his throat. He reached up to his borrowed communicator.

“Miruko, are you done yet?”

“Raptor!! Hang on- LUNA RING!!!” Crashing noises accompanied the panicked wails of several villains. *“Don’t tell me you’re finished already!?”*

“Yep.” More noises, both from the communicator and the floor above. “The villains are taken down and the victims secured. The cavalry is here to take care of the rest.”

“Luna Arc!” More thundering collisions, before it went silent. *“Aw man, and I was almost done here! I guess I’m paying for dinner, huh?”*

“Eh, can we wait?” Hawks’ stomach roiled at the horrifying scene behind him. “I’m not feeling very hungry right now.”

“Fine! Name a time and place whenever you’re ready!”

“Will do. Any word from Joker?”

“Nope! The others are still attacking as we speak. Hopefully it won’t take too much longer!”

“Yeah. See you on the other side?”

“You know it!!”

He left the horrible room without another word.

One man startled as another suddenly slumped over onto the pavement.

“H-hey, are you okay?” He shook his comrade’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

A shadow jumped down from above. He recognized the flowing tailcoat and golden eyes. He cursed under his breath as he startled

backwards, reaching for his phone.

Joker waved. “Yo.”

“J-Joker is here! Hello!?” He furiously poked the screen. “Why doesn’t anybody pick up!?”

“I’m afraid that won’t work.” Joker said, smirking. “Did somebody forget to pay the phone bill?”

The man threw the device down and bolted. Joker sighed when he reached the end of the alley, but crashed face first into an invisible, stretchy barrier. He fell on his behind, gaping. Mona rolled his eyes as a Miracle Punch knocked him out cold.

“Oh dear.” Gentle Criminal came around the corner. “That’ll hurt in the morning.”

“That takes care of the goons outside.” Joker said.

“Yes.” Gentle stared at the unconscious men. “Leave any escapees to me.”

“We’re counting on you!” Mona said.

Gentle nodded, and they separated. Joker and Mona crept atop some crates and peeked in through a dirty window. They couldn’t see much, aside from stacks of crates and a truck with a small trailer. A couple of people patrolled around, oblivious to what lay in store.

“I see a way in.” Mona looked up. “Those windows up there would be perfect.”

Joker chuckled. “We’ll blend in with the rafters. Nice catch.”

Mona beamed as they rounded the building and climbed in, Joker’s footsteps as silent as a ghost’s. He balanced on the rafters and crept towards the center.

“I told ya we should’ve moved them days ago.” A female voice came from below. “We’ve been here too long.”

“Eh, what’s there to worry about? Joker’s been too busy sniping rich people, and the heroes and police are so focused on him that we get overlooked. It’s a win-win.”

“Maybe, but still. Things have been too quiet for us. It makes my teeth itch, like something isn’t right. Doesn’t it make you suspicious?”

“Not really. Besides, we’re moving tonight anyway.” A frustrated sigh and the sound of a vehicle door opening. “Well? Go on and see what’s taking them so long. I don’t want to waste fuel and have to stop somewhere because they’re being too slow.”

“R-right.”

They watched as the woman opened a door and disappeared inside, probably extra office space. The truck started up. Joker unsheathed his weapons and Mona waited with bated breath. After a few minutes, the door opened.

A long line of people, hands bound together with rope and hoods covering their heads, were dragged out. They came in all shapes and sizes, men, women, and the tiny forms in the middle of the line struggled to keep up with the rest. Joker swallowed. He knew how suffocating those things were. The ghosts of creaking chains and guillotines of the Velvet Room were pushed aside as the final person was came out.

Haru-san hobbled behind, but she stopped when she looked up. Joker held his breath as she stared *right* towards them.

“Oi, get moving!”

They saw the villain’s hand strike. Haru-san cried out as she was sent to the ground, the other captives whimpered and shuffled

around in their restraints. Another villain slapped him on the arm, scowling.

“Hey, hands off the merchan-”

Joker and Mona dropped, their rage bursting like a star. The villains were ill prepared for the eruptions of blue and green flames.

“Mercurius!”

“Vasuki!” Joker rolled into his landing as screams echoed. “Mona, protect the captives!”

“Got it!”

Furious winds howled. Mercurius raised his staff as the gales beat back the villains, while leaving the panicking civilians untouched.

Vasuki towered over them as he coiled his body. The shrill song of Vasuki’s Tentarafoo swept through the villains, but over half of them evaded the effect. One thug screamed as he punched his ally in the face with a solid *crack*, and he went down.

“H-hey, what are you doing!?” Another one yelled. “Joker’s the enemy!”

“I’m afraid they’re just a bit confused on who’s friend and foe.” The in-fighting exploded as Joker chuckled. “No hard feelings, I hope.”

A few recovered from their shock and charged at Joker. He ducked under a man’s sucker punch, and his fist collided with Vasuki’s scales. Vasuki cackled as he bowled him over, mercilessly slithering over the victim as his arms weaved in a delicate dance. The next dastardly spell was cast. It was an Evil Smile that sent the bravest of men cowering for cover and sparked ice cold fear into their hearts.

Any fight was reaped from their souls as the confused villains overtook their friends and turned on one another, while others dropped their weapons in surrender.

“Sc-screw this!!”

Joker whirled around as truck tires screeched, kicking up a hail of smoke and burned rubber. Vasuki fell back as the next persona took to the stage in a veil of dazzling blue.

Cu Chulainn, his cape billowing valiantly, stared in the face of the speeding vehicle. Blinding headlights drowned him as he guarded with his spear. The screeching *crunch* of metal and squealing tires pervaded their ears, until the car slowed into a pathetic stop, trails of smoke wafting from the engine.

Cu Chulainn pulled his weapon free and rolled his shoulder. He was strong against such physical trauma, but the Trickster might be a little sore without any healing. He walked around the vehicle and ripped open the door, where the driver groaned over the airbag. Joker felt Cu Chulainn’s disgust as he grabbed the driver by the back of the collar and dragged him out, where he was thrown beside other downed thugs.

The fighting died down and silence permeated the warehouse.

Mona’s protective winds faded.

Joker nodded his thanks at Cu Chulainn, and he vanished. Mona perched on his partner’s shoulder as Mercurius kept the kidnappers confined within a small maelstrom

“My presence might soothe the victims, Trickster.” Ishtar whispered. *“If I may?”*

Joker allowed her to manifest. Light danced around the victims after Ishtar snapped her fingers for a Salvation. She floated serenely as he sheathed his gun and knelt down to the first victim, a middle aged man with strangely glossy skin. The ropes were cut, and the man pulled off the suffocating hood.

“Are you okay?” Joker asked softly.

“Y-yes.” He said as he rubbed his sore wrists. “Th-thank you.”

“Sit tight, I’ll handle the rest from here.”

Joker freed the next victim while Ishtar placed her hand on the man’s head and whispered warm words of encouragement, doing the same with every person he freed.

“You’re alright, dear.” Ishtar wrapped her arms around the smallest child, a boy who shook like a leaf. “We won’t let those evil people harm you any longer.”

Haru-san was the last.

“Are you alright, miss?” Joker cut the ropes and helped with the hood. “You took a nasty hit, but there shouldn’t be any more pain.”

“Y-yes, I’m fine.” Haru-san smiled with the same warmth as always. She encased his gloved hands in her own. “Thank you. I knew there had to be more to you than meets the eye. Ah, I’ve missed my tea.”

Ishtar stiffened. She looked over the children and glared at Haru, and Joker felt the budding fury through their bond.

“What do you mean?” Joker asked evenly, despite the panic in his heart.

“Oh, please don’t feel threatened. I’d recognize your unique aura anywhere.” She whispered. “Your secret is safe with me, sweetie. It’s a promise.”

Joker nodded at Ishtar, who relaxed and returned her attention to the frightened children.

“Thank you.” He chuckled as she squeezed his hands. “Who knows? I have a feeling that you’ll get many free cups of tea in the near future.”

“I’ll be sure to thank the handsome barista.”

“He’d appreciate just having you back.” She nodded as Joker pulled away and faced the other victims. “It won’t take long for the police to arrive. Is everyone okay with walking outside?”

“What about you?” The little girl holding Ishtar’s hand asked. “The police won’t hurt you, will they?”

“You won’t see us, but we’ll be around to watch over you until the authorities get here. Alright?”

“Okay...”

“By the way, were there any other victims?” Joker asked. “Any quirkless people?”

There were confused murmurs as the former victims exchanged glances.

“N-no.” One woman said. “At least I don’t think so? Those hoods didn’t let us see very much.”

Joker frowned. “... I see.”

Ishtar patted the children’s heads, and the crowd of people shambled towards the exit. Haru-san smiled at him one last time before she followed.

“What now?” Mona asked when the coast was clear.

Mercurius tilted his head.

“First, I’ll have Titania put the villains to sleep.” Ishtar scowled at this, but she was ignored. “We check in with the others, and then we’ll have La Brava signal the authorities.”

Ryukyu surveyed the destruction.

The former illegal fighting ring had been decimated by her surprise attack from above. Shattered concrete and broken steel littered the surrounding block alongside the gouge marks from her claws, and the cries of the rescued victims trilled in her ears. The light of police vehicles and ambulances surrounded them. Villains were arrested, long lost victims would be healed and reunited with their families.

All thanks to a certain vigilante.

“Are you okay, Ryukyu?” Nejire-chan floated beside the dragon, as bubbly as ever.

“Yeah.”

Nejire-chan bobbed back and forth. “You’re worried about something.”

“There might be some trouble since we didn’t go through the proper channels to set this up,” Ryukyu stared into the victims’ faces, her heart set at ease. “But whatever trouble I face in the future, it was worth it if it means that these people are safe.”

Nejire-chan giggled. “You’ve changed.”

“Eh?” Ryukyu blinked. “You really think so?”

“Yup!” Nejire-chan poked the dragon’s nose. “Don’t get me wrong. You were always an awesome hero, but I don’t think the old you would’ve listened to you-know-who, and then these people wouldn’t have been rescued! I think that your heart has changed because of him.”

“A change of heart, huh?” Ryukyu looked once more into the victims’ faces, and the pure, overwhelming relief in their eyes. “I have a feeling that I’m not the only one who had a change of heart.”

At that, Nejire agreed.

Best Jeanist and his sidekicks made quick work of the unsuspecting villains. It was all a blur between the panicked battle cries and the scream of approaching sirens, of innocent civilians locked away in small cells with only fragments of their memory intact.

Police tape bordered the building, and the sounds of sirens were fading away. A few of his sidekicks were working with police to make sure that the area was secure before calling it a night.

"Report." Joker voice trickled in his ear. *"What's everyone's status?"*

"Raptor, reporting in. The building has been cleared. 18 villains captured, 23 victims rescued, and..." Hawks sighed. *"One casualty."*

"You did the best you could do." Joker whispered.

"I know. Thanks."

"Oh, Birdie..." Miruko said. *"Mine's clear too! The captives are being taken to the hospital as we speak. To think, I would've won our bet if I didn't get the bigger target!"*

"Doubt." Hawks teased.

"You-!!"

"This is Orca. This villain operation has been dismantled. These children are safe, but many of them will need extensive therapy. Possibly for the rest of their lives."

Ryukyu swore under her breath. *"It's a small comfort, but they won't have to live like that any more."* Orca grumbled, and Ryukyu continued. *"The ring has been taken down on my end. It... wasn't pretty."*

"Are you okay?" Miruko asked.

"Of course. But like Orca, the victims will need a lot of help if they ever wanted to lead normal lives. These poor people had to fight and

kill each other to survive. It won't be an easy battle for them."

Best Jeanist sighed. "At least we've taken them down."

"Oh? Were you successful too?" Joker asked.

"Yeah, but there were some problems. The ringleader had a powerful memory manipulation quirk. Most of the victims didn't even know who they were. He'll be thoroughly interrogated, and I got word that the hospital will do DNA tests to confirm their identities."

"Some people are just sick. I'm glad you caught the asshole." Miruko spat. "So, Joker! I'm not seeing any crazy headlines from Musutafu! Did you take care of yours already?"

"Yep."

"Huh, so you really took them down quietly?" Hawks mused. "I'm impressed."

"I'm surprised." Ryukyu said, not unkindly. *"I was half expecting articles to swarm the news about you, Joker."*

"Remember that I'm staying anonymous this time. Even I have standards, dear heroes." Joker said. *"You shouldn't save people just to get attention and glamour. We saved them because they were people who needed our help."*

"Hell yeah!"

"By the way, were there any quirkless people among the victims?" Joker asked.

"Quirkless? I don't believe so, but it's hard to tell when their memories were wiped."

"Hmm, not that I am aware." Gang Orca said. *"All of the children had a large variety of quirks, but no quirkless individuals were among them."*

"I don't think so either!" Miruko shouted. "Why are you asking about quirkless people?"

"A while ago I received some intel about some quirkless people going missing, but I haven't been able to find anything about them." Joker sighed. "I was hoping that this operation would have answers, but no dice."

"But who would take quirkless people, and why?" Hawks' voice held an invisible edge. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Who knows. I've learned that many authorities stopped looking for them after only a few days. The sister of one of the victims was told that they weren't worth the resources."

"What!?" Miruko's shriek nearly burst their eardrums.

"That's terrible." Ryukyu muttered.

"Hmm, if it's any consolation, then may I look into this a little more?" Gang Orca asked. "We have taken many villains down tonight, but I feel as if this case hasn't been solved. If people are still missing, despite whatever quirk they may or may not have, then we cannot leave this unfinished."

"I agree." Hawks said.

"I'll lend my aid too." Ryukyu hummed. "Just say the word."

"Thank you." Silence overtook the line for a long minute. "Well, you know what happens now that the mission has been cleared." The grin was evident in Joker's tone. "I would take the communicators out of your ears after this channel goes dark, otherwise you'll get quite the ear ache."

"What!? Already!?" Miruko shouted.

"Wait, how would we reach you if we find new information?" Ryukyu asked.

"Post the word 'Birdie' on my Spotlight, and I'll get into contact with you. I'll know if you use this to set up any traps, so don't even try."

Hawks sputtered as Miruko bowled over in laughter.

"Very well." Gang Orca grumbled. *"It was a pleasure working with everyone."*

"Same. This was... an eye opening experience." Ryukyu said.

"This isn't fair." Miruko pouted. *"I don't want to say goodbye yet!"*

"Hey, you still have me!" Hawks chirped.

"Eh."

"'Eh'!? What's that supposed to-"

The signal cut off.

Best Jeanist sighed as he removed it. He held it in the palm of his hand and, true to Joker's word, there was a strange, high pitched whir after thirty seconds. He dropped it after it popped with sparks, the electronic being reduced to useless bits of metal scattered over the pavement.

Best Jeanist stared at his hand as he curled it into a fist.

Joker was... different than he expected, and not just in the way of personality. The boy's costume was odd. The threads of Joker's clothes *sang* when he used his quirk, an ethereal buzzing overcame his mind while he had Joker entrapped, as if there was a sort of life imbued upon them. His quirk had never reacted that way before.

Whatever phenomena it was, he knew that there was *far* more to Joker than what he showed to the rest of the world.

Tires screeched as Tsukauchi swerved to the warehouse, throwing the car in park and flying out the door. Officer Tamakawa bolted to his side.

“What’s the situation?”

“It’s...” He sighed as he gestured Tsukauchi to follow. “You better see for yourself. Do we even know who activated the Emergency Locator? There weren’t any heroes here when we first arrived.”

“I don’t know.” Tsukauchi frowned. “Nobody has claimed it yet.”

Sansa grumbled over police chatter. “In any case, the victims are being looked over by paramedics, but there’s not a single scratch on any of them. Unconscious villains are being loaded up, too.”

“Unconscious villains?” Tsukauchi’s stomach sank. “*Victims* ?”

“It looks like a kidnapping ring.” They rounded the corner, and the street was splashed with vibrant red and blue. “Somebody rescued them. Our boys are trying to get statements, but they’re being pretty tight lipped about everything that went down.”

“Doesn’t this sound like something Joker would do?”

“It does. That’s what I don’t get.” The officer shook his head. “I thought he was someone who would want this posted all over the news, but he’s keeping this one quiet? How did he even get access to a hero’s Emergency Locator?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot we don’t understand about him.”

“You can say that again.”

“Tsukauchi!” They whirled around to Midnight, who was standing next to Aizawa. “Glad you made it to the party!”

“This isn’t a party.” Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon.

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood. Come on, Eraser!” Midnight nudged him and whirled around to the chaos. “We have the lights, we just need good music and-” She stiffened, her grin falling with a grimace. “Eraser.”

“What is it?”

“Rooftops, eleven o’clock.”

They followed her gaze. Crouched on an adjacent rooftop draped in shadow, was Joker.

“A price...?” Aizawa’s eyes flicked between Joker and the kidnapes. He exchanged a significant glance with Tsukauchi. “You don’t think...?”

Tsukauchi was about to answer, when Joker reached into one of his pockets as Sansa grabbed his radio.

Tsukauchi snatched Sansa’s arm. “Don’t.”

“But-”

“*Don’t.* ”

Sansa stared into Tsukauchi’s eyes for a long moment, his hand dropping. “... Alright.”

Joker’s eyes widened when Midnight smiled warmly at him. With a wink, she turned on her heel, dragging Eraserhead by the back of his capture weapon like a grumpy feline. Surprisingly, he allowed it, his eyes falling from Joker as if he were never seen.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.” Sansa whispered. “You could get in trouble.”

“You don’t get in trouble for seeing shadows, Sansa.” Tsukauchi patted officer’s shoulder. “Come on, we have work to do.”

Sansa gawked at Tsukauchi as he walked towards the chaotic warehouse. He turned back to the rooftops. Joker was gone.

“Certain shadows are more trouble than they’re worth.” Sansa muttered.

With a resigned sigh, he rejoined the bedlam.

Whew, this was quite the long chapter, huh? At 12.6k words, its probably the longest chapter yet. That said, I don't think I'll keep the chapters this long in the future. They take tons of time and energy to perfect, neither of which I have much of lately. So expect the next few chapters to be 7-9k at the most.

ALSO, I know this has taken a ton of time and set up, but everything that Joker and these heroes go through will have a huge pay off. I honestly cannot wait at the sharp twists and turns that this story is about to take as this arc is soon to conclude in a few chapters and then we look toward the Summer Camp after!

Prepare your hearts, everyone ;) I'm not going to pull any punches.

Hatsumode

Chapter 50: Hatsumode

Akira had just packed everything away when a thunderous boom rattled the entire building.

Heeeey we've officially passed 300k words!! That's pretty crazy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!

[Aria](#) on Twitter!

[Kirisuma](#) on Twitter!

[aweebritrustyeh](#) on Tumblr! (They also did others of good fics you guys should check out!!)

Giran prowled down the alley, his mood as dark as the shadows clinging to this city's filth.

He should've known better. One swindler should've recognized another. At least the fake diamonds didn't bother his boss in the slightest. In fact, that monster wearing a man's skin seemed to think this whole situation was *entertaining*. He was a true Demon King sitting on his throne, grinning as Joker and those heroes danced within the palm of his hand. If a few worthless organizations were thrown under the bus for the sake of his goals, then so be it.

His burner began to ring, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“Make it quick.” Giran growled. “I’m not in the mood.”

“B-boss.” A crackled cough. *“There’s somebody that-”*

“Is that him!? Give it here!” There was a yelp and a cat’s hiss before the speaker changed. *“Hey, I have some business with you!”*

“Me?” Giran narrowed his eyes. “To what do I owe the honor, Mr....?”

“Spinner!!” There was another gurgled meow in the background.
“And Lady Stubbs!”

Spinner? The same person that took down that small time Yakuza group? A *Joker rip off*, huh?

Giran smirked. “What business do you have with me?”

“I have questions and you have the answers. I want to meet with you.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Questions about a particular group calling themselves the League Of Villains. You heard of them?”

“Oh?” Giran stiffened, his grin faltering. “And if I say no?”

“Then your buddy here will get it!”

“B-boss, please-” There was a shriek followed by yowling noises.

“Alright, alright. Leave him alone.” Giran chuckled. “Name the time and place.”

“Wait, really?”

“I don’t have all day.”

"A-alright! I'm waiting at your buddy's little hideout. Be here in an hour!"

Spinner hung up. Giran tore the phone away from his ear and dialed one of the numbers he knew like the back of his hand. The person answered, but remained silent.

"It's Giran."

"Giran?" Kurogiri asked. *"You only call this number when something goes wrong."*

"We might have a problem."

"Explain."

"That Joker rip off that's been running around?" Giran flicked open the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. "He was able to track me down from one of my informants, and he wants information on the League."

"That is... problematic. How do you want to handle it?"

He took a good puff before answering. "The good doctor always needs more subjects, doesn't he?"

"Is it wise to go that route?" Kurogiri asked. *"He dresses as Joker, so he might have a connection with him. We cannot get in the way of Sensei's plan if this affects the real vigilante without his knowledge."*

"Nah, you don't need to worry. My sources say that there's no evidence that he's had any contact with Joker. We'll be able to take care of him without anything getting back to the real one."

"... What a truly foolish man." Kurogiri sighed. *"Alright, if this is how you wish to carry this out, then I will lend my aid. I have the perfect Nomu at my disposal."*

"Perfect. I'll send you the location. Be there in an hour."

“Understood.”

Giran ended the call. He wasn't too far from his informant's hideout. Giran threw his phone in his pocket and lit a second cigarette, letting out a puff of smoke and lazily watching it vanish into the air. He prowled through the back alleys of Tokyo until it was time to meet up with the glorified idiot.

His informant's place was a shabby little apartment. The residents here knew to keep their heads down and look the other way, so there wouldn't be any interference if things got a little loud. It's not like any heroes patrolled this part of the city anyway. He stamped out his cigarette on the sidewalk before going inside.

Cracks floors and peeling walls were commonplace, and he had to step over a passed out drunk on the way to the second floor. A wisp of back fog already waited outside the contact's door. Kurogiri sorely looked out of place, what with his fancy suit and glowing yellow eyes floating in the depths of a near incorporeal body.

“Wait for my signal.” Giran said with a smirk.

“Understood. He doesn't seem to know that I was out here.”

Giran opened the door and walked inside. The apartment was a mess. Clothes, old food containers, the works spread around carelessly. That sickly sweet smell of rot was ingrained into the walls.

“Oi, why didn't you knock first!?” The green lizard dressed as Joker shot up from the couch. “I could've attacked you!”

The fake's costume had nothing on the real deal. Ripped, stained, off color. Any weapon could pierce through it. His whole getup was quite mundane, he didn't seem to sport any divine weapons or any otherworldly trinkets. What a shame.

“I technically own this place.” Giran stared between Spinner, a ghoulish cat, and the informant on the floor. “Why do I have to

knock?"

"Whatever." Spinner growled. "You better have the information."

"Oh, I do. Trust me." Giran gestured to his crony, great slash marks had torn his clothes apart. "How about you let him go first, then I promise that you'll get exactly what you're looking for."

"Fine." Spinner poked the lackey's side with his boot, and the man bolted from the apartment. "Now spill the beans!"

Giran cracked a smile. "I'm impressed."

"Huh?"

"Not many people would've been able to track me down without my knowledge. That takes real skill." Giran lit another cigarette, the copy cat and his feline companion blanched at the smoke. "I'm surprised you actually got this far, but you won't get any further."

"What do you mean?" Spinner snapped as he reached for his dagger, Lady Stubbs' fur bristled. "Are you threatening me? If you are, just be warned that I don't go down easy!"

"You think you're a threat to me? Please." Giran flicked the ash. "You wanted the League, and you found them. But you should always be careful what you wish for."

Spinner's eyes widened. Fury vibrated in every fiber of his being.

"You-!!" Spinner's dagger was torn free. "You better give me the information, *now*!"

"Or else what?" Giran said, his voice a a little louder.

The air in front of him became displaced, like a heatwave in the midst of summer. A prelude to Kurogiri's appearance.

"If you want the information so badly, then come and get it."

The lizard fell for it. He charged with a valiant war cry, but it was fruitless. Giran remained stoic as the flash of a dagger sliced through the air with a steely *swish* . A pool of darkness exploded between them, and Spinner's swing was stopped by a giant meaty hand grasping his forearm.

"Wha-!?"

The Nomu gurgled as it pulled itself through Kurogiri's portal. A hulking beast with an oily sheen to its green skin, the singular eye implanted in its brain held no inkling of emotion, although its extended muzzle gave it a wolfish grin. Four arms completed the Nomu's build.

Spinner's pupils were mere pinpricks as he stared up at the hulking monster. Lady Stubbs jumped with a furious yowl. Clumps of fur flew and claws slashed, but they couldn't penetrate the Nomu's skin. The Nomu pulled her off by her scruff, flailing and screaming.

"You let her go!!" Spinner shouted as he thrashed in the Nomu's grip. "Or I swear I'll-"

The Nomu lifted Spinner as easily as breathing, before slamming him down on the ground. Giran lazily watched the brainless monster do it two, three more times. He stamped out his cigarette in the dirty carpet as Spinner's dagger fell from his grasp. The ugly cat still flailed, but the fight drained out of it as its partner went limp.

"Enough." The Nomu froze at the fourth assault, smashing the fake into the ground. Giran thought he heard the vicious crack of bones somewhere in there. "The doctor likes his subjects in one piece. Mostly."

"That takes care of that." Kurogiri appeared beside him, unbothered by the brutality. "Let's leave this place."

"Yeah." Giran sighed. "Let's."

“Mreow?” Lady Stubbs’ ears fell flat as the Nomu sank within a dark pool at its feet. Her eyes never left her bloody and broken partner.
“Mreow...”

Her mournful cries fell on deaf ears as the world faded to black.

Tensei walked into his agency amidst the afternoon buzz.

“Boss!” Miya shot up from her chair at the front desk. “I thought I told you not to come in today! You look exhausted.”

“I’ll be fine. I wanted to work today.”

Miya placed her hands on her hips and scanned him from head to toe. “Says the sole guy who took the graveyard shift last night. You look dead on your feet.”

Tensei opened his mouth, but the darting figures of his other employees distracted him. A few were his sidekicks. They congregated around a single computer, frantically whispering among one another.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh.” Miya looked over her shoulder. “I suppose you wouldn’t know yet. C’mon, since you’re so determined to work today.” Tensei grinned as he followed Miya to the cubicle, others cleared the way when they saw him. “Nozomi, girl, turn that up!”

The screen showed two news anchors, the headline reading ‘Major Blow To Human Trafficking!’ Ah, so that was it.

“-op heroes including Hawks, Miruko, Ryukyu, Best Jeanist, and Gang Orca took the villain world by storm late last night. Several human trafficking rings, including those who targeted children and elderly, were dismantled in a seemingly unified operation. We’ve

reached out to these heroes for comments, but they have all declined to make a statement. How strange."

"We're missing one, too."

The woman looked to her partner. *"What do you mean?"*

"Reports indicate that an additional quirk smuggling ring was taken down in Musutafu at the same time."

"Wait, really? Do we have any intel on that?"

"Nothing solid, but considering that it was in Musutafu, my main theory is that Joker did it."

"Eeh!? But Joker would've put on a show if he were responsible. It doesn't fit his M.O. at all! Are you sure it wasn't some underground hero who doesn't want to be named? There are plenty of those in Musutafu."

"Who can say? Remember that Ryukyu made her public apology, and right after she was part of the team of heroes that disassembled these villain organizations. I'm just saying that there's a possibility that Joker was the cause of all this."

"But we have no proof, either. Joker hasn't said anything on his Spotlight and there haven't been any sightings as far as we know. I doubt that these heroes would risk their careers working alongside an infamous vigilante."

"Hmm, you do make a good point..."

"Why are you smiling like that?"

Tensei glanced at Miya-san and the others who were staring at him. He rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish smile.

"Nothing. I'm just glad that these villains were taken down."

“You can say that again!”

“I’ll be at my desk if anyone needs me.” Tensei turned away. “Let’s not get too carried away with this, okay?”

“Kay!” Miya called as he walked away. “Oh, there’s a package on your desk.”

“A package?” Tensei raised a brow. “From who?”

“Dunno. It was there before we got in this morning.” She nudged him with her elbow with a subtle smirk. “Maybe its from a fan?”

Tensei nodded as he approached his desk, where a small box sat in front of his computer. He sank down into the chair, staring at it. There were no addresses or labels on it. He swallowed as he opened it, but his fears were cast aside as he pulled out a nondescript red mug. A little note was inside.

‘Thank you :)’

Tensei blinked several times before an unabashed grin broke out on his face. He set the mug on a place of pride at his desk, and stored the note in his wallet for safekeeping. He was about to dive into his work when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

“Tenya? What’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you while you’re working, but I need some advice!”

“You can call me anytime, little bro.” Tensei chuckled as he imaged his brother chopping his arm. “What do you need?”

“It’s just...” Tenya sighed, and Tensei felt worry sprout in his gut. *“One of my classmates is going through a tough time, and I don’t know how to make her feel better. I feel, as both her friend and Class Representative, that I should cheer her up somehow!”*

“Cheer her up, huh?” Tensei leaned back in his chair. “How about an outing? Some place that’s quiet and private, where she could be surrounded by people who care for her. You should take your other classmates along, too.”

“That makes sense, I-” Tenya sharply inhaled. *“I know just the place! Thanks for the advice, nii-san! I will keep you updated!!”*

“Well, somebody is excited.” Tensei chuckled as his little brother hung up. “Oh well. As long as he’s happy.”

Tensei put his phone aside and got to work, but a smile stayed with him for the rest of the day.

“Put your back into it!”

“I-I’m trying!” Hitoshi’s arms *burned* as he pulled his chin above the bar. “It’d be a lot easier if you weren’t glued to my leg!”

Morgana mercilessly cackled. “We’re not done, keep at it!”

“A-Akira was right.” Hitoshi gasped. “You really are a s-slave driver!”

“What was that!? You’re doing ten more just for that comment!”

Akira grinned as he watched from the other side of the room. Morgana was indeed latched onto Hitoshi’s leg like a demonic koala. Akira remembered the pain from his own training, but he would admit that this was entertaining to watch.

“Hey, Hitoshi.”

“What?” Hitoshi griped as he did another chin-up.

“How did you find this place, anyway?”

Akira gestured to the small, abandoned gym. Light streamed in from the high windows, highlighting the specks of dust floating through the

air. Rustic equipment dotted the room, unused for who knows how long. Akira eyed the small boxing ring in the corner with a devious smirk. Perhaps he'd use it to teach Hitoshi some hand-to-hand combat skills.

"I admit it is the perfect location." Tobita said from his spot on the floor. Various locks surrounded him and he pinched one of Hitoshi's lock picks between his fingers. "Different from our usual venue."

Manami was on her computer, listening to music as she typed away. Taneo's blog was in the works and she was keeping tabs on the news. Hitoshi's new laptop lay at her side. Morgana and Manami had traded off every other hour so he could start getting a grasp at hacking.

"I-it..."

Hitoshi grunted halfway up. His arms trembled before the inevitable. Morgana shrieked as they both tumbled on the floor in an undignified heap.

"Hey!" Morgana was on all fours and jumped on a panting Hitoshi's heaving chest. "We weren't finished!"

"Go easy on him, Morgana." Akira smirked. "He probably needs a break."

"A break sounds faaaantastic." Hitoshi muttered as he splayed his arms out on the floor. "And to answer your question, this was my hideaway whenever that wolf guy bothered me too much. He was too big to fit in through the window."

"Oh..." Morgana exchanged a long look with Akira.

"Has he bothered you since then?"

"Nope. I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since that night. You probably scared the shit out of him."

“Good.” Akira adjusted his glasses. “Nobody bullies my friends and gets away with it.”

Hitoshi lazily grinned. “Thanks.”

“How about we break for supper?” Tobita stretched and dusted himself off. “We’ve been here since this morning and.... I wish to admit defeat. Perhaps lock picking is not a skill I can master.”

“Don’t say that.” Akira smiled as he crouched beside Tobita. “I know you’ll get a feel for it soon, you just need to practice. There’s this technique I learned ages ago, I could teach it to you later.”

Tobita brightened with a smile of his own. “It would be much appreciated.”

“Speaking of food,” Hitoshi suddenly sat up, vaulting a screaming Morgana across the room. “How about curry at the Raven’s Nest?”

“Sounds good. But...” The others looked at Akira with raised brows.

“Buuuut?” Hitoshi asked.

“I want to do something before we head back. Tobita, do you still have the watch from the Yaoyorozu manor?”

“Of course!” Tobita put a hand over a hidden breast pocket. “Why?”

“I tinkered with it last night and I wrote a list of what parts it needs. There’s a place that might have them for a lower price. I want to check it out while I have the chance.”

“Oh! You mean that one junkyard we’ve had our eye on? It’s nearby, isn’t it?” Morgana pranced to Akira’s side. “It’ll be a good source of other materials, too! Since Giran is.... less than trustworthy.”

“Do you want us to come with?” Manami asked as she rolled up her earphones.

“Actually, I’d like Hitoshi to tag along.” Akira smirked. “If his limbs haven’t been reduced to noodles.”

“I’ll go.” Hitoshi pulled himself into standing with a pained grunt. “I think I know which one you’re talking about.”

Manami nodded in satisfaction. “Okay, but don’t get into trouble!”

“Hey, why are you looking at me like that?” Akira asked when she gave him a pointed look. “I never get into trouble!”

She deadpanned. “Uh huh. Sure.”

“We’ll meet you at the Raven’s Nest.” Tobita said.

“Don’t wait up for us!” Morgana chirped.

“Yeah, there’s plenty of left over curry if we run a bit late.” Akira chuckled. “If Kaito didn’t raid the fridge first.”

“Don’t try and get out of making a fresh batch!” Manami said with a impish grin. “By my count, you’re still less than halfway out of your curry debt!”

“Noted.” Akira huffed as he collected his bag.

Morgana climbed inside and got comfortable, and Hitoshi was the first to scramble out of the loose window at the back of the building. Tobita handed the watch over before Akira followed Hitoshi outside. They walked side by side through the alley and onto the streets. Yatararasu, who had been perched on the rooftop corner, followed them.

The atmosphere of Musutafu had changed.

No longer was it the tense, strained city it had been since the raid. A sense of lightness and freedom came without heroes clogging every street corner and sidewalk, and it helped calm Akira’s heart now that

he didn't have to constantly look over his shoulder on the way to work.

"I've been wondering." Akira glanced at Hitoshi as they stopped at a crosswalk. "You gave me a ton of materials to practice making those tools, so why don't you use those to fix the watch?"

Morgana poked his nose out to listen.

"We still wouldn't have all of the parts we need to fix it." Akira led the way as the light turned green. "Besides, this trip will benefit you. I won't always be around to provide the materials, so having a good relationship with the owners of this place will do you good."

"I guess that makes sense." Hitoshi blinked. "It sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"You could say that." A soft smile bloomed on Akira's face. "There was someone back home who did this sort of thing. He would buy whatever treasures we acquired in Palaces, and he was our sole source for equipment. Iwai continued his support even after he found out my identity. He was- *is* a good man." The softness in his face hardened with concern. "I hope everybody back home is alright."

"I'm sure they're hanging in there." Morgana whispered. "They *have* to be. They're not the kind of people who would roll over and give in!"

Akira didn't answer. They walked through the next block in silence, and Akira tried to dissect the thoughtful look that took over Hitoshi's demeanor. It wasn't until they found themselves on a less crowded street that Hitoshi spoke.

"I have a confession." Hitoshi took a sudden interest to buildings on the other side of the street. "For a while I never believed your story, e-even when it stuck in the back of my mind about how open you guys were about it."

Akira shoved his hands in his pockets, frowning.

“What’s your point?” Morgana asked, his tone sour.

“I-I.... I just...” Hitoshi dragged out a sigh. “Seeing you two continually talk about your world and the people in it, and how they seem so *real* -”

“Because it *is* real.” Akira snapped. “We wouldn’t make this stuff up!”

“Th-that’s what I’m getting at!” Hitoshi paled and frantically waved his hands. “I’ll feel like shit if I keep doubting you, especially when you show genuine connections to your past. I can tell how much you guys care for this Iwai guy.”

Akira’s anger drained away. “So..?”

“So I’m choosing to believe you.” Hitoshi stated. “And I’m sorry that I didn’t support you right away. It must be hard being torn away from the people you care about most.”

Akira opened his mouth, then closed it, stunned.

“Thank you.” Morgana popped his head out of the bag. “That means a lot coming from you, Hitoshi.”

“Yeah, we really appreciate it.” Akira’s smile was full of genuine warmth.

“Don’t mention it.” Hitoshi fidgeted as he avoided Akira’s eye, he almost couldn’t bear the warm giddiness in his heart. “It’s what friends are for, right?”

“Hey,” Hitoshi looked up as Akira held out his fist. “You and your family are people that we care about, too. Don’t forget that.”

“My parents are in the same boat.” Hitoshi grinned as he fist bumped Akira. “Dad was a bit salty at first, but you really grew on him. You’re pretty much family at this point.”

“Wouldn’t that make me your older brother, then?”

"I'm not gonna lie, that would be awesome." Hitoshi flinched back in horror. "W-wait, I didn't mean to say that out loud! F-forget I said that!"

Akira sprouted a cheeky grin. "Are you going to start calling me 'big bro' or something?"

"Th-that's..." Hitoshi's face burned.

"C'mon." Akira threw an arm around Hitoshi's shoulder. "If it helps, I can start calling you little bro-"

"No way!" Hitoshi, completely red-faced, shoved Akira off and bolted down the sidewalk. "W-we're close to the place, anyway! Let's stop messing around!"

Akira and Morgana laughed until they came to the gates of Hatsume Junkyard. Piles of metal scrap towered over them, and a rusty smell overtook the refreshing breeze. Morgana wrinkled his nose as they took the first step inside.

"I don't know where the main office is, so we could just wander around?" Hitoshi grumbled as his embarrassment faded.

"Remember that we have our eye in the sky." Akira glanced up at Yatagarasu's shadow.

"Oh yeah." Hitoshi squinted at the bright sky. "I kinda forget that he's always around."

Akira opened his mouth, when he was silenced by a metallic *clang*.

Morgana's ears pricked. "Wh-what was that?"

"I'm sure it was nothing." Hitoshi droned.

Something skittered within the nearest pile, Akira only caught the glimmer of a small, greenish gold body before it buried itself in the debris.

“I don’t think that was nothing.” Akira casually walked over to it.

“Oh, wh-what if this place is haunted!?”

“Really, Morgana?” Akira huffed. “Of all the things it could be, you think it’s a ghost?”

Hitoshi shuffled on his feet. “Maybe we should just leave-”

A loud *clunk* startled them. The pile *moved* . Akira backpedaled when several pieces of junk rained down in a pseudo avalanche, spilling everything between dismantled car parts and other scrap onto the path. A little golden teapot was ejected from the pile, rolling clumsily several times over before it crashed into a bent piece of sheet metal. The three spindly, spider-like legs screwed in the bottom wildly floundered as it failed to right itself. A gargantuan ruby red eye was wide in panic as it found itself stuck.

Akira stepped over a pipe and swiped a golden lid that fell off the teapot. It held an odd warmth and thrummed steadily like a heartbeat. He gently picked up the teapot and set it upright, and replaced the lid. It’s red eye seemed to widen as it stared at them, before it folded its legs against its body and closed its eye. It lay still. Nobody moved.

“Uh....” Hitoshi gaped. “Is it pretending to be dead or something?”

“Who knows?” Akira softly tapped the lid. “Hey, we won’t hurt you. We’re actually here to talk to the owner. Do you know where they are?”

The eye slowly opened. Its slitted pupil stared up at the replaced lid, then back at Akira. The legs uncurled with *ticks* and *whirs*, and it scrambled down the pathway. It stopped when it was at a fork in the path, a sharp whistle of steam escaping the spout.

“I think it wants us to follow?” Akira said.

“This just got weird.” Hitoshi muttered as he trailed after Akira. “You two aren’t even phased by it.”

“It’s not that weird.” Morgana whispered. “We encountered all sort of strange things in the Metaverse. This is pretty normal.”

“‘Normal’. Right, because this whole thing screams normal.”

“Says the person born in a world of superpowers.” Morgana said.

“Hey! It’s not every day that you see a quirk that makes something like-” Hitoshi pointed to the sentient teapot. “*That* .”

Akira chuckled at their bickering. The teapot navigated around giant piles of junk until they came to an old garage. The main doors were closed, but the little critter led them around the building to a smaller office. It stopped in front of the battered door, whistled, and then scrambled through a smaller pet entrance.

Akira walked through the door before anybody could stop him.

“Woah...” Hitoshi marveled at the scenery.

They stepped from the world of super heroes and quirks to a wonderland of clockwork machinations. Tools, the constant thrum of cranking gears, and intricate artifacts that Akira could only describe as belonging in some steam punk themed Palace, overtook the shop. The sentient teapot crawled onto the front desk, its practiced gait didn’t disturb the messy piles on it.

“This place is...” Morgana whispered.

“Awesome.” Akira said.

“I can’t believe this is all hiding in a junk yard.” Hitoshi swiveled his head around. “Just what kind of person-”

The teapot braced itself, and *screamed*. The shrill whistle pierced their ears, and Morgana cried as he buried himself in Akira’s bag.

“How do we shut it off!?” Hitoshi shouted with his hands clamped over his ears.

Akira rushed to the counter, his glasses fogging over from the cloud of steam the teapot generated.

“Alright, ALRIGHT!!” A voice came from another door behind the counter. “I’m coming!!”

Blessed silence. Hitoshi and Akira sighed in relief as the back door was thrown open.

“Now, what in the hell-”

Akira just finished wiping his glasses to stare back at a tall, curvy woman. Rose-colored dreadlocks flowed down her back and past her knees, and she wore a leather apron stained with oil. Thick gloves covered up past her elbows. She had huge goggles over her face that reminded him of Oracle’s mask.

“Well, who do we have here?” She lifted her goggles to reveal blue eyes as pale as sea glass. “Sorry about my darling’s voice. I hope Whistler didn’t blow out your eardrums!”

“Your... darling?” Hitoshi asked.

“Yep! It’s what I call my little creatures.” She placed her hands on the desk and tilted her head, a few smaller braids spilled over her shoulder. “So what brings you boys here? It’s not often that I get guests! I should’ve set out some tea.”

She grinned at Whistler, who trembled and reverted to a ‘normal’ tea pot.

“Thanks, but that’s not necessary.” Akira smiled. “We were hoping that you would have some parts to fix an old pocket watch.”

“A pocket watch, huh?” She blinked. “Those are pretty rare nowadays. Most people prefer checking the time with their fancy

smart phones. True clockwork is a lost art. Do you happen to have this watch on you?"

Akira nodded. He reached into his bag, scratching Morgana under the chin to reassure him, before taking it out. The long chain dangled from his grasp. She grinned as she shoved a pile of scrap aside and made grabby hands at it. Akira chuckled as he handed it over.

"Oooh! I can already tell that this is an old beauty!" She flipped it over, and froze. Her grin faltered as something dark flickered in her eyes. Whistler peeked at its owner as the tense silence smothered the room. "Where did you get this?"

Hitoshi flinched back at the sudden change in tone, like needles pricking into his skin. Akira wasn't affected. He adjusted his glasses and stood his ground.

"My uncle found it in an antique desk."

"Where?"

"I wasn't there when he found it." The twisted truth flowed like butter. "Why? Is there something wrong with it?"

"This insignia." She firmly placed it down, the metal glinting in the dull light. "It belongs to the Yaoyorozu clan. It's been their symbol for several generations."

Hitoshi squinted at the flowing floral design. "That style doesn't match what a lot of other Japanese families would use, though."

"I couldn't tell you why they chose a western design. Maybe they thought it would make them 'special' or something." She glared at the watch as if it could melt under her gaze. "It's a load of crap if you ask me."

"You must not like them very much." Akira said.

“Of course I don’t! They’re responsible for-” She cut herself off with a shake of her head. Her fingers tapped against the front desk, and Akira’s ears picked up the distinct sound of metal under her right glove. She noticed Akira staring. “They’re responsible for this.”

She pulled down the glove to her elbow. Hitoshi and Akira’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates. Where once was flesh, now there was only tubes and gears and metal wires that should have been veins and muscles. Sleek golden plates, with the same designs as Whistler, covered the prosthetic like armor. Her expression fell into despair as she slowly pulled the glove back up.

“What happened?” Akira asked gently.

“Those bastards.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, and they gave her a minute to collect her thoughts. “They’re the fiends that put an illegal piece of tech in my lab at I-Island. It went haywire, and since I was the only one who knew how to turn it off, I *must’ve* been responsible. Responsible my ass, I lost my arm to the damn thing. Do you know how gutted my family was, getting kicked off I-Island right after I woke up in the hospital without an arm?”

“I can only imagine, but how did you know it was the Yaoyorozu’s?” Hitoshi asked.

“Because they came to me with an offer to ‘take the business off my hands’! I could see in their eyes that they were just a bunch of snakes, and managed to put two and two together. They’re the cause for a lot of peoples’ pain and suffering. My daughter was supposed to have a bright future in this industry, but we’ve had to restart from *nothing* . They got what they deserved.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Akira frowned. “I know how hard it is starting over when your reputation is ruined.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel too.” Hitoshi looked the woman in the eye. “Joker saved my family from Silver Falcon’s tyranny. He saved you too by exposing their crimes, isn’t that right?”

Akira fought hard to keep his expression neutral as the woman chuckled.

“Yep. Hell, I wonder how many people are in Joker’s debt. He’s done a lot more than most heroes would even dare. Any who!” The darkness in her eyes was banished with a bright smile. “Enough with the doom and gloom. If your uncle found this in some old desk, then I doubt they’re actively looking for it. Let’s talk price. Something like this is pretty complicated, it’ll cost a lot for me to take it apart and figure out what’s-”

Akira held up his hand. “No need. I already know what parts it needs.”

“Buuuut to do that you’d already have to take it apart.”

Akira grinned. “And?”

“You’re telling me that *you* took it apart and put it all back together again?”

“Yep.” He reached into his pocket for a list. “I wrote everything down-”

She swiped it with a mad grin. “Mainspring barrel, hairsprings, balance wheel, click spring, and a regulator. Hoooo boy, you weren’t kidding! You’re a fellow tinkerer, huh!?”

“I dabble in it sometimes.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Hitoshi crossed his arms. “No novice would be teaching me what you know, and you know a *lot*. Turning normal scrap into *working tools* isn’t something you learn overnight.”

“Oooh, really!? I always love meeting new tinkerers!” She eyed Akira with new interest. “In that case, allow my beautiful darlings to get the parts for you. Everything you need should be here somewhere!”

“You have other darlings?” Hitoshi inched back as Whistler twitched.

“Of course! You’ve been in here the whole time and never noticed!?”

She clapped her hands together. The shop came *alive* . Mechanical whirs sang through the air as there was movement on the walls, in the scrap piles, buried within tools. None of these constructs were larger than a hand, nor as highly decorated as Whistler. Gemmed eyes of all color and long, spindly legs were a common trait.

Hatsume lay the list flat on the desk. “You all know what to do, so get to it!”

Akira and Hitoshi could only watch in awe at the mass of sentient critters overtook the shop, opening drawers, scrambling over one another to get the correct parts. A silver wasp with emerald eyes and glass wings buzzed by and placed the first part in front of Hatsume, before zooming off. It took less than a minute before all of the pieces were on the desk.

Hatsume’s darlings returned to their spots when the task was done, and the shop was returned to normal. Well, as normal as can be in an otherworldly clockwork haven.

“Oh, I love it when new people see all of my Darlings for the first time!”

“No comment?” Hitoshi droned.

“How much for everything?” Akira asked.

“It would have been a bit more pricey, but I’ll give you a discount since you two have been entertaining.” Hatsume drummed her fingers on the desk. “How does ninety thousand sound?”

Akira reached for his wallet. “That’s a fair price.”

“Ninety *thousand* for a couple of gears!?” Hitoshi shouted. “That’s crazy!”

“We usually don’t see those prices in this shop, but it’s not so crazy when you consider a watch so old that you need antique parts that aren’t in circulation anymore. One of these parts can reach into the hundreds of thousands.”

“I understand.” Akira said as he placed the bills on the counter. “I can pay.”

Hitoshi stared at him as if he sprouted another head.

“Sweet. I’ll wrap everything up for you!” She neatly sorted the delicate parts into a small bag. “Would you boys like my card? This shop is always open to new customers, and I’ll give my discount to budding tinkerers!”

Akira smiled and gave Hitoshi a knowing glance.

“Sure.” Hitoshi said. “This place is pretty cool.”

She grinned and handed them two cards.

‘Hatsume Ichinose’ was her name.

Akira had just packed everything away when a thunderous boom rattled the entire building. Many of Hatsume’s darlings were shaken from their rest, a few were thrown from the walls. Akira grabbed Hitoshi’s arm as he fell into a battle stance with Yatagarasu’s winds at his fingertips.

The back door burst open to reveal a coughing girl in a similar apron, bright pink dreadlocks bounced around her shoulders. Spirals of smoke leaked into the shop and she was covered head to toe in soot.

Akira and Hitoshi exchanged glances. Akira righted himself when it was clear that they weren’t under attack, though his heart pounded against his ear drums.

“Mei! I told you not to mess with the fuel injectors until I got back!!”

“I couldn’t help it!” Mei lifted her goggles. The pupils of her amber eyes were shaped like cross-hairs. “You were taking too long, momma!”

Ichinose sighed. “Mei, you know the rules-”

Mei honed in on them. “Oh, new customers!?” She scrambled around the counter and lunged at them, bouncing in between Akira and Hitoshi. “Do you two want to make babies with me!?”

“*What!?*” Hitoshi turned crimson, his voice several octaves higher. “N-no!!”

“I’d prefer to wait until marriage, but thanks for the offer.” Akira stated with a straight face.

“How are you so calm over this!?” Hitoshi shrieked.

“Mei!” Ichinose dragged her daughter back by the collar of her shirt. “Leave them be. *You* have a mess to clean up.”

“But momma-”

“No buts! Either you clean up or I’ll ground you from the garage for two weeks. I could call Power Loader to make sure your lab time gets-”

“Okay okay, fine!” Mei sagged in her mother’s grip. “You win.”

“Good. Now go clean the garage!” Ichinose ruffled her daughter’s hair, Mei huffed and bolted through the door. “Don’t mind her, she meant nothing by it. Like my glorious Darlings, she calls her inventions ‘babies.’”

Hitoshi put a hand on his chest. “Oh, thank god.”

“I need to make sure nothing starts on fire, so I’ll see you boys around!” She whirled towards the back door. “Whistler, escort these fine gentlemen to the exit!!”

With the grace of a hurricane, she was gone.

A puff of steam escaped Whistler's spout like an annoyed sigh. It scrambled down the desk and out the door, Akira and Hitoshi followed. The sky was already beginning to go dark. Yatararasu was but a speck against the sky as Whistler led them through the towering maze of scrap.

"Well that was... *interesting* ." Hitoshi muttered as they stepped outside.

"You have to admit that it was a fun time."

Akira waved at Whistler, who gave a little *toot* in response. It scuttled away into the scrap.

"Yeah. Fun." Hitoshi said as they trailed down the sidewalk.

"Hey!" Morgana popped his head out. "It's an awesome place for you to get materials! With a *discount* ! You should be thanking us."

"Yeah, I guess you have a point." Hitoshi sighed. "Still, I've had *several* heart attacks in the last hour and I don't want anymore surprises today."

"You can complain to the others once we get back." Morgana said.

"They better have left us some curry." Hitoshi rubbed his stomach. "I'm starving from *somebody's* training."

Morgana rolled his eyes as he ducked back in the bag.

"I wouldn't worry too much." Akira chuckled. "You know it doesn't take me long to make a fresh batch."

They walked the darkened city in amicable silence. Few people ventured out to bars and restaurants as Musutafu's night scenery came to life. The streets were peaceful and full of smiles. Tantalizing aromas wafted through the air as they walked through a busy district.

It felt as if the city could finally breathe now that the crushing presence of heroes was wiped away.

“Trickster.”

“What is it, Yatagarasu?”

“I do not mean to shatter your peace of mind, but....”

They stopped at a crosswalk. Hitoshi gave Akira an odd glance as Akira’s bag straps creaked under his grip.

“What’s wrong?”

“I believe you’re being followed.”

“What?” Akira tensed. *“By who?”*

“A man in the crowd thirty feet behind you. I wasn’t sure at first, but he has walked the same direction for the past several minutes. His eyes are upon you now.”

“How long has he been on our tail?”

“The past few blocks. I know not where he came from.”

The light turned green and they walked across the street. But instead of turning left to head towards the Raven’s Nest, Akira turned right.

“Uh... We’re going the wrong way?” Hitoshi jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. “I thought we were heading to-”

“We’re taking a detour.” Akira’s sharp tone wasn’t to be objected.
“Come on.”

Hitoshi frowned. “O-okay.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Morgana whispered.

“Stay in the bag, Morgana. We’re being followed.”

“*What ?*”

“H-how do you know?” Hitoshi paled.

“Yatagarasu. He wasn’t certain until he witnessed the man watching us. Still is.”

“But *why ?*” Hitoshi frantically whispered. “Do you think he knows you’re...?”

“I don’t know.” Akira stopped in front of a boutique window lit up by golden lights. The finely dressed mannequins were ignored, instead Akira stared at the reflections. “He stops when we stop. Do you see him?”

Hitoshi turned his head, but Akira grabbed his arm.

“When you’re being followed, look for other means to identify your follower. Don’t let them know that you know you’re being tailed. Glass reflections and mirrors are perfect for this sort of thing.”

“Are you seriously turning this into a *lesson ?*” Hitoshi hissed under his breath.

“Real life situations are usually the best training.” Akira shrugged.

Ah, the nostalgia of being tailed. But this wasn’t a wayward Class President hiding behind an upside down manga. This was an unknown stranger following them for ill intent.

Hitoshi sighed. He squinted at the glass to copy Akira. It was a bit warped, but there was a man in a hooded jacket texting on his phone, though the glint of dark eyes glanced at them every few seconds. Worms wriggled in Hitoshi’s stomach.

“I see him.” He muttered. “You don’t think it’s a police officer?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to tell with that getup.” Akira studied the man’s reflection. “He doesn’t feel like a police officer. I doubt a certain detective would plant another spy on me.”

“What do you mean by *that* ?” Hitoshi’s head whipped towards Akira. “I’m seriously starting to freak out over this!”

“You have to stay calm. Panicking only worsens the situation.” Akira smiled at Hitoshi. “Come on.”

Hitoshi bit his lip, but followed Akira’s lead. Hitoshi’s nerves were on edge, and he resisted the urge to look over his shoulder more than once. It was like reliving nightmares of Wolf and his cohorts all over again. Akira was as steady as a rock beside him, grounding Hitoshi.

They weaved to and fro through the night crowd, circling the same stores and boutiques for the next twenty minutes. Their tail was getting irritated and twitchy. They stopped at the same crosswalk for the fourth time and, like the last few times, the man stopped a good distance away. Staring. Typing on his phone. The curl on the man’s lip was invisible to them.

Akira leaned closer to Hitoshi. “Targets who are agitated or angry tend to make mistakes more often. What do you want to do?”

“What?” Hitoshi gaped at Akira. “What do you mean?”

“We don’t know who he is or why he’s following us, and it’s too risky to split up. I can see this going one of two ways.” Akira adjusted his glasses and kept his voice low. “We can lose him in the winding alleyways nearby and escape that way. There wouldn’t be any danger to you.”

“And the other...?”

“We go into the alleys and confront him.”

Hitoshi swallowed. “*Confront* him? Are you insane?”

“Maybe.” Akira sighed. “That’s why I’m leaving this up to you. Plan A will ensure your safety. Plan B is dangerous, but we might get useful intel. If worse comes to worst, I’ll handle him myself.”

Hitoshi was torn. “I... I...”

“It’s okay to choose the safer option.” He said gently. “I won’t hate you for it.”

“No. No. ” Hitoshi’s hands balled into fists. “I don’t want to run away from things any more. I keep saying that I want to help you, so let me prove it.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

Hitoshi squared his shoulder. “Yes.”

“Okay.” Something like pride sparkled in Akira’s eyes. “Let’s do this.”

Akira adjusted his bag as Morgana wiggled in anticipation. Hitoshi followed Akira like a shadow as they crossed the intersection, trailed down the sidewalk, and ducked into the closest alleyway. Nobody batted an eye.

“He follows like a bloodhound fixated on your scent.” Yatagarasu circled over them. *“Turn right in the next fork and follow it. It’s a dead end to those who only venture on the ground.”*

Hitoshi grew paler as their footsteps scraped the ground, the sound amplified by the tight alleyways closing in on them. Hitoshi strained his ears. He could hear the faint footsteps behind them. Akira gestured for Hitoshi to follow him up some old crates and onto a creaky fire escape.

“I’m going to be so sore tomorrow.” Hitoshi muttered.

Akira put a finger on his lips as the man came into view. They held their breath when he walked underneath, knowing that he would see

them if he only looked up. He came to the dead end, muttering under his breath. Akira vaulted over the railing and landed behind him.

The man swore and whirled around as Hitoshi climbed down the ladder. He hastily pocketed his phone and backpedaled into the wall.

“You’ve been following us.” Akira stepped closer. “Why?”

“What!? I don’t know what you’re talking about, brat!” He shouted as he threw his arm up. “Why the hell would I follow around some kids!?”

Hitoshi narrowed his eyes. “Why don’t you tell us?”

“I already said-” He went still as his eyes clouded over.

Akira looked at Hitoshi as he let out a shaky breath. “Are you okay with this?”

“Y-yeah. I’m fine.” Hitoshi cleared his throat. “Unlock the phone in your pocket and hand it over.”

He complied. His zombie-like expression never shifted as he gave Akira the phone, which was open to a chat message. Akira frowned. He wasn’t surprised that he didn’t recognize the number, but he committed it to memory.

“Why were you sending our locations? Who were you sending them to?”

The stalker remained silent.

“Uh, my quirk doesn’t work like that.” Hitoshi shifted uncomfortably. “I can’t make people follow complicated demands, only simple tasks.”

“So he can’t talk?”

“No.” Hitoshi sulked. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Akira had a dangerous smirk. “It just means we do this the old fashioned way.”

“Do it the way you did with my old bullies.” Hitoshi said as he slowly backpedaled. “That scared the shit out of everyone present.”

“Yes!” Morgana whispered. “That was pretty entertaining if I’m being honest.”

“Alright.” Akira took off his glasses and placed them in the bag with a grinning Morgana. “Undo your quirk.”

Hitoshi deactivated his quirk from behind the safety of a large garbage bin, preferably several paces away as his best friend’s expression twisted into a nightmarish leer. Hitoshi gulped. That face would be enough to make demons scream for mercy as they fled back into hell. The scrape of claws signaled Yatagarasu landing on the adjacent rooftop.

The stalker gasped as he was set free. “What the hell did you do to me!?”

“Nothing. Yet.” Akira tilted his head as the air turned heavy, Hitoshi found it hard to breathe. “I’ll give you one chance to tell me why you were following us,” He held up the phone, “And who you were sending our location to.”

The stranger made a sudden swiping motion with his arm. Akira jumped back as the phone flew from his grasp and crashed into the wall. The screen splintered like a broken mirror as it clattered onto the ground.

“Ha! Now you have no proof, kid.” The man chuckled as he stepped right into Akira’s face. “How about you run along or I tell the police that your little friend over there assaulted me with his quirk?”

Akira remained silent, his eyes on the phone.

Hitoshi ducked down as he sensed the calm before the storm.

“I was going easy on you.” Akira stared into the man with eyes like molten gold. “But now you really made me mad.”

Yatagarasu vanished, and in his place stemmed the power of Death. Any presence of life drained from the alleyway, drowned by the oppressive force that invaded every person’s heart when their time was up. Akira’s eyes glowed as shadows pooled around him like puddles of ink.

“What is this!?” The man cowered back, his pupils pinpricks of fear. “You’re supposed to be a quirkless brat!”

The shadows froze. Hitoshi didn’t dare breath, but he thought he heard a small gasp from Morgana.

“How do you know that I’m supposed to be quirkless?” Akira’s voice was as fine as spider’s silk. “You better start talking. *Now.* ”

“I-I was desperate for cash, okay!? They came to me with an offer-”

“Who?”

“I don’t know! I never saw their faces!”

“What was their offer?”

“A lotta cash for information on any quirkless people! They gave me that phone with one number. I overheard a buddy of mine talking about this cafe with a quirkless barista, a-and I thought...” The man swallowed. “He sh-showed a picture. I was gonna stake out the cafe, b-but it was just a coincidence that I saw you tonight.”

“... I see.”

“I don’t want any trouble, okay? I-I’ll leave you alone, so can you let me go?”

“Yes.” The man nearly melted with relief, but Akira wasn’t done. “You won’t remember anything though.”

Akira snapped his fingers as the shadows of Death vanished. The man collapsed as Titania’s Dormina sent him to the realm of sleep. Akira caught him before he hit the ground.

“That was...” Morgana scrambled out of the bag as Akira set the man down. “I don’t even have words for that.”

Hitoshi slowly came out from hiding. “Absolutely terrifying, in more ways than one. Just who the hell is this guy?”

Akira dug around the pockets. A leather wallet was hidden in his jacket pocket, Akira flipped it open to see an ID.

“Daichi Kaname.” Akira shook his head. “Definitely *not* a police officer.”

“What did you mean earlier?” Hitoshi asked as he peeked over Akira’s shoulder. “Why do you think the police are spying on you?”

“Not the police. One officer. Akane.”

“Akane!? Like.... the Blue Lotus regular?” Hitoshi held a bewildered look. “Why him?”

“It wasn’t that hard to figure out.” Morgana said as he cleaned his face with a paw.

“A police officer, who could barely stop in during the morning rush, suddenly having the spare time to spend an hour or two at the cafe each day? His schedule changed right after Detective Tsukauchi and Eraserhead figured me out. Akane and the detective worked on several cases together, they go way back and even graduated together.” Akira sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Honestly, I wish they would give me more credit. Did they really think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Oh.” Hitoshi scratched the back of his neck. “So what now?”

Akira took a breath as Titania allowed another mask to take her place. Vasuki gently hissed in the back of his mind when he lay a hand over Kaname’s forehead, the Makajama working its magic. Akira took some bills from his own wallet, deposited it into Kaname’s, and tucked the wallet into the jacket pocket.

“What are you doing?” Hitoshi asked. “That was pretty much your whole last paycheck, not to mention how much you just paid for those parts.”

“He did this out of desperation. He needs it more than I do.” Akira shrugged when Hitoshi gave him a weird look. “Desperate people do bad things to stay afloat, but it doesn’t always mean that they are bad people. The Makajama will make sure he won’t remember anything for the past day or so.” Akira righted himself and swiped the broken phone. “It’s busted. I don’t think we can get anything from this, but I memorized the number.”

“I’m getting a really bad feeling.” Morgana climbed up Akira’s shoulder. “We should inform the others.”

“No kidding. So we go to the Raven’s Nest and-”

“No.”

Hitoshi furrowed his brow. “What?”

“Change of plans. I’m walking you home.”

“*What ?*”

“I’m walking you home. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure nobody follows us this time so that you’ll be safe-”

“Hold up!” Hitoshi scowled. “Don’t tell me you’re cutting me out.”

“Shinsou-”

“No, tell me what you’re planning.” Hitoshi gestured to Kaname. “I helped with this guy, I can help on this too!”

“*Hitoshi.*” Hitoshi clamped his jaw shut as Akira looked him in the eye. “This is different. We don’t know who he sent this information to. He was targeting *me*, and for all we know you and your family might be dragged into this too. I would rather you be safe until we know what’s going on.” He placed a hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder. “Trust me on this, okay?”

“Okay.” Hitoshi deflated. “But I won’t forgive if you do something stupid and get hurt again.”

Akira simply smiled. “Come on. It’s already late, and we don’t want your parents to worry.”

“Yeah, I don’t think *I’m* the one they’re worried about.” Hitoshi muttered under his breath.

Morgana chuckled as he dove into bag once more.

“Did you say something?” Akira asked.

“Nope.” Hitoshi shoved his hands in his pockets. “Let’s just get out of here.”

The stilted silence did nothing to soothe Hitoshi’s worries, and he caught himself studying all possible reflections on the way home.

Whistler and Ichinose’s quirk(giving life to her machinations) as a whole was inspired by the Eyepot enemies in Alice: Madness Returns! You guys should totally check that game out. It’s so good.

Anyway, this was such a fun chapter to work on, and having slightly shorter chapters is making me feel better about the pacing. We still have around 4 or 5 chapters before this arc ends and then we get

straight to the Summer Camp! And hey, you guys won't even have to wait long for the next chapter!

Next chapter shall be out on July 3rd! ;D

Axe To Grind

Chapter 51: Axe To Grind

“What did he make you, Todoroki-kun?” Midoriya asked over his spoonful of curry.

Todoroki set his phone aside and stared at his drink. It had a mountain of whipped cream and sprinkles, with a red and white striped candy sticking out from it.

“It looks like hot chocolate!” Uraraka beamed. “I don’t think it’s the same kind as mine, though.”

“... Peppermint.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“YOU WHAAAAAAT!?”

“Aaagh!” Mona cried. “Do you have to be so loud!?”

“S-sorry!!” Manami said.

“This does not bode well for us.” Tobita murmured. *“What’s the plan?”*

Joker gently kicked his legs from where he sat on the edge of the roof. They needed some time to clear their heads and think after Hitoshi said a clipped goodbye in front of the Blue Lotus. They had wandered around the Musutafu rooftops for about twenty minutes before they decided to inform the others.

“You won’t like it.”

“What else is new?” Mona snarked, his tail incessantly twitching.
“You’re planning something crazy, aren’t you?”

“You know me so well, Mona.”

“Please just tell us.” Manami whispered. *“I don’t know if my heart can take the anticipation.”*

“I know, sorry.” Joker sighed as he looked to the night sky. “I’m using myself as bait.”

“WH-WHAT!?” Manami sputtered. *“B-but... you can’t! That’s... That’s-”*

“I believe what my partner is trying to say is,” Tobita cleared his throat. *“That it’s absolutely ludicrous. I happen to agree with her.”*

“What other choice to we have?”

“Anything but that!” Manami sniffled. *“This is dangerous! And stupid! There has to be something else we can do!”*

“Is there? La Brava, have you had any luck tracing down any missing quirkless people in the past month and a half? *Anything ?*”

“Well, no-”

“Do we honestly want to be screwed over by someone like Giran again? Somebody who, need I remind you, left out vital information, gave us the run around, *and* dealt behind our backs? I’m not putting up with his bullshit again. I’m done.”

“But, but.... there has to be something else...”

“Then please enlighten me on another miracle plan that’ll save these people. Somebody?” Joker waited. Mona’s ears drooped and he couldn’t look Joker in the eyes. The other two were silent. “That’s what I thought. Look, I don’t like this any more than you do, but the

'quirkless barista' is already being targeted. Why not let the sharks come to us?"

"What do you propose?" Tobita said, all fight lost.

Joker tapped his chin in thought. "La Brava, can you do a search on that phone number?"

"O-okay, one second. Hmm, it's impossible to trace."

"Why?"

"They most likely used an app so that this number couldn't be traced. It's possible that they just used a burner too."

"It's probably still open to any texts from Daichi." Joker smirked. "Which means that we could use this. What if we sent them a fake schedule? Plan a long route that doesn't get much foot traffic and I'll walk it tomorrow night after work. Whoever they are, they'll most likely come when I'm alone and vulnerable."

"... Does Shinsou know about any of this?" Manami asked.

"No. The less he knows, the better." Joker stretched as he stood up, coattails gently flowing with the wind.

"He's not going to be happy about this." Tobita's voice shook lightly, whether from anger or fright Joker didn't know. *"We should be honest with him, after all, we've been training him-"*

"Yes, and that's all it is. *Training.* " Joker slowly walked a lap around the rooftop, Mona's eyes followed him. "It's training for him to be a better *hero* down the line, not for gallivanting with vigilantes."

"But he would be able to handle it! He's going to be upset if we leave him out of this." Manami said.

"It's not that I don't trust him, but what do you think will happen once he knew? What if he gets kidnapped too because we were careless?"

How could I face his parents if I let something happen to him?" Joker's heart grew heavy at the thought of Hitoshi cowering under his former bullies. Never again. "I won't allow him to go through that."

"I understand. But sometimes protecting people too much can have the opposite effect."

"We'll... leave the decision up to you, Joker." Manami said softly. *"What else should we prepare for?"*

"We'll go in-depth and plan for possible contingencies when Mona and I get back to the hideout. Sound good?"

"Okay. We'll see you in a bit?" Manami asked.

"It's a promise." Mona said. "We'll be home before you know it!"

"You better! We're still waiting on curry." Manami said.

"Kaito devoured all of the leftovers, so we've been starving this whole time." Tobita sighed. *"He's not apologetic about it though."*

Joker chuckled. "I'll make more. See you soon."

He shut off the comms. He felt Mona's stare digging into his back.

"Spit it out, Mona."

"You know I don't like this." Mona sighed when he climbed to his usual perch. "Not one bit. I remember what happened *last* time we planned for your capture, and don't think I can't see how this scares you. Don't lie to me and say that you're not."

"... It's scary how you can read me so well." Joker rubbed his temple, the exact spot where that detective planted his boot and forced a drugged teenager's face into the ground. "I'm *terrified*, Mona."

Mona's lips trembled. "Joker-"

“Isn’t it ironic?” Joker tilted his head back, his throat bubbling with a frantic chuckle. “After all of the bullshit we went through trying to find a lead, one practically falls in front of us? I feel as if some higher power is screwing with us all over again. What do you think it is this time, Mona? An evil goddess playing behind the scenes? An underground demon lord? Or do you think Yaldabaoth is watching from somewhere, laughing at all of our struggles?”

Mona didn’t know what to say. He’s seen this look in Joker’s eyes before. Lost. Broken, but so determined to change things no matter the cost. That’s what made his partner so reliable. He was never stagnant, staying in the same place to wither away like a gnarled tree. Joker was like his Northern Star, a guiding light that he would follow to the end of the earth.

But it was more than that, wasn’t it?

He’d follow Amamiya Ren to the ends of whatever worlds their journey would take them on. Resolve thrummed through his body, and Mercurius whispered in awe to his other self.

“But you know what’s more terrifying?” Joker stated within the stretch of silence, his eyes inscrutable as he gazed into the heavens. “Not knowing what these people are going through, knowing that they’ve been suffering and there wasn’t anything we could do until now. I’m *going* to save them and there’s nothing that anybody can do to stop me.”

“That’s the Joker I know.” Mona rubbed his silky fur against Joker’s cheek. “You have a heart of gold and the determination to see this through. That’s what makes you such a good leader!”

“Are you purring?”

“What!? No!” Mona scoffed and raised his nose to the air. “I’m not a cat!”

Joker smirked. “Hey, I didn’t say anything about you being a cat.”

“L-let’s just go! We’re already in for a long night and you have work in the morning. You’ll need your strength.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joker hopped to the next rooftop. “I’m going!”

Despite the charming smile Joker showed the rest of the world, at his core he was petrified. Calming whispers and soothing words filtered through his mind for the rest of the night as plans were set in place.

Knowing that he was never alone filled him with courage.

“You’re still going through with this, aren’t you?” Kaito asked the next morning when the others were lined up in front of his desk. “You’re not going to consider that this whole plan of yours is stupidly dangerous? An idiotic goose chase?”

Akira cheekily grinned, but it didn’t fool anybody. “Don’t worry about it. I’m making sure that you will be safe-”

“Safe? *Safe* ?” Kaito scowled. He stared at Manami and Tobita, who had their entire cubicles packed away into small bags. “I’m not speaking for myself here when I say I don’t give a damn about me being ‘safe.’ It’s you that we’re all worried about.”

“W-we’ll be back before you know it, Kaito!” Manami tried to smile, but it was oh so tired. “I’ll be keeping a close eye over the Shinsou family too!”

“We’ll be laying low in a new location for the time being.” Tobita shuffled his weight. “Just in case Hitoshi is forced to reveal this place.”

“I’ll be following Akira after work, and regroup with these two after.... after it’s done. Sorry, Kaito.” Morgana stuck his head out of the bag, his fake green eyes weary. “But our leader never changes his mind when he’s set on something. He’s too stubborn that way.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” Akira said.

Manami and Tobita exchanged long glances behind Akira’s back, Morgana hid in the bag instead of replying. Kaito, however, sunk back in his chair with a sour scowl.

“Fine. Whatever.” Kaito snapped, his eyes then flicked to the other two. “You update me the moment it happens okay? Don’t you dare keep me out of the loop.”

“W-we will!” Manami nodded frantically.

A heavy silence hung on them, and Kaito could barely take the suffocating weight sinking his heart into his stomach.

“Just go.” He said with a wave of his hand. “You don’t want to be late for work.”

“Right!” Akira turned away with an excitement that only deceived the empty air. “See ya.”

He was out the door within seconds. Kaito took off his glasses and scrubbed at his eyes. He was too tired for this bullshit.

“Hey,” Kaito looked up to Manami, her eyes red and exhausted. “We’ll do our best to make sure that he comes home soon!”

Tobita gently patted her head, his own expression was as dark as Kaito had ever seen. The lack of enthusiasm from a man like Tobita made everything that much worse.

“Of course.” Tobita forced a shaky smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “We... we won’t allow him to be in their hands for long.”

Kaito’s throat was too clogged to answer, but the same sentiment drifted across all of the adults in the internet cafe.

If Akira was willing to go *this far* to rescue people, how much longer would it be before he started destroying himself?

“Alright boys, listen up!” The two men shrunk back at the fire in Risumi’s eyes. “This is a first for our little cafe. Someone making a reservation is a big step forward, so we have to do it right!”

“It’ll be a normal day until we close early at 10, then we’ll prepare for the lunch reservation.” Ayumu raised a brow at his wife. “Right?”

“Yep, we’ll prepare everything as normal until then! Akira!”

He jumped. “Y-yes?”

“As usual, you’re responsible for the curry. We’ll have hungry teenagers to feed, so we should have a good variety.”

“Aye aye.” Akira did the two finger salute. “I know their favorites. Well, *most* of them.”

“Oh yeah, aren’t you friends with a few of them?” Ayumu asked.

“Yep.” Akira smirked. “Midoriya spilled the beans after he texted me if it was possible to make a reservation here. The one who made it was lida, right?”

“That’s correct.” Risumi adjusted her glasses. “I almost refused, but the lida family insisted. The price they offered was more than enough for us to agree.”

“I can’t wait to see my green child again!!” Cerberus howled.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen them!” Alice grinned.

“Ah, I hope these children won’t be too reckless.” Ishtar said. *“It’ll be troublesome if they make a huge mess.”*

“I’m sure they won’t be that bad...” Byakko huffed an icy breath.
“Maybe.”

“Akira?” He snapped out of it and stared at Risumi. “You okay, kiddo?”

“Just perfect. I’ll get started on the morning curry.”

“Great.” Risumi rubbed her hands together with a grin. “Ayumu, prepare the desserts! I’ll make sure the cafe is in tip top shape! Let’s do this, boys!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Akira and Ayumu shouted in unison.

“Oh, this will be entertaining.” Titania stated.

“I can already feel the oncoming headache.” Byakko muttered with a shake of his head.

“But if this party is comprised of 1-A students, then that means Yaoyorozu Momo might be there as well.”

“Ishtar! Way to sour the mood, you harlot!”

“I’m not souring the mood! I’m just stating the truth!”

Akira sighed as Arsene face palmed.

“Don’t worry about it, Ren.” Arsene said gently. *“Just focus on your work and everything will be fine.”*

“I hope you’re right....”

The clang of pots and pans echoed within the kitchen, and it didn’t take long for the cafe to be smothered in mouth-watering scents. They followed the usual morning routine until it was time to open.

“Risumi?”

She just finished wiping down the counter. “What is it?”

“Where’s Hitoshi?” Akira scanned the empty cafe. “I thought he’d be down here for his usual coffee.”

“Oh.” Risumi tucked some stray hair behind her ear. “He left for his morning run before you arrived. But last night he seemed... tense. He went straight to his room and wouldn’t talk to us. Is everything okay between you two?”

Akira bit the inside of his cheek. “We might have had a slight disagreement last night.”

“I see.” Risumi sighed. “I know that you two can work it out. He really looks up to you. You know that, don’t you?” Akira nodded, hiding his unease behind a smile. “Talk to us if you need help, okay?”

“I will. Promise.”

Hollow words for hollow lies, but Risumi didn’t pick it up.

“Good.” She looked across the cafe. “They won’t wait a moment longer. Want to do the honors, Akira?”

“Always.”

Akira flipped the sign and opened the door. The usual crowd swept in with the eagerness of people craving the first caffeine of the morning. However, everyone else paled in comparison when a certain smile was directed at him.

“Haru-san.” Akira beamed as he held out his arm. “How are you feeling?”

“Good morning, Kurusu.” She took his arm. Her demeanor was as gentle as a summer breeze. “I’m doing much better now that I was able to go home, and those nice officers helped clean my apartment. The pain in my joints is gone, too. Imagine that!” She gave him a knowing look. “Almost like *magic* .”

“I’m happy to hear that.” He seated her at a table warmed by morning sunlight. “I’ve saved your usual tea, would you like it with anything? Ayumu is trying out a new recipe for some cinnamon rolls and I-”

“Sweetheart.” Some of Haru’s warmth turned into concern. “Why is your aura so dark? What has you so frightened, child?”

Akira stiffened. Haru was perhaps one of the only people he *couldn’t* lie to. Well, aside from Tsukauchi, but that was beside the point.

“I’m...” He checked over his shoulder, the rest of the cafe was too loud to hear his whisper. “I’m still on the job, if you know what I mean.”

“I see.” Haru-san placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. “You’re very brave, but don’t take things too far, alright? You have people here that will gladly support you through anything.”

“Don’t worry.” Akira tried to squash his anxiety with a warm smile. “I’m not alone. I promise.”

“I believe you.” She firmly nodded. “But don’t push these people away, alright? You don’t have to shoulder the weight of the world all by yourself.”

For some reason, that struck a cord in Akira. He knew that better than anyone, and yet such weight was so hard to share with others. He swallowed down his internal conflict and kept his smile plastered in place.

“I know.” He stepped away from the sunny table. “I’ll be back with your usual tea, okay? With a fresh cinnamon roll on me.”

Haru stared at the boy’s back as he walked away. His aura was so black with twisting and churning dread, a noxious storm that swallowed the bright star of hope in his heart. She’s seen people thrice Akira’s age crumble under such immense pressure, but the

twinkling star at the center of his vast aura had been a constant, something that other people let wither away and die.

She dearly hoped that the boy wouldn't let it drown in the storm.

"Are you sure you two want to go out?" Fuyumi hovered in the entryway, her hands wringing together.

"We'll be fine." Shoto said as he slipped on his shoes. "And we won't be alone."

"Indeed." Momo tucked her bangs behind her ears. "I... I cannot hide forever. If I cannot walk my own path and be able to face the public now, then I might as well give up on my future as a hero. I want to... no, I *need* to keep moving forward."

"You've been so strong, dear." Fuyumi chuckled. "But remember that you don't have to walk alone. We're here for you, okay?"

Momo inhaled sharply. There was something about this family, a powerful sibling solidarity that she's never experienced. They would include her in conversations and make her feel comfortable during meals, between Natsuo's lighthearted jokes, Fuyumi's laughter and the way they had spent the last couple of nights full of 'girl talk' and doing each other's hair or nails. Endeavor was hardly at the house, but Natsuo assured her that he was just busy with work. She didn't know how to process the sour tone in his voice, though.

And Shoto...

He was a solid anchor through everything. They all were, but Shoto would always be there after interviews by detectives. He was the one who told her to take her time when they asked if she wanted to see her parents. She wasn't ready yet. Far from it. But the fact was that none of the evidence was sticking simply because of *how* it was obtained, that there's a high chance that her parents would walk

free, their wealth was all but gone. She didn't know if she could handle living with-

Fuyumi wrapped her arms around her, as if reading her mind.

"... Thank you." Momo tightly hugged Fuyumi back. "I appreciate everything that you've done for me."

Fuyumi pulled back and rested her hands on Momo's shoulders. "Always. Be careful, okay? Call me if you two run into any trouble."

"We will, but we'll be late if we wait any longer." Shoto said.

They waved goodbye, and Momo was out the door with Shoto at her side. The fresh air was revitalizing after shutting herself away from the world, birds chirped in nearby trees and the city was ripe with wandering people. A few turned their heads to stare, but immediately turned away to flee when they saw Shoto staring right back, his natural stoicism not hiding the promise of murder within his eyes.

They made it across town and reached the meeting spot, an empty park a few blocks away from the cafe. Old char stains wreaked havoc on the flowers beds and trees, burnt to a crisp from those fires a while ago. And yet, speckles of green broke through the ashes. A new hope within a wasteland of desolation.

Momo never thought she would be able to relate with *grass* of all things.

"Yaomomo!!" A warm body crashed into hers as wild pink curls ticked her nose. "You're really alive!!"

"O-of course I am!" Momo chuckled as Ashido pulled away, her eyes swimming with tears. "Why did you think I was-"

"Ashido, please give her some room to breathe!!" Iida shouted.

A familiar group marched up to them. Their full class might've been overkill, so a smaller group volunteered themselves for this outing.

All of the girls, Iida, Midoriya, Kirishima, Kaminari, and surprisingly, Tokoyami.

“S-sorry!” Ashido jumped back, her pink cheeks turning crimson. “I was just worried about her, okay!?”

“W-we all were!” Uraraka nodded. “We’re happy that you’re alright!”

“It’s been difficult.” Momo smiled, but it bore such a solemn sadness to it. “But I’m okay. I promise.”

“So…” Kaminari scratched the back of his head with a sheepish smirk. “Did you actually get to meet Joker-”

“Kaminari!” Ashido smacked the back of his head. “That’s not something you just ask!”

“Yeah, dude! That’s not manly!” Kirishima cried.

“Oww! You didn’t need to hit me so hard!”

“Oh, I’ll hit you a lot harder if you keep being an idiot.” Jiro stated with a scowl.

“Guys, please!” Midoriya waved his hands as Ashido chased Kaminari around the park.

“Are you okay, Momo-chan?” Asui asked over the commotion.

“Everyone.” Her classmates froze as she squared her shoulders. “It’s okay. I understand that most of our class admires Joker, but what I don’t want is for any of you to hate him because of what he did to me.”

“Momo…” Hagakure gently bounced between her heels. “Are you sure? I don’t want anybody to upset you if they say anything *insensitive* .”

“Yes.” Momo smiled at Iida. “Especially you. I know how much Joker has done for you and your family.”

Iida pushed up his glasses, his expression pinched. He shared an odd look in between Midoriya and Todoroki.

“But Joker has hurt you, right?” Asui tilted her head as she poked her cheek. “I don’t think it’s right.”

“I agree.” Tokoyami crossed his arms. “It is not fair how he continues to dance in the limelight when you are suffering the consequences of his actions.”

“N-no... I mean...” Her shoulders slumped and she suddenly found interest in the blackened grass at her feet. “H-he... he was a bit frightening, yes, but he had this...” She looked down at her hands, remembering the warm brush of Joker’s gloved hand on hers. “This gentleness and *sincerity*. He truly wanted to help people, a-and you can’t deny that had he done nothing, then people would have continued to suffer under my parents’ actions. He... he set me free, too.”

She looked up, and bit her lip. Her classmates openly gawked at her. Perhaps she had said too much?

“So you really *did* meet him- ouch!!” Kaminari playfully glared at Jiro, her crossed her arms and glared back. “Geez, I was just asking!”

“The point is,” Iida said as he gently chopped an arm towards her. “You want us to form our own opinions on Joker, separate from what he did to your family?”

“Precisely.” She turned towards the park exit as her classmates exchanged uneasy glances. “Now, shall we go? We’ll be late if we don’t depart soon.”

“Y-yes!!” Iida jolted as if a bolt of electricity struck him. “It would be rude if we waste their time! Let’s go!!”

“Ooh, this park really isn’t that far, huh!?” Kirishima beamed as they left it behind.

“Right!?” Ashido’s grin stretched from ear to ear. “I haven’t been to the cafe in so long! I miss Kurusu!!”

“I’ve only been there once!” Kaminari said. “But I’m glad I’ll be able to taste that amazing curry again.”

Ashido cackled. “The food isn’t the only thing I want though.”

“Are you salivating over the supposed heavenly taste of the food, or of the barista that’s been upon everyone’s minds since the first term began?” Tokoyami said. “This madness surrounding him makes it hard to tell.”

“I don’t even understand what you’re saying, Tokoyami!” Hagakure eagerly danced within the group. “But Mina-chan always talks about him nonstop when we’re in the locker room, and how she-”

“Shhh! Hagakure!!” Ashido pulled on her horns. “What happens in the girl’s locker room, *stays* in the girl’s locker room!!”

“Can we please quiet down?” Jiro said with a long sigh. “You’re being too loud.”

“Mina-chan is always loud.” Uraraka giggled. “But maybe we should tone it down a bit?”

“P-people are starting to stare at us.” Midoriya had a sheepish grin. “Not that our class doesn’t get attention anyway.”

“Yes!!” Iida chopped his hand vigorously. “And it is uncouth to talk about our friend in such a demeaning manner!!”

“I agree, kero.” Tsuyu stared at Ashido, blinking slowly. “I don’t think Kurusu would like it.”

“Yeah, that’s just unmanly!”

“Kirishima, we’re *girls* .” Hagakure said.

“You know what I mean!” Kirishima cried.

Jiro facepalmed. “Yaomomo, you’ve been to the cafe, right? What do you think of Kurusu?”

The group stared at Momo. They didn’t say it, but they knew how she gravitated towards the center of their group, while they warded off any would-be gawkers on the streets.

“Yes, I’ve been there once before. Kurusu was very kind to me.” Momo chuckled and suddenly wouldn’t meet their eyes. “And he is not all that bad looking.”

“I knew it!!” Ashido smirked.

“I’m kinda jealous.” Kaminari looked forlorn. “He can get all of the girls he wants? Does the dude even have a girlfriend?”

“Enough of this!!” Iida shouted. “The cafe is just down the street and it would be considered rude if Kurusu overheard you!”

Other people cleared the way at Iida’s stern energy, and they carved a path straight to the Blue Lotus Cafe. A neat little sign hung on the door.

‘Closed For Reservation!’

“Can we just...” Jiro tilted her head. “Go inside?”

“I don’t see why not?” Ashido said. “We’re the ones who made it! Well, our Class Rep did, anyways.”

Iida pushed up his glasses. “Yes, it should be open for us!!”

“Never lose that energy, Iida.” Asui said sagely.

“It wouldn’t be our Iida if he did!” Uraraka said with a tiny smile.

Iida cleared his throat as his cheeks burned. A happy little bell rang as they walked into the realm of buttery cinnamon and sugar, with a hint of pleasant bitterness from freshly ground coffee. Tokoyami took interest in the decorative charms on the walls, his eyes scanning titles of the books on a few shelves. He wondered if he could peruse through them.

“Welcome!” Shinsou Risumi smiled from the front counter. “Choose any booth you want, and we’ll take your orders in a minute.”

“Oh, I’m glad I skipped breakfast for this!” Ashido darted into the largest booth in the corner. “And we have this place all to ourselves!”

“I’ve never seen it this empty!” Kirishima said as he scooted in next. “It’s kinda cool.”

“It is quite comfortable.” Tokoyami slid in after. “This would be a lovely den to relax and study the people passing by.”

Uraraka chuckled. “It is! It’s pretty cool to just watch the world go by.”

The others squished themselves into the booth as Risumi smiled at Akira.

“You haven’t seen them in a while, right?” She said. “Do you want to take their orders?”

Akira smiled. “I’ll get on it.”

Akira rounded the counter and approached the bustling table. Uraraka, Midoriya, Ashido, Tokoyami, Tsuyu, Kirishima, Iida, some invisible girl. Another girl with literal jacks dangling from her earlobes. He recognized Kaminari from Bakugo’s first visit. Yaoyorozu Momo was in the center of their antics, and-

His eyes locked onto a heterochromatic pair lingering at the end of the table. In turn, Todoroki stiffened and stared at Akira, his forehead knotting together.

"Ah, it is him." Arsene said. "The subject of one of our recent studies."

Akira swallowed as he recalled the conversation they had several nights ago at the Raven's Nest.

"Endeavor had another child?" Akira's eyes were wide. "What happened?"

"It doesn't explain in detail." Manami's eyes held sorrow as she read out the report. "Just that he died in a training accident. M-most of his body wasn't... recovered."

Akira exchanged a long glance with Morgana. They knew that death wasn't permanent in this world, and Cerberus was so certain that those blue flames were from a soul that belonged to the Todoroki line. There were no other relatives. The mother was in a psych ward, the other two siblings had ice quirks, and Todoroki Shoto was a hero student. None of them, not even Endeavor, would be insane enough to light half the city on fire.

And if his full body was never recovered....

Then Todoroki Touya could be their culprit.

But the deeper intricacies as to why there was a wayward presumed-dead Todoroki going rogue was a mystery.

"Kurusu?" Midoriya's voice snapped Akira out of his thoughts.

"Sorry." Akira planted on the smile that charmed so many. "So, what would you like-"

"I know you from somewhere." Todoroki Shoto interrupted.

"Kirishima, you owe me 500 yen!!" Ashido pounded her fist on the table. "I totally called it!"

Todoroki's brow scrunched further. "What?"

“This again?” Akira chuckled and shook his head. “Ask your friends about it, they’ll explain. But first, I’ll take your orders. We have a few new coffee blends if you’re feeling adventurous, and today’s special curry has grated apple and other spices to give it a bit more oomph, but there are other flavors available.”

“You put apples in your curry!?!?”

Akira jumped back as a giant shadow burst from Tokoyami’s chest.

“Dark Shadow!” Tokoyami looked horrified. “Unhand him at once!”

“But Fumi!” Dark Shadow wrapped his arms around Akira’s shoulders, his head nuzzling Akira’s poofy hair. “His hair is so soft! And he said that there are apples in today’s curry! APPLES!!”

“I apologize for his behavior...” Tokoyami glanced at his name tag. “Kurusu-kun.”

Ashido cackled. “Aww, they look so cute!”

“Are you okay, Kurusu-kun?” Midoriya’s eyes softened when he noticed that Akira turned as stiff as a board.

“Of course.” Akira laughed as he glanced up at the shadow. “If you want, I can sneak in an extra scoop of apple butter in yours, but you have to let me go first.”

“Oh, can you do three extra scoops!?”

“You drive a hard bargain, my friend.” Akira smirked. “How about two extra scoops of apple butter plus a slice of an apple tart fresh from the oven? Just for you.”

“Did you hear that, Fumi!?” Dark Shadow untangled himself from the barista. “We’re getting more apples!!”

“Yes.” Tokoyami rather looked as if he wanted the ground to swallow him up. “I heard you loud and clear.”

“Oooh, that apple curry sounds so delicious!” Ashido whirled around to look at the chalk board. “I’ll take... the kona blend and one plate of curry, please!”

“Make that two!” Kirishima said.

“Three, kero.”

“I’ll take a decaf, a-and also the curry!” Midoriya said.

“M-my usual.” Uraraka said, her cheeks turning pink.

“You come here so often that you have a ‘usual’!?” Ashido cried as she put a hand to her chest. “I feel so betrayed!”

Uraraka nudged Ashido with an elbow as she she stared at her lap.

“As it is my first time here, I will request the apple curry as well!!” Iida chopped his arm. “But can I trade the coffee for orange juice?”

“Of course.” Akira made a note, and then looked at Yaoyorozu, his expression softening. “What about you? I convinced the Shinsous’ to get a few new brands, if you’re interested?”

“Oh?” She perked up. “What kinds are there?”

Akira beamed. “We have Mocha Matari, which has a spicier chocolate flavor. We also have another with a sweetness to it, Salvadoran Pacamara. It has slight hints of fruity flavors, and many people say that it tastes like butterscotch.”

“I could listen to you talk about coffee all day.” Ashido said dreamily.

Akira felt his ears go hot as the other kids gawked. “Heh, sorry.”

“No need for apologies!” Yaoyorozu chuckled. “I would like to try the Salvadoran blend, with a plate of apple curry.”

Akira smiled as he wrote it down, then stared at Todoroki. “And you?”

Todoroki was unfazed as the attention was on him, and yet he still couldn't tear his eyes away from Akira.

"I'll take whatever you recommend."

"Daring. I like it!" Ashido said.

"I-I'll just take whatever you recommend too." For some reason, Jiro was as pale as a ghost and she wouldn't look Akira in the eye.

"Please."

"Ooh!" The ghost inhabiting empty clothes wildly waved her arms around. "I'll take an americano with my curry! And some brownies for dessert!"

Kirishima's eyes lit up like fireworks. "Oh yeah! The brownies in this place are so good!!"

"I'll get a plate big enough for the whole table. Everything will be ready soon." Akira smirked. "Just sit tight."

With that, he went behind the counter and got to work, helping Risumi get everything ready.

"I've seen him somewhere before." Todoroki stated.

"Hmm, interesting." Iida adjusted his glasses. "I do wonder why he has that effect on so many of us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Most of us have felt that way towards him!" Midoriya glanced over to Akira, his eyes practically bursting with admiration. "Like we've met him before, but we actually haven't."

Ashido threw her arm over Uraraka. "Which is weird, because Ochako-chan and I didn't feel that way."

“I have been here once before, and I never felt that way either. But... now that I think on it, he does seem familiar all of a sudden.”
Yaoyorozu glanced towards the front counter. “How strange.”

“But I’ve had that feeling, too. I can’t really shake it.” Tsuyu tilted her head. “It’s curious.”

“As I stared into the depths of his eyes, I too felt a wave of *deja vu*.”
Dark Shadow curled around his host, nodding. “I have never seen somebody else negotiate with Dark Shadow as well as this purveyor of coffee.”

“You have a weird way of saying that, Tokoyami. I still think he has one of those faces.” Kirishima shrugged. “You know, those faces that you see everywhere?”

“No, I swear I know him.” Todoroki frowned as he got out his phone. “I just don’t remember where I’ve met him before.”

“He’s only been here, what, a couple of months?” Kirishima shrugged. “He’s never been to Musutafu before then, right?”

“Right!” Midoriya chirped.

The rest of their small talk fell deaf on Todoroki’s ears as he scrolled through his phone. There wasn’t a single thing he could find on this barista. Some wriggling thing in the back of his mind was screaming at him, telling him that *he did* know this person. But where? *When* ?

“Hey, not to bring the mood down, but does Kurusu seem a bit... weird today?” Kirishima asked as he glanced at the counter. “Or distracted, at least?”

“Maybe?” Uraraka tugged at her bangs. “He seems to be spacing off a lot?”

Jiro bit her lip.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Ashido’s yellow eyes sparked with something feral. “Do we need to beat someone up for him!?”

“We shouldn’t just jump to conclusions.” Tsuyu, ever the calm within the storm, poked her cheek. “Everyone has their off days.”

“Maybe he’s just tired?” Iida furrowed his brow. “I have read up on how popular this cafe is, it takes a lot of hard work to maintain!”

“Yeah…” Kirishima rubbed the back of his neck, frowning. “Maybe.”

Shoto was brought out of his search by the smell of curry, which had to be handed out on three separate platters between both baristas. Their previous conversation was ejected when the plates were handed out.

“Thanks for the food!” Ashido clapped before she dug in.

“I hope you enjoy.” Akira smirked.

“Yes, we made it extra special since you’re our first ever customers to make a reservation!” Risumi beamed. “Just holler at us if you need anything else.”

“Thank you!” Iida nodded. “We shall!!”

The pair of baristas left them alone. Kirishima and Ashido weren’t the only ones to start shoving food in their gullets. Tokoyami practically had to beat Dark Shadow back with his spoon as he tried out the apple curry, his feathers rippling at its delicate flavor. Dark Shadow devoured the apple tart in one bite.

“What did he make you, Todoroki-kun?” Midoriya asked over his spoonful of curry.

Todoroki set his phone aside and stared at his drink. It had a mountain of whipped cream and sprinkles, with a red and white striped candy sticking out from it.

"It looks like hot chocolate!" Uraraka beamed. "I don't think it's the same kind as mine, though."

"... Peppermint." Todoroki said after an experimental sip, and he raised a brow when his friends started laughing. "What's wrong?"

"Todoroki." Kaminari bit back a bubble of laughter. "You have whip cream stuck on your lip, dude."

"Oh."

The table burst out laughing as he licked the cream from his lip.

Meanwhile, Risumi chuckled from behind the counter as Akira busied himself with washing dishes.

"They certainly are a loud bunch."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Akira glanced over his shoulder, grinning. "They're good kids."

Risumi hummed as they watched the chaos of the 1-A students' midday meal. Iida did his best to confine the mess, but they wouldn't have it. Yaoyorozu, as much as Akira wanted to apologize to her right then and there, at least had a smile as she gazed at her classmates. It was a familiar sort of fondness that made Akira's own heart ache.

He was lost to a haze of his own memories. His body worked on auto-pilot, only to be snapped out of it by someone slamming down a pile of yen on the counter. He nearly jumped out of his skin, and Ashido's face fell in concern. He wiped it away with a grin.

"What's this? I thought the reservation was already paid for?"

"Your tip, silly!" Ashido cackled. "We each threw in a few hundred yen, so don't spend it all in one place."

Akira winked. "Wouldn't dream of it. Is everyone leaving already?"

“We would stay longer, but *someone* wants to make sure we don’t overstay our welcome. I can’t believe an hour went by so fast!”

He heard lida squawk as the group was about to leave the cafe.

“Later, Kurusu-kun!”

Akira waved them off as Risumi placed the yen in the register. While the table looked more or less like a tornado ripped through it, lida and Yaoyorozu at least attempted to keep it a bit tamed.

“I’ll start cleaning up.” Akira said.

“Thank you, dear.”

He stacked the plates from Midoriya’s table when something caught his eye. He picked up the phone and glanced at the door. One of the U.A. kids must’ve left it on accident. He was going to let Risumi know, when the jingle of the door drew his attention.

Todoroki stood at the entrance, eyes scanning the cafe.

Akira approached and held it out. “Looking for this?”

“Oh.” Todoroki blinked as he grabbed the phone. “Thanks for saving it.”

“No problem.” Akira winked. “I got you covered, Peppermint.”

Akira never saw Todoroki’s face go ashen or how violently he flinched, as Akira had turned his back to finish cleaning the table. Todoroki’s mouth went slack as *something* deep inside of him was plucked like a violin string.

Peppermint.

Peppermint .

It wasn't a coincidence. In the face of danger, staring down Stain as his friends were paralyzed. *Joker* was the one who stepped in and gave them the chance they needed.

"Don't face him alone." Todoroki stood at Joker's side. "He's far too dangerous."

"I know, Peppermint." Joker donned a confident smirk. "Can you use those those flames of yours to keep him away from your friends?"

"Peppermint...?"

That voice had a slightly different timbre than his Joker persona, but it had to be the same. Joker was a confirmed teenager. A *teenager* who happened to know what nickname to call him.

Todoroki didn't feel the ice slowly creeping over his phone.

He would be laughing if everything wasn't so damned ironic. Todoroki glanced at the barista one last time before he fled the cafe, his mind speeding at a thousand miles an hour.

"Todoroki!" Ashido howled from down the street. "What's taking you so long!?!"

"Sorry. Took me a minute to find it." He muttered as he shoved his phone into his pocket

"Are you okay, Todoroki-kun?" Midoriya said as he approached the group.

"You do look a bit ill." Iida said with a frown.

"I'm fine." Todoroki said, maybe a little too fast. "Just fine. Midoriya, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Huh? Sure?" They slowed down as the rest of the group walked onwards. "You look really pale. Is the curry not agreeing with you?"

“It’s not that.” Todoroki’s head was still spinning. “I wanted to ask you when you first met that barista.”

“During the spring.” Midoriya smiled at the memory. “Uraraka and I ran into him when he was looking for a job.”

“Was it after the USJ?”

“After the... I think so?” Midoriya’s eyes widened. “Why are you asking about the USJ?”

Todoroki shook his head. “It’s nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“H-hey, sorry to interrupt.” They looked at Jiro, who had hunched shoulders as she poked her ear jacks together. “But I have to ask something. Midoriya, you’ve known Kurusu the longest out of all of us, right?”

“Maybe?” Midoriya squinted as he tried to remember. “Uraraka and I were the first ones to bump into him. Why?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but...” She stopped fidgeting with her ear jacks, her eyes glimmering with guilt. “He’s scared.”

Todoroki frowned. “Scared?”

“A-and it’s not like the nervous sort of scared like you get before an exam.” She shook her head. “I’ve heard heartbeats like that when I was interning with Death Arms, and we saved a bunch of people in a hostage situation.”

“What are you getting at?” Midoriya’s heart rate picked up, his eyes widening.

“What I’m saying is that... that...” Jiro bit her lip, and sighed sharply through her nose. “Whatever it is, he’s afraid for his *life*. Whatever smiles and happy vibes he threw our way today were completely fake, probably so that he wouldn’t worry anybody. You all noticed how he was distracted and spacing off, too. Something isn’t right.”

Midoriya was pale. "What...?"

"But what would he have to be scared about?" Todoroki glanced back at the cafe over a block away. "He's..."

Todoroki trailed off.

"I'm gonna to talk to him quick! I'll only be a minute!" Midoriya bolted. "Don't wait up on me!"

"Midoriya!" Jiro called after him.

Todoroki let him go, dizzy from all of the new information thrown at him in less than five minutes.

Akira was startled by the bell, his arms full of stacked plates as he looked over to the door. Midoriya held his gaze with frightening intensity.

"Midoriya?" Akira blinked. "Is there more than one lost phone? We haven't found anything else-"

Midoriya marched up to him, determination set within every facet of his expression. His hands balled into fists. There was a certain protective softness about him that Akira didn't know how to place.

"Akira, do you have time to talk?"

"Uh..." Akira blinked rapidly. "Not really? We're planning to reopen soon, so I don't really have time right now. Why?"

"N-no reason!" Midoriya turned red. "J-just that.... that you know you can talk to me about anything right? Didn't we make that promise a while ago?"

"Yeah?"

"If you can't talk right now, maybe...." Midoriya's eyes lit up. "Oh, can you come to Dagobah beach tonight? Nobody goes there after dark!"

We could talk in private? Please?"

"T-tonight?" Midoriya stiffened. Akira had *never* stuttered before, and the uncertainty in Akira's eyes almost looked alien. "I don't know."

"It's okay if you're tired after work! I'll wait at the beach tonight, and you can just text me if you can't make it?" Midoriya had that sunny smile that was one of Cerberus' weak points. "The beach isn't too far from my house, so it's not big deal for me."

"O-okay. Tonight." Midoriya felt his heart twist at Kurusu's pained smile, and how he never noticed until Jiro said something. "I'll try to make it."

"Right! I'll see you then!"

Midoriya left, but not without dread sprouting within his chest like thorny vines.

"Are you certain that this plan is the right one, Trickster?" Ishtar floated at the forefront of his mind, her serenity disturbed by the same concern coursing through the other Personas. *"I don't want-"*

"I know." Akira shifted his near empty bag around his shoulder. *"I've heard it from everyone else already."*

"I did not mean to upset you." Akira could almost feel her delicate fingers trace around his face in motherly concern. *"I just do not want any unnecessary harm that may come. While my Insta-Heal will immediately purge any drugs from your system, the same cannot be said about other means to keep you... docile."*

Akira remained silent as he threaded the path La Brava chose for him. On the outside, he was lone teenager walking through the darker side of Musutafu. He had an important part to play as the helpless lamb. The entire crux of this plan stemmed on Akira being able to act as such.

“And we’ve yet to inform the Moon.” Yatagarasu shuffled from atop Kohryu’s horn. *“I sense that this doesn’t sit well with you, Trickster. You’ve not spoken to him today.”*

“What am I supposed to do? I don’t want him caught up in this. At least La Brava confirmed that he came home after I left work. He’ll be safe.”

Kohryu released a deep sigh, but any internal bantering was thrown out the window when the screech of tires pierced his ears. A beat-up van rounded the corner and lurched to a stop beside him. Akira didn’t move as the side door opened and a few men poured out.

Ishtar screamed when the nearest one threw a punch. Akira’s glasses flew from his face and he saw stars as his body tumbled to the concrete. The prick of a needle in his neck and the numbing ice through his veins were the last things he felt as his vision went dark...

....Only to be thrown into the waking world moments later.

Ishtar’s fury burned away whatever cocktail was in the syringe, and he found himself being harshly thrown into the van. His bag and burner phone were already discarded, his glasses gone.

“Go, go!!” One gruff voice shouted. “Before someone sees us!”

Several swears broke out as the van lurched down the street. It took *everything* in Akira not to move. A single twitch of a finger, or the flutter of an eyelash might give him away. The heat of several bodies surrounded him in the darkness, breathing heavily.

“Bind his hands.”

“Why? The brat’s out cold.”

“Just do it!”

“Fine! You don’t have to yell.”

Clammy hands bound Akira's wrists behind his back, the plastic zip tie biting into his skin. A hand harshly grabbed his hair and wrenched his head up. If this man's fingers were but two inches lower, he would've felt the hair pin tracker that made Akira's scalp itch all day.

"Didn't expect to find some kid." A phantom voice whispered. *"You have your teammate to thank for all of this. You were sold out-"*

"Trickster, snap out of it!" Ishtar cast the voice away. *"You must focus. It's alright, we are all with you."*

"This kid isn't bad looking. Are you sure we can't just sell him to some old pervert instead?"

"No, you half-wit!" This voice was further away, near the front. The driver, perhaps? "You know how our boss is. We follow his rules, and his rules only."

"Fine." The man released Akira.

Silence fell after that. Akira continued his facade, but he was getting sore. The hard floor of this van wasn't kind, or warm. He felt the increase in speed as they most likely got on a highway out of Musutafu.

How long did they drive? One hour?

Two?

All night ?

Akira concentrated on the hum of the vehicle long after his arms and legs went numb, his Personas constantly whispering encouragement and comfort through it all.

The soft brush of Arsene's feathers.

Kohryu's steady, rumbling voice.

Cerberus and Byakko's alternating heat and chill.

The motherly love of Ishtar.

Titania's solid determination.

A calming whisper of death from Alice.

Yatagarasu's soft warbles.

The snapping jaws of Seth.

A hiss or two from the serpents on Shiva's body.

A promise to poison these heathens from Vasuki.

Black Frost's shouts of 'hee ho!'

A single tune from Orpheus' instrument.

Cu Chulainn's steady strength and seeping bloodlust.

The Bubbly One's playfulness.

And last but not least, the Observer. One who said nothing, but carefully scrutinized everything under the sun.

Finally, after an eternity spent in an unmoving hell, the van stopped. The lack of motion made Akira dizzy.

"Are you sure he's okay? Usually they'd wake up by now."

"How much did you put in the syringe?"

"About the same... I think? Maybe I put in more than I thought."

"If you put the same then you gave him the *adult* dosage, you moron."

“Who cares? He’ll be off of our hands soon enough.” A vehicle door was thrown open. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Rough hands grabbed Akira's bound arms. A cool night breeze drifted over his hair as he was dragged outside, his legs scraping over concrete. The scent of rusted metal and salt water burned his nose, but he wore the mask of a peacefully sleeping teenager. A mask that nearly broke when he was dragged inside some building. Footsteps echoed between enclosed walls.

“About time you get here.”

Everything in Akira stilled. Himself. His Personas. The air around him seemed to go stale as he recognized that voice. It was -

“Long time, no see Giran.” The driver said. “We brought you a quirkless brat.”

Akira was thrown down onto the damp concrete, his cheek stinging from the cold ground. The acrid scent of cigarette smoke and the creak of leather signified that Giran was crouching over him.

“Did anybody follow you?” Giran asked.

“Of course not, we watched our back.” The driver said. “We were going to scrub the security cameras, but this kid was stupid enough to be walking alone in a bad part of town. It wasn’t a problem.”

“Good. And the informant?”

“We can’t find the little weasel. He most likely got rid of the phone, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“We can’t have any loose ends messing things up, so make sure you take care of him. Are you certain this brat is quirkless? He’s... hmm?” Giran’s calloused hand grasped his chin and pulled his head upwards.

"How dare he touch you. Just say the word." Alice was deceptively calm as the aura of death spread across the mindscape. *"I'll kill him myself."*

"What is it, Giran?"

There was another beside Giran. Akira couldn't tell anything by the light weight of his footsteps, but the voice was... refined. Posh, even. He's heard it before.

"Nothin'." Giran let go of Akira. "Thought I recognized him, but it must be my imagination. Still, we can never be too careful. Doctor's orders and all that."

Something ice cold clamped over Akira's wrist. He heard his Personas' frantic screams before they were ruthlessly silenced. A still, dark void swallowed his heart. Panicked dread pumped through his veins and, for the first time, he broke his act.

His eyes snapped open and he thrashed against his bonds, the first thing he saw was Giran's shoes leaping back.

"Oh, we got a live one!" Giran's slimy smile returned in full force. "You know what to do."

Kurogiri, that sentient portal, slowly expanded. Hatred laced Akira's eyes as he was rendered helpless, his body sinking in the darkness of Kurogiri's body.

"You son of a bit-!"

Akira was swallowed by the pitch blackness.

Izuku shivered as he hugged his knees to his chest.

Night time on the beach was always peaceful, pleasant, if not a bit cold. The clean sand felt good and the salty air refreshed him like

nothing else ever had. Still, there was uneasiness on the breeze as he checked his phone for the hundredth time.

Several hours had passed, and yet Akira hadn't sent any texts or calls. Maybe he forgot? But no, that wasn't like him at all! Izuku's thumb hovered over the call button. Was Izuku just being paranoid? Maybe. But his instincts had gone haywire since his conversation with Jiro.

Todoroki himself didn't look well after their visit to the cafe, and Yaoyorozu didn't seem to mind that they called it an early day.

Izuku shook his head, craning his neck to where the seawall stairs met the sand.

"Maybe calling him once wouldn't hurt?"

He pressed dial and held it up to his ear. The ringtone droned on and on *and on* . Boulders sank within Izuku's stomach. He tore the phone away and pressed redial.

The calls would continue to go unanswered.

I'm not sorry. Honestly this part has been planned ever since Akira was first labeled as 'quirkless' way at the beginning xD Giran, you don't know how bad you just screwed up ;D

Anyway, I do ask for everybody's patience. We are at a very high note within this story, but grief and depression have been hitting me very hard these last few weeks. July all the way through September will be very difficult for me personally. This story has helped me so much with coping for a variety of things, so focusing all of those emotions into writing, as well as reading all of your lovely comments, really do make my days so much better.

We'll keep up with the schedule of on chapter every other Saturday for the time being, but my ultimate goal right now is to be able to

update once a week for the Summer Camp/Kamino chapters because.... hoooo boy those will be so fun.

Anywho, enough rambling. Next chapter will be up on the 17th.

Singularity

Chapter 52: Singularity

Maybe he was just overthinking things.

Kurusu could be there, laughing as he told Izuku that he was too tired last night, that his phone had just died and he forgot to charge it.

Casually sips tea

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“-itch!”

Akira squeezed his eyes shut as the dark cloud spat him out amidst bright artificial lights. He fell for a good few seconds before the hard ground knocked the wind out of him. Other voices shouted. A hand touched his arm. His eyes snapped open and he lashed out.

A howl of pain was followed by colorful swears.

“Kid, calm down!” A man crouched down in front of him, blocking out some of the glaring light. Akira stared back into kind, soft blue eyes, a wrinkled face, and a salt and pepper beard. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you anywhere?”

“N-no, I...” Akira struggled to sit up. “I... think I’m okay.”

“Alright. Is it okay if I help with that zip tie? It’s starting to cut into your wrists.”

Ah, so that's why there was a sudden biting pain in his arms. That inescapable void gutting him had numbed everything else. Akira nodded. The old stranger moved slow and steady, as if Akira were an injured animal. There was a *snap*, and Akira was free.

"Barbarians." The kind stranger sneered at the bit of plastic before he tossed it away. "What's your name?"

The question was ignored as Akira scanned the windowless room. Hard, gray concrete. Tiny vents to allow air flow. Most likely underground. Just like the interrogation room. Other people hovered around them at a safe distance, most of them middle aged or older, sickly and thin. Their clothes hung off their frail bodies.

A thick yellow line sliced the room in half, the other side of the room was bare, empty, except for a heavy steel door. He thought he heard the grind of chains somewhere overhead.

"Whoever he is," Another man rocked back and forth on the floor, clutching his shin. "He's got one hell of a kick. *Damnit...* "

"Sorry." Akira rubbed his sore wrists. His fingers brushed something ice cold, a seamless band of silver with iridescent veins running through it, with no keyhole for him to pick though. "You can just call me Ren."

"Itsuki Yuuto." He stood with a heavy sigh and held down his hand. "Can you stand, Ren?"

"I think so?"

Akira took the hand and he was hauled to his feet. He wobbled as dizziness made the world spin and darkened the edges of his vision.

"Whoa!" Yuuto steadied him. "Maybe you should just sit down."

"What did they do to you?" A woman approached, ash-colored hair bleeding into pure white at the scalp. The light wrinkles did nothing to

soften her glare. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"D-drugs, I think?" Akira clutched his head, but he already knew that the drugs in his system were purged, the loss of his power made him weak....sick. Pieces of himself were being chipped away. "Some men ambushed me in a van, and I felt the needle. I didn't wake up until...."

He glanced up to where the non-existent portal spat him out. He swore he saw another... *thing* moving along the rafters on the other half of the room.

"Where are we, anyway?"

"We don't frickin' know." The downed man grumbled as he forced himself to his feet. "We don't know a *damn* thing about this place. Where we are, what time it is, even what *day*, hell even what month it is. They keep these damn lights on all the frickin' time!"

Akira's heart hurt. He had a feeling that Ryuji would like this person.

"Kid... Ren..." The woman sheepishly rubbed her arm. "What month *is* it?"

Those who had lost interest in Akira's sudden arrival stared at him, their eyes desperate, hopeless. Any fight was long beaten out of them.

"It's June 27th." Akira said. "The first day of summer already passed."

"The end of June, huh?" A hollow laugh escaped her lips. "Funny, it feels like I've been trapped here much longer."

Akira frowned. "What do they do here? Why do we have quirk suppressants even though I'm quirkless?"

"How do ya know they're quirk suppressants?" Not-Ryuji asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Lucky guess.” Akira glared at the icy thing flush to his skin. “What else would it be?”

“Most of us *are* quirkless.” Yuuto let his hands fall when he was sure that Akira wouldn’t collapse.

“Hey, I’m not quirkless!” Not-Ryuji shouted.

“Yeah,” The woman crossed her arms and scowled. “Because you had such a powerful quirk to begin with, Tokaji.”

“Hey, light pain resistance isn’t completely useless, you know!”

“Oh, and are you calling the *rest* of us useless? You’re the one who was howling on the floor when the kid kicked you.”

“No, of course not!”

“Enough.” Yuuto facepalmed. Akira noticed the silver glimmer of the band on his wrist, too. They all had them. “We don’t know why they gave these to mostly quirkless people. Maybe they’re paranoid that the stress of their experiments will awaken quirks in us.”

Akira’s mouth went dry. “... Experiments?”

Suddenly, a loud siren bellowed through the room. The others scrambled to the nearest wall, forcing their backs against the concrete. An inhuman scream echoed from the rafters above.

“What’s going on?”

“No time to explain. Just follow our lead.”

Yuuto grabbed Akira’s wrist and dragged him to the far wall, Tokaji and the woman trailed behind. Their backs were to the wall, but the three adults crowded in front of him as if to shield him from something. The giant steel door hissed open, the hinges screamed as if they hadn’t been oiled in years.

Two armed men dragged an unconscious body inside, tossing him carelessly over the yellow line in a crumpled heap. Akira's ears rang as he recognized that particular shade of strawberry colored hair. The guards did a quick sweep of the room, one of them grinning maliciously when he met Akira's eyes.

"Kid, wait!"

Akira shoved the adults aside and rushed to the unconscious person's side, his whole body screaming with all sorts of pains, but he *had to know* . He turned them over, and froze. He'd recognize this face anywhere, as pallid and covered in sweat as it was, for this face had stared back at him from a lifeless missing poster for weeks.

Shirogane Kaien.

The guards hovered by the door, snickering as the alarm finally died.

"Ren!"

Chain rattles and the mad howl of a starved beast pierced their ears. Someone grabbed the collars of their shirts and yanked them back. Akira only saw a blur of gray and vibrant green drop from the ceiling as Yuuto frantically pulled them to safety.

"Are you crazy!?" Yuuto let go of Akira's shirt. "That thing could've killed you!"

"What is *that!* ?"

Akira stared into the open maw of what could only be described as a demon. The gray humanoid body bore a few white stripes on its arms and legs. Four viridian flaps hung like delicate fabric from its chest and back, and worst yet, its entire head was split vertically by snapping jaws. The teeth were as big as knives.

The pair of guards bowled over in fits of laughter as the thing prowled back and forth on the yellow line, globs of saliva dripping

from its terrifying jaws. A thick shackle bound its neck, with a chain leading all the way to the ceiling. The chain was just short enough to prevent it from stepping over the line.

“That... doesn’t look like a Nomu.”

“What the hell is a Nomu?” Tokaji shuffled over to them.

“It used to be human, as far as we know.” Yuuto planted himself beside Akira and Kaien. “One with a dangerous transformation quirk. I heard from the guards that say they had ‘fun’ beating and starving the poor thing. That’s all that’s left of the poor bastard.”

“H-hey, don’t worry about it, ‘kay?” Tokaji grimaced. “Just don’t step over the line and that thing can’t hurt you.”

“You look dead on your feet.” The woman stared at them. “You should rest while you can.”

“But what about him?” Akira clutched Kaien’s shoulder to make sure that he was *real* . “He doesn’t look so good. I can’t just-”

“We’ll keep an eye on him, dear. We promise.”

“Come on.” Yuuto gently took Kaien in his arms. “Choose a spot and get some sleep. There aren’t any pillows or blankets, but it never gets too unbearable in here.”

Akira reluctantly nodded. He hauled himself over to an open corner and collapsed, his body feeling as if it was splitting apart at the seams. His empty mind rang far too loud. He was stripped of his power and his other selves with the *infernal* silver band clamped around his wrist.

With no other choice, he fell into a fitful slumber in a place where all hope had died.

“What do you mean you lost him!?” Morgana shrieked.

“T-the signal was there, and then it was gone! It-” Manami froze at a blessed ping from her computer. “No, I have it! I... what?”

“What’s wrong?” Tobita hardly sat down since they returned to the temporary hideout, a cheap hotel room with dingy furniture.

“His signal moved a few hundred miles in an instant! But how is that possible?”

“Who cares if it’s possible!?” Morgana scratched off another puff of fur. “Where is he?”

“H-here!” Manami rubbed her eyes. She hasn’t stopped crying since the incident. “He’s located in Sapporo. I’ll dig up everything I can about his location.”

“Good, then we can move to the next stage of the plan.” Morgana paced in small circles. “I hope this works.”

Tobita cleared his throat. “Akira’s plans are always... *daring* -”

“That’s the nice way of putting it.” Manami muttered.

“... Yes. They are daring, but they’ve always paid off.”

“I know that more than anybody, but... I have this nagging feeling that something else is wrong. We didn’t think that *this* would happen.” Morgana took in a shaky breath to try and calm down, but his nerves were too jittery. Seeing his partner, punched, *drugged again*, dragged away to who knows where, made his blood boil.

“He’s a reckless idiot with a heart of gold.”

“You can say that again.” Manami’s fingers ached as she typed faster. “It won’t take me long to gather what we need. We’ll move on the the next stage as soon as we can.”

“Good.” Morgana rubbed against her. “But don’t push yourself so hard that you pass out, okay?”

“I won’t! Don’t doubt my skills!”

“Who said that I ever doubted your skills!?”

Tobita sighed at their antics. Perhaps he should make another cup of tea to soothe his anxiety. He walked away, still hearing their bickering from the kitchenette. Tobita waited for the water to boil and, by habit, poured three cups of tea. He froze, staring forlornly into the final cup.

He promised himself that he would make Akira the finest cup of relaxing chamomile when they reunited.

Ryukyu sat in her office, arms crossed with her finger tapping incessantly on her arm.

Villains were taken down. People had been rescued. Those people were safe now, but the trauma they harbored could ruin the rest of their lives. Ryukyu glanced at the red mug sitting on her desk. She had found the box on her desk the morning after their raids, and the thank you note was locked away in her safe.

It wasn’t hard to guess who it was from. The other heroes from the group had all received one, too.

“This kid...”

She picked up her phone with a sigh, dialing somebody who she knows felt the same.

“Ryukyu? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Gang Orca.” She smiled. “I hope I’m not bothering you if you’re busy.”

"Not at all." The big softie chuckled. *"But you sound troubled. What's wrong?"*

"It's about our recent mission together." She bit her lip. "I can't stop thinking about these poor people, and what they've been through. I have a feeling that you're on the same boat with yours?"

Gang Orca sighed, long and exhausted. *"Yes. I don't want to think what would've happened to those children had we not gotten to them in time."*

"I know. I just..." She ran a hand through her hair. "I feel like we should do more for them."

"What do you mean?"

"We rescued them, right? But only physically. Mentally, what if they're still trapped? What if they see those places every time they close their eyes?"

"That is what therapy is for."

"Yeah, but not everyone might have access to it. They might not be able to afford therapy in the long term, even with the subsidies that come with being victims of a villain attack."

"What exactly are you trying to say, Ryukyu?"

The idea popped into her head like a neon light bulb.

"What if more people had access to those facilities, free of charge? What if..." Her eyes widened. She thought of Joker, how she viewed him as nothing more than a villain that needed to be thrown behind bars. How many other people were misunderstood, treated as villains for circumstances they had no control over? "What if it extended past victims, but to villains themselves? I-it would have to be separate facilities, but it could help understand why people become villains, and help them retain normal lives!"

Shocked silence overtook the line for several seconds. That inspiration flashing within her heart died as she frowned.

“Orca?”

“That is... quite an ambitious idea, Ryukyu. That said, if you could do this, then how would it be funded? How would you get the necessary resources to help these people? Building these places, hiring the proper professionals, and making sure that everything is being taken care of won’t be cheap.”

“Orca, you would know how much we make as top heroes. My ranking may have taken a minor hit, but it’s recovering. I have more money in my bank accounts than I could ever spend in several lifetimes.” She reached over for a pen and pad to write everything down. “I just want to give back after everything he did. This kid opened my eyes to how things really are, you know?”

“It might be less of a burden if you had a partner.”

That hope reignited like a pyre. “Orca, you mean...?”

“Yes. I would like to help you, if we could add children and learning centers into this?”

“Of course!” She grinned. “If we could get even more support from other heroes and-”

Ping . That bonfire of hope was smothered by a spontaneous deluge as she stared at her screen. Gang Orca inhaled sharply.

“Ryukyu, did you get it too?” He asked, all excitement reduced to a grim seriousness.

“Yes.” She stood from her desk, expression hardening. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

“I think so. I’ll make some calls to see if the others got it.”

“Right. Call me back as soon as you can, I’ll see where we can meet.”

“Roger.”

Gang Orca hung up as she swore underneath her breath. Her computer lit up with files and photographs of a normal looking pharmaceutical lab in Sapporo, but she knew it was far more sinister than meets the eye. She stared at the final photo, a map with a blaring red dot.

‘SOS - Birdie’

Given that it was from an untraceable email, it *had* to be from Joker. But if it was an SOS, did that mean that the kid was in serious trouble? His Spotlight hasn’t been updated. She shook her head. Whatever this was, she didn’t have a good feeling about it.

“Hang in there, kid.” She said as she stormed from her office. “We’re coming.”

Izuku couldn’t sleep.

He waited at the beach for hours until his mother texted him to come home at midnight. Kurusu never picked up. Worry gnawed away at him. Jiro’s words rang in his mind as he tossed and turned in bed, and he was out the door when the sky bled with the sun’s first light. The rest of the city was a hazy blur as his feet dragged him to one location, familiar and full of warmth and smiles.

Maybe he was just overthinking things.

Kurusu could be there, laughing as he told Izuku that he was too tired last night, that his phone had just died and he forgot to charge it.

“Deku!?” Izuku looked up to Uraraka’s beaming smile. “What brings you here so early?”

Izuku blinked. He already stood in front of the Blue Lotus.

“Uraraka!” Izuku’s shaky smile made the light and happiness in Uraraka drained away. “This might sound strange, but have you seen Kurusu yet?”

“Kurusu?” She tilted her head. “No? I was running late this morning, and I just got here too! I think they opened half an hour ago- Deku!?”

Izuku dove inside. Uraraka rushed after him. Izuku scanned the sea of people huddling in the booths with coffee and curry in front of them, and the sweet smell of caramel that drifted in from the kitchen. Kurusu wasn’t here.

Kurusu wasn’t here!

Shinsou Risumi smiled as he rushed to the front counter. “Good morning, what would you like?”

“Um,” Izuku wrung his hands together. “Is Kurusu working today?”

Risumi’s brow wrinkled. “He was supposed to, but he hasn’t come in yet. Why?”

“You haven’t called or texted him?”

Uraraka bit her lip as she tried to connect the dots. Was he worried about Kurusu?

“N-no. I’ve been trying to get a hold of him or his guardian, but I haven’t had any luck.” Risumi crossed her arms. “Kurusu isn’t the type of person who would do a no call no show, either.”

Izuku went pale.

“Deku?” Uraraka grabbed his sleeve. “You’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

“Kurusu and I were supposed to meet up at the beach last night after he got off work.” Izuku took a deep breath. “I waited on the beach until midnight, but he never showed up. My classmate, Jiro, her quirk gives her extremely sensitive hearing, and she said... she said that Kurusu’s heart rate was crazy high when we came in yesterday. He was really scared of something.”

Uraraka’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

“... What?” Risumi stabilized herself on the counter. “Why didn’t he tell us? Why did he...?”

“Excuse me.” A man with pitch black hair and vibrant red eyes came to the counter. “Are you okay, Shinsou-san? Are these kids upsetting you?”

“No, Akane.” The woman squared her shoulders, and any softness in her body hardened like steel. “But *something* is wrong. Kurusu might be missing.”

“*What* ?” Akane’s surprise was erased by a professional air. “Why do you think he’s missing?”

Izuku and Risumi explained everything while Akane wrote on a pad. The air of the cafe changed as the customers noticed Risumi’s growing concern. It became as silent as the grave.

“And you haven’t been able to reach Kurusu’s guardian?”

“No. I’ll keep trying though.”

“Alright. I’ll have to make a call.” Akane said as he tucked away the notepad. “My boss is a detective, he’ll know what to do.”

“R-right.” Risumi sighed. “I’ll inform my husband and we’ll close down the cafe. My son is out for his morning exercise, but I’ll call him

and tell him to come home.”

Emiyo raced to the counter. “What can we do to help?”

“I-”

“We can look around the surrounding area!” Another one called.

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

“Hey, wait for me!” Emiyo said, then she looked at Risumi with determination. “We’ll come back if we find anything!”

Many regulars marched out the cafe, leaving Risumi gaping. Only Haru-san and a few others remained, but the former looked into her tea with a forlorn sigh.

“What should we do?” Uraraka’s hands tightened into fists, and fire sparked in her eyes. “We can help, too!”

“You two sit tight.” Akane said as he dug out his phone. “We’ll need all the information you can give while we wait.”

“O-okay.” Uraraka said.

The adults leapt into action, while the two teens stood awkwardly by the front counter.

“I’m sure that Kurusu is okay.” Uraraka had a strained smile.

“Yeah, we’ll find him!” Izuku stated.

“Should we let the others know?” Uraraka reached into her pocket for her phone wrapped in a striped handkerchief. “They care about Kurusu-kun too.”

“I... I don’t know.” Izuku frowned at the weight in his pocket. “Let’s wait until that detective gets here first.”

She nodded, clutching the handkerchief over her chest.

“Hey, that was suppose to be mine! That’s not a fair portion!”

“Sorry, little bro.” Tensei grinned as his little brother wildly chopped his arms from across the table. “You have to be faster than that!”

“Boys, please.” Mother shook her head and sighed, but she couldn’t hide her smile. “I can always make more. Besides, you both need your energy. Tensei, you still look exhausted.”

Tenya stilled. “Yes, you’ve been working a lot lately. Make sure to get plenty of proper rest, nii-san!!”

“I told you guys that I’m fine.” Tensei shoved the wayward piece of tempura in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “I do miss being a daylight hero, but I love working behind the scenes. It gives me a lot of satisfaction that I never had before.”

“Alright.” His mother gave him a stern glare. “But even that won’t help if you collapse out of exhaustion. If not for yourself, then for us. Please?”

Tensei smiled as Tenya nodded sharply. “Okay, I promise-”

His phone chimed with an alert. His mouth dropped open as he stared at the screen. His chopsticks fell from his slackened grip and rolled off the table to clatter on the floor.

“Tensei, what’s wrong?” His mother asked, eyes brimming with concern.

“N-nothing.” He stood from the table. “Emergency at the office. I’m gonna have to make a few calls.”

“But-”

“Can you pack something quick for lunch, Tenya?” Tensei asked. “I might be out for a while.”

“O-of course!” Tenya bolted into the kitchen.

“Dear, what’s really going on?”

“I can explain later.” Tensei sighed. “But right now somebody needs my help. It’s important.”

“Okay.” She stepped away from the table and wrapped her arms around him. “Just be careful, alright?”

“Always.”

Tenya rushed in with a bento box. “I packed all of your favorites as quick and neat as I could!!”

“Thanks.” He ruffled Tenya’s hair before grabbing the box. “I’ll call and let you know when I’ll be back home, okay?”

They nodded, and he rushed out the door a minute later.

The cafe was empty. Where once was the laughter and chatter of an entire crowd, now there was only strained silence. Any coffee served had gone cold as they huddled in one of the booths. Risumi and Ayumu on one side, Uraraka and Midoriya on the other. Akane watched the door.

The ring of the doorbell drew their eyes.

“A-Aizawa-sensei!?” Uraraka cried. “What are you doing here?”

Aizawa glowered at his students. “How are you two involved in all of this?”

“Aizawa, go easy on them.” Detective Tsukauchi smiled at those sitting in the booth. “We’re only here to help.”

“Help?” Risumi exited the booth and marched straight up to Aizawa. “How are *you* going to help? You two always come in here and make things worse for him! How do you expect us to trust you!?”

Uraraka and Midoriya exchanged confused glances as Ayumu rushed to his wife.

“Risumi.” He gently pulled her away. “Let’s hear them out, first.”

“But... but they...” Her anger melted with an exhausted sigh. “Fine.”

“Whatever has happened before,” Tsukauchi held up placating hands. “Know that we really are trying to help him, and right now he might need us. What can you tell us about the situation? Akane has filled us in, but we’d like to hear from you.”

Midoriya and the Shinsous’ parroted what they told Akane, but they weren’t able to come up with any new details. None of the regulars had come back yet, either. That was, until the cafe door opened once more.

Hitoshi froze as the door swung closed behind him, eyes flicking back and forth.

“Uh...” His water bottle crunched under his tense grasp. “What’s going on?”

“Hitoshi, sweetie.” Risumi took his hand and led him to the booth, where he hesitantly sat on the edge, eyes wide at his mother. “Don’t panic, okay?”

“Okay, but I’m honestly starting to panic right now.” His eyes scanned the room, landing on Aizawa, who stared back with a furrowed brow. “Tell me what’s happened. You sounded worried over the phone.”

“It’s Kurusu. He’s...” Risumi bit her lip. “He’s missing.”

“H-he’s....but no, that can’t be right.” Hitoshi stiffened. He went as white as a ghost as realization slapped him in the face. “No. N-no. He.... he *wouldn’t!* ”

Risumi and Ayumu gawked at their son.

“He... he wouldn’t what?” Midoriya piped up. “Are you okay, Shinsou?”

“Hitoshi.” Ayumu placed both hands on Hitoshi’s shaking shoulders. “What’s wrong? If you know something, you can tell us.”

Tsukauchi and Aizawa looked at each other, and Aizawa nodded.

“You won’t get in trouble either.” Tsukauchi said softly. “But we must know more if we want to find him. What did you mean? Kurusu wouldn’t do *what* ?”

“I...” Hitoshi began to sweat. Sweat that had nothing to do with how hard he pushed himself during his run. “He was giving me tips on working out. Um, w-we were walking home two nights ago when... when...”

Aizawa filed this information away for later. Right now, he couldn’t be angry at his potential student.

“We were by the mall when Kurusu suddenly wanted to change directions. I asked why. He said we were being followed.”

Tsukauchi stiffened. “Followed?”

“Yeah.”

Aizawa crossed his arms. “Why were you two being followed?”

Hitoshi bit his lip. He almost couldn’t take all of the stares from the adults surrounding the booth. Midoriya and the other girl’s worry didn’t help either.

“He wasn’t after me. He was after Kurusu.”

“But how did you know he was after Kurusu?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Because we cornered him in an alley and confronted him about it.”

“*What!?* But why would-”

“Midoriya.” Aizawa sighed. “Let him finish.”

Midoriya turned red. “S-sorry.”

Hitoshi ground his teeth together and glared at the floor. “He said he was desperate for money, and he heard that some group was shilling out serious yen for information on quirkless people. He was going to scout out our cafe, but it was just by coincidence that he saw us out on the streets.”

“What happened to this man?” Tsukauchi had an inscrutable look in his eye, his pen hovering over his notepad.

“He freaked out when we confronted him, and he let Kurusu and I walk away after he spilled the beans. He didn’t follow us.”

Couldn’t follow more like, seeing as how they left him unconscious, but he wasn’t about to tell them that.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Risumi put her hand on Hitoshi’s head.

“Because I was angry!”

“... Angry?” Ayumu frowned. “You did come home in a bad mood that night.”

“But why were you angry?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Akira... that *asshole* wanted me to forget about the whole thing!” Tears stung Hitoshi’s eyes. “H-he said didn’t want me caught up in anything because that guy was following *him*, and he had nothing to

do with me. Some creep was stalking Kurusu, but he was more concerned for *my* safety!” Hitoshi angrily scrubbed his eyes. “S-so, if we can’t get a hold of him now, then that moron probably used himself as bait!”

The words were out before he could stop them. Several gasps broke out as the atmosphere of the cafe froze over with dread.

“Th-that’s why Jiro said he was scared.” Midoriya was as pale as Hitoshi. “Because he knew he was in danger?”

“Why didn’t he say anything!?” Uraraka’s eyes flooded with tears. “We could’ve helped him!”

“Take it easy.” Aizawa said. “Right now, time is of the essence. Getting upset won’t help anybody.”

“He’s right.” Akane said. “Still, we can’t get into contact with Kurusu’s guardian, right? Do we have an address?”

The older Shinsous’ exchanged quick glances, and Hitoshi shrunk in on himself when their eyes fell on him. Akane smiled gently.

“Would you-”

“I-I can’t...” Hitoshi ducked his head.

“But we *have* to speak with Kurusu’s guardian.” Tsukauchi implored. “He could be in danger, too.”

“He didn’t put his home address anywhere?” Tsukauchi asked.

“No.” Ayumu shook his head. “He left it blank on his application.”

“I see.” Akane peered at Hitoshi. “Shinsou, please tell us.”

Hitoshi shook his head as the walls seemed to close in on him. His heart was like a beating war drum as everyone stared at him in

expectation, but he couldn't handle how their eyes dug into him. The cold sweat on the back of his neck sprouted goosebumps.

Tsukauchi stepped closer. "Shinsou-"

"I just can't, okay!?" Hitoshi suddenly bellowed.

The shocked stillness was overtaken by Tsukauchi's ringing phone. The detective grimaced as he stepped away to answer. The rest of the group waited in tense silence as Tsukauchi responded in quick whispers, and he hung up after a few minutes.

"That was the police chief. There's a meeting being set up with some of the top heroes in Japan. He wants both of us there. Nezu too."

Aizawa dragged out a long sigh. "Alright, I'll call him after we leave."

"What happens now?" Risumi interrupted. "What's going on?"

"An emergency meeting has been called, it might have to do with Kurusu's situation." Aizawa said. The three teenagers in the booth sat ramrod straight, eyes so focused that they were like daggers.

"And no, you three should stay out of it."

"But-"

"No buts, Uraraka."

"He's my best friend, and he could be in serious trouble!" Hitoshi shot up, gripping his shirt with white knuckles. "And you expect us to sit here and do nothing!? That's *bullshit* !"

"Hitoshi!" Risumi cried.

"Let the professionals handle it." Tsukauchi said, frowning. "I know it's hard to sit still when one of your friends might be in danger, but we'll do everything in our power to make sure that he is found safe and sound, okay?"

Hitoshi sneered. He looked as if he was about to say something caustic to Tsukauchi, but thought better of it.

“Midoriya, Uraraka, you two should head home.” Aizawa droned. “You aren’t licensed, and I’m not about to drag you into this when you’re not on an official internship, either.”

Uraraka bowed her head, her lip quivering. Midoriya looked torn as several emotions flowed through his eyes. The table would’ve cracked if he gripped it any harder.

“Akane, can you stay here and watch the cafe?” Tsukauchi turned to the officer. “If there are individuals going after quirkless people, then there’s a chance that this place might be in danger.”

“Yes, sir!”

“We don’t need your protection.” Risumi crossed her arms. “We’ve never needed your protection before, we don’t need it now.”

“Shinsou-san.” Akane smiled at her. “It’ll only be for a little bit, okay?”

“We don’t really have a choice, do we?” She snapped.

“Risumi, please.” Ayumu had the unfamiliar glimmer of defeat. “This is for Kurusu.”

“You... you’re right. I’m sorry.”

Hitoshi suddenly ducked his head and rushed into the kitchen.

“Hitoshi!” Risumi chased after him.

Ayumu scrubbed at his face, before pinning Aizawa and Tsukauchi with a glare.

“You better bring that kid back safe, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.” Tsukauchi said.

Ayumu nodded, and he turned around to follow his distressed wife and son.

They bid goodbye to Akane and walked out of the morose cafe.

"Kid? Kid!"

Akira jolted awake with a gasp. The gentle hand on his shoulder retracted as if it burned, and he bent over in a coughing fit. His chest *hurt* . It was like a mirror being tossed into the Mariana Trench, his soul being *crushed* and *squeezed* with intense pressure the further it sank into the darkness.

"Jesus, kid." He looked up to the same woman from last night. "You look like shit."

"S-sorry." He rasped.

"What are you sorry for?" She huffed as she sat next to him. "You looked like you were having a bad nightmare, so I woke you up. That bruise on your face looks *nasty* ."

Akira felt his cheek, hissing when his fingers prodded the swollen flesh.

"Here." Akira blinked at the apple shoved into his hand, and glanced at her with a raised brow. "Don't give me that look. They give us just enough food to not starve, but it looks you need this more than me."

"No," He held it out towards her. "I feel sick just looking at it. You take it."

"Kid-"

"You can call me Ren."

"Fine. *Ren*, just take it. You look sicker than a dog, so you'll need your strength."

“I... okay.” He shifted to sit cross legged, rolling the apple in between his palms. “I never got your name last night.”

“Junko Kagome. But we’re all stuck in this mess together, so don’t bother with being overly polite, yeah? Just call me Kagome.”

Akira nodded and then looked around their cell. Yuuto and Tokaji, as promised, sat on either side of Shirogane, who was still unconscious, pale, sweating. Others stood around, either leaning against the wall or just walking circles around the open area. Most had a dead look in their eyes as they stared off into nothing.

That poor chained creature was curled up on the other side of the line, sleeping.

Akira bit his lip and stared down at the apple. “What time is it?”

“Well, ain’t that the million yen question?” She waved at the blank walls. “You see any clocks around here? But, judging from what you told us and how long you’ve been sleeping, I would guess that its early morning. Maybe the sun is up, maybe not. We can never tell.”

No wonder these people lost hope. Being locked down here, without rain or shine, night or day, with no way to tell what time it was, could be maddening. The blaring white lights never flickered, never turned off or on to signal what time of day it was.

“How long have you been here?”

“Me?” She crossed her arms and sighed. “You said it was June, right?”

Akira nodded.

“... It was November when they snatched me. Damnit, it feels like so much longer.” Her eyes misted over. “A poor old quirkless woman working a dead end job, barely making her rent or having the money for food. I suppose they thought nobody would miss me. Maybe they

were right. I doubt anybody is looking for the likes of us *quirkless* people.”

Akira ran a hand through his hair, freezing when his fingers brushed the tracking pin. There was a reason why he wanted Manami to make it with a *hair pin*. Disguising the movement as scratching his head, he slipped the hair pin into his right sleeve.

“That’s not true.” He said as the pin brushed his skin. “There are people coming for us. I know it.”

She looked at him, her lips pursed and her eyes falling with pity.

“Ren, you’re a sweet kid.” She put a hand on his arm. “But people like us are treated as second class citizens at best. I know that look in your eyes. You’ve been treated like shit all your life too, haven’t you?” Akira opened his mouth, then closed it. “I knew it.”

“Maybe I haven’t been treated fairly.” He stated, eyes sparking with faint sputters of hope. “But I’ve made friends with people who don’t give a shit where I come from or if I have powers or not. People who have had my back through thick and thin. They *won’t* abandon me.”

Her eyes widened, but howling sirens prevented her from responding. The creature jolted awake, screeching as it clutched its head in agony, before jumping up to the rafters above. The metal door opened as the prisoners put their backs to the walls. Kagome dragged Akira unsteadily to his feet as several guards poured in the room.

The same guard who sneered at Akira last night led the group over the yellow line.

“Yuuto, it’s your lucky day!” He chirped happily, and Akira didn’t like the vile smirk. “It’s your turn again, old man.”

“What!?” Tokaji shouted. “But it was his turn last time before you took the kid, a-and the time before that!”

“Hey, I don’t make the rules.” The guard tapped a taser on his belt. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Yuuto bowed his head in defeat. “I understand.”

“You can’t! This is bullshit!” Tokaji stepped in front of Yuuto. “Don’t you see how weak he’s been!? Any more will kill him!”

“What, are you saying you’d take his place?” Tokaji flinched as the head guard grinned at him. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You talk big, but you’re just a coward. Useless, just like the rest of these rejects.”

Tokaji was the first to throw a punch. The head guard dodged it with ease, and screams broke out at the *crack* of a taser. Tokaji spasmed on the ground and writhed in agony. The other guards laughed as their leader was about to go in for a second strike.

“*Stop it !*” With the apple forgotten, Akira pushed past Kagome and stood in front of the others with his arms out. “That’s enough!”

The sirens cut through the shock as everyone’s eyes pinned Akira to the spot.

“Ren, what are you doing!?” Kagome was at his side, staring at the kid as if he were crazy.

“Ooh, look what we have here.” The leader was face to face with Akira, the taser sparking dangerously. “Last night’s fresh meat has some backbone! What are you gonna do, kid?”

“I’ll take Yuuto’s place.”

“Ren!!” Kagome shouted.

Yuuto grasped his shoulder and made to pull him back.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Yuuto.” The guard pointed his taser at the old man. “Can’t you see that this kid is doing you a favor? You

better thank him properly. After all, you know how the doctor *loves* breaking in the new ones.”

More screams rang out, but Akira’s world turned into a haze of static fire suddenly piercing into his stomach. He collapsed to the floor, his head slamming against the hard concrete. Stars and blurred faces swam in his vision.

“Ren-”

Harsh hands gripped his arms and he was roughly dragged across the floor.

“Ren!!”

Spinner wished he could slam his head against the wall, if only to relieve the monotony. He’s been staring at the white ceiling for an age. He’s tried *everything* to escape the horrific dentist’s chair turned torture machine, squirming, wriggling, nearly breaking his thumbs, but the restraints were too tight.

How long has he been strapped in here, stripped of his weapons and tailcoat?

How long has his mind been buzzing and his body wracking with pain? Where was Lady Stubbs? If they had hurt her he *swore* he would hurt them ten times as bad.

He whipped his head towards the lab door as it opened.

“-I told you to be careful with them!! *Careful!!!* ” The short, bald doctor with a bushy mustache screamed. “Now look at the state of him! I have to waste time and resources to heal him and it’s your fault! Vital progress will be lost!”

Spinner’s stomach clenched like an icy ball when they dragged in a kid, *a helpless teenager*, into the room. A small trickle of blood

dripped down his face and while he was *awake*, his eyes were vacant, hollow. There, and yet *not there* .

“You know how they get.” That utter bastard with the taser smirked. “This kid wanted to pick a fight, and the others would’ve joined had I not intervened.”

“I won’t hear anymore of your nonsense! Just get him in the chair so I can look him over!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The kid was as weak as a newborn, struggling uselessly as they strapped him to the second chair.

“Now out, *out!* ” The doctor grumbled as the guards were kicked out and he slammed the door shut. “Imbeciles! Now, let’s get a look at you, boy.”

“Hey, hey!” Spinner thrashed in the chair. “Just what did they do to him, huh!? He’s just a kid!!”

“Shut it, you.” The doctor growled. “Though I agree that those degenerates need to be more careful with my stock. I don’t understand why Sensei won’t let me replace them with Nomu. They would never go against orders...”

The kid whimpered when the doctor fetched a rolling table laden with needles and other medical supplies. Spinner felt his heart shatter when he shrunk away in horror, wrestling and lashing in his bonds.

“Now, now. Hold still!” The doctor grasped the boy’s head, sighing as his fingers were stained red. He clicked his tongue in disgust as he held the boy’s head back and waved a small flashlight in his eyes. “Definitely a concussion. Bruising along his face and electrical burns on his torso thanks to those careless gorillas. Pupils heavily dilated. Sweating profusely with a high grade fever? This must be from when

he was brought in- Boy, if you don't stop resisting then I will sedate you."

Spinner tuned the doctor's voice out, his eyes locked into the raven-haired child as he struggled. The doctor finished his mutterings and picked up a syringe, and the boy froze like a deer in the headlights.

"N-no..."

"Hmm?" The doctor turned to him, holding up the needle. "What did you say?"

"I-I don't want another shot." The boy's voice was so broken and hopeless that horror trickled up Spinner's spine. "I... I already signed the confession. What more do you people want from me!?"

"Oh?" The doctor's eyebrows shot skywards. "Whatever are you talking about? What confession?"

"No more drugs, p-please..."

"It's just a light sedative so I can treat-"

"No!"

The kid was like a wild animal as he tugged harder on the restraints, but the doctor only sighed and shook his head. Pure terror sparked in the kid's eyes as the doctor rolled up the kid's left sleeve and held his arm down, the needle approaching.

"No, *no* !!"

The needle went in, the plunger pressed down. It had an immediate effect. The boy tried to fight it off, but his eyes fluttered closed against his will. Spinner saw him tear up before he lost consciousness.

"Morgana..."

The doctor sighed once the boy was sedated. "The things I do for these people. They should be grateful."

Something in Spinner *snapped*.

"Grateful? *Grateful!*?" Rage rolled into his chest like a building thunderstorm. "You think they should be grateful!? To hell with that, and to hell with you! They would've been out there living their lives if you didn't kidnap and experiment on them like the twisted freak you are! If I was out of these restraints, I'd-urg!"

His ribs burned and he tasted copper at the back of his throat.

"Calm down, lizard." The doctor threw the empty syringe in a disposal box on the wall and wiped his hands on a towel. "Or I'll sedate you to set your ribs again. Is that what you want?"

Spinner held his tongue. He pounded his head repeatedly on his chair, earning the doctor's annoyed sigh as he began wrapping the boy's injuries. A vow was forged in that moment.

He would rescue the people trapped down here, no matter what the cost.

Such self sacrifice is nothing short of what Joker would do, and he wouldn't be any different.

Hawks walked down the hall towards the police station's conference room with a frown. There were far more people in there than he thought there would be, but he slapped on a bright smile as he threw open the door.

"Sorry I'm late, everyone. Those headwinds were pretty challenging to fly through."

"You *flew!*?" Miruko cackled. "You could've just used public transport like a normal person!"

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Take your seat, Hawks.” Chief Tsuragamae sighed at the head of the table. “Do we need to start over?”

“Nah, Miruko has been keeping me up to date.”

He planted himself between a grinning Miruko and Ryukyu. Speaking of which, Ryukyu’s intern was here. Gang Orca, Best Jeanist, and Iida Tensei sat on his side of the table. On the opposite side was an exhausted hobo, a textbook detective in a trench coat, Principal Nezu, and...

Sir Nighteye, accompanied by his smiling intern, Lemillion.

“Although I’m a bit surprised that there are so many people here.” Hawks said.

“Ah, Chief Tsuragamae called for my aid.” Principal Nezu folded his paws on the table with a grin. “And I, in turn, called in a few extra hands to help in our endeavor. Isn’t that right, Nighteye?”

Nighteye sighed. “Yes.”

“Now, I’m sure one side of the table is a bit confused as to why we’ve called this meeting.” Chief Tsuragamae crossed his arms as his eyes wandered over to Iida. “If you could explain the situation.”

Sir Nighteye frowned as he adjusted his glasses.

“Of course.” Tensei grabbed a remote from the table to turn on an overhead projector. “As the reports before you state, a few nights ago we took down several villain organizations and human trafficking rings. However, it wasn’t until after these rings were taken down that our informant said there was another targeting quirkless individuals.”

“Which were enacted against protocol.” Chief Tsuragamae clasped his hands together on the table, his expression unreadable.

“Permission to invade these places was never given.”

“I know, sir.” Tensei bowed his head. “I plan to take full responsibility _.”

“Oh no you won’t!” Gang Orca slammed a meaty hand on the table, jostling several cups of cold tea. “We were all in this *together*, and I will not allow you to take the fall by yourself!”

Tensei’s eyes widened. “Orca-”

“I won’t let it happen either.” Ryukyu scanned the room. “This operation was willingly agreed upon by everybody.”

“Damn straight!” Miruko shouted.

“But not *everybody* is present, isn’t that correct?” The heroes stiffened as Nezu’s beady eyes brimmed with intelligence. “Your unnamed informant is responsible for this gathering, yes?”

Hawks grit his teeth together.

“Yes.” Tensei stated.

“Then why do you not disclose their identity?” Tsuragamae leaned forward. “This individual is just as responsible as the rest of you for going against protocol and acting on your own, and now they have needlessly put themselves in danger to uncover this final trafficking ring.”

For some reason, the hobo and the detective’s heart rates picked up. Interesting. Nezu’s heart rate was sky high too, but not in fear like these other gentlemen. It was in *excitement* . The thrill of a hunt. They must know something, but Hawks remained silent and slid on a passive mask.

“Wait.” Sir Nighteye peered into the screen, which showed the map of Sapporo. “I am not aware of any human trafficking rings or any Yakuza groups in this location.”

“Have you investigated this city before?” Hawks asked, eyes as sharp as Nighteye’s. “Bold of you to assume that you know everything about a city you haven’t looked into.”

“That is not what I meant.” Nighteye sighed. “I only stated that I haven’t heard anything of the like in that city. That’s all.”

“Be at peace, gentlemen!” Nezu chirped. “What does it matter the name of their informant, or of this city in particular? The informant has sent out a dire SOS with a keyword that only these heroes would know. If I am correct, we assume that they are in danger because all contact with them has ceased?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Tensei’s brows furrowed. “I believe that they could be in grave danger if we don’t act soon. There may be other individuals kept against their will.”

“I have looked into missing quirkless people.” Best Jeanist scowled. “And it’s true. Many quirkless people, mostly including elderly and even a teenager, have been recorded as missing for *months*, and yet nobody has spent the resources needed to search for them. It’s as if they have been forgotten.”

“... I see.” Tsuragamae deeply sighed through his nose. “But we simply cannot charge in blindly. These blueprints may be falsified to throw off any who are suspicious.” Tsuragamae looked at Nighteye. “Since these heroes acted without permission, I will give you the leading role. Nezu, can you provide support from the outside?”

The top heroes were going to object, but Nezu silenced them.

“Indeed! I shall do everything in my power to help!” The rat said.

“Very well. I already have a proposal.” Nighteye stood from his chair, his intern sitting ramrod straight, eyes razor sharp. “I would like to use my quirk on an employee leaving the building. If I see anything useful, then we could use that information to formulate a plan.”

Hawks raised his hand. "Same here. I could send in my feathers to scope out the inside. There should be a few vents that they could travel through."

"Ooh, it would be like killing two birds with one stone!" Nejire-chan bounced in her seat. "No offense to Hawks, of course!"

Miruko cackled.

Ryukyu pinched the bridge of her nose.

Hawks winked. "None taken, darling."

Nighteye nodded. "Then I suggest that we reconvene once we have more information."

The other half of the table was forgotten as Hawks exchanged quick glances with his group. Ryukyu gnashed her teeth together, but kept a smile for her intern. Gang Orca took constant deep breaths to calm his protective anger. Best Jeanist sank in his chair, brow knotted together. Iida was hyper focused on the map splayed on the wall. Miruko was a minute away from punching a hole in the wall, if the annoyed twitch in her ears was anything to go by.

They shared the same sentiment.

Whatever happens, they'll make sure that Joker makes it through alright.

Their demeanor didn't go unnoticed by Nezu.

Nighteye and Hawks prowled around the target. Hawks abandoned his costume for a disguise, and he made sure that these clothes were his colors this time. He lounged back in a dark alley as his smallest feathers were scattered around the building.

“Oh, I heard somebody exit out back.” Hawks grinned at Nighteye. “It’s your time to shine! They’re heading to the main road, so you should be able to bump into them.”

Nighteye nodded. “Mirio, stay here. I’ll be back momentarily.”

“Yes, sir!”

Nighteye bore a tiny smile before he stepped out into the busy street. His hero costume, a deceptively sturdy business suit, blended in with the crowd. On cue, an employee hustled out the back of an innocent looking pharmacy. To anyone else, the collision looked like an accident.

“Hey, watch it!”

“I apologize.” Nighteye put a hand to the man’s shoulder to stabilize him. “It’s my fault.”

“Damn right it’s your fault-”

Nighteye activated his quirk.

Worst mistake of his life. White hot pain stabbed into his eyes like blazing pokers as forbidden knowledge flooded his mind in an unrelenting storm. It was too much. His mind couldn’t handle it! Too many images and noises and scents blurring together in an unending stream. The reel had split into infinite possibilities, flailing wildly underneath the malicious laughter of an unseen god.

Make it stop. Make it stop!

Make it stop!!

“Whatever, freak!”

The man scoffed and shoulder checked him, abandoning Nighteye as agony paralyzed him. It was a small mercy when his quirk *finally* stopped, leaving his head swimming in confusion, his mind nearly

fractured into bits. He dragged himself into the closest alleyway before he lost the entirety of his breakfast behind a garbage bin.

“Sir?”

Mirio and Hawks rushed into the alley, worry clear in their expression. His heart hurt when his intern looked at him with such uncertainty. He held back dry heaving as he leaned against the wall, wiping sweat from his brow.

“I’m fine.”

“Clearly.” Hawks deadpanned. “What happened? I take it that your quirk wasn’t supposed to do *that* ?”

“I don’t know. I saw... I honestly don’t understand? It was too much too fast, it didn’t make any sense. *Whatever* is in that building, it’s not... it isn’t natural.”

“Right....About that.” Hawks looked over his shoulder. “My feathers just picked up quite the large basement. A basement that *wasn’t* on any blueprints, I might add. Several dozen people are down there, most are crammed into the largest room.”

“So,” Mirio’s sunny smile fell as he helped his mentor to his feet. “There really are civilians trapped down there.”

“Given the obvious stress on their bodies?” Hawks hummed. “I would say so.”

“Then we know what our next step is.” Nighteye patted his intern on the back, who let him stand freely. Nighteye took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with the end of his sleeve. “Let’s recall everyone and share what we’ve learned. We can’t let these people suffer any longer.”

Hawks gave them the two finger salute. “Right. Let me do that while you get yourself together.”

“... Thank you.”

Hawks turned his back to them and retrieved his phone, ignoring the growing number of angry emails from Kunikazu to dial Tsuragamae's number. He nodded at Nighteye and his intern once it was done, and they left the dirty alleyway behind to work out a plan of attack.

Still, one idea popped into Keigo's head, an especially wicked task that would need to be done after they rescued Joker and the other quirkless people.

He'd have to lose this phone to an untimely accident.

This chapter totally didn't make me cry a little when Akiren said Morgana's name ;3 Next chapter will hit the feels even worse, but in a good way. If you guys don't know who that 'monster' was that was guarding the cell, it was Gale's demon form from Digital Devil Saga. I wanted to include him somehow, as he is my favorite character from my favorite game dualogy. Could I have simply used a Nomu? Probably, but I honestly don't care.

Hooo boy, next chapter has a lot packed in it.... including the next persona reveal which might be my favorite reveal so far! :D I know I said that the upcoming chapters would be shorter but the next one is near 13k, and the one after is 14k... I have no self control. I might try to cut them down a bit, but they are the final chapters before the Summer Camp, and any loose ends must be tied before the Point Of No Return. We shall see.

ALSO, I do keep meaning to go back and do touch ups and such on the first half of this story, but I haven't had the time or energy to start yet. I'll get there eventually.

Until next time! ;)

~Next update is July 31st!~

Wicked Plan

Chapter 53: Wicked Plan

“You know the last doctor I worked with was way more attractive.” Akira squinted. “Sorry, but I don’t think you’d be able to pull off that goth look even if you tried. I’ll have nightmares imagining you in fishnet stockings.”

Spinner made a noise between a wheezing cough and a cackle.

This chapter was split in half, so the persona reveal will be next chapter.

I suppose I’ll give a slight trigger warning for this chapter too because Akira does go a bit savage in two parts that involve needles going into places they shouldn’t.

Also, important schedule update in the end notes.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“My feathers have infiltrated the building.”

“Stand by while I present the search warrant. We’ll go on the offensive if they retaliate.”

“My feathers can protect the captives, so we don’t need to worry about them turning into hostages.”

“Yes, make sure to guide Lemillion to the prisoners. We can never be too careful. Do you copy, Lemillion, Hawks?”

"Yes, sir!!"

"Yep. It'll be cake with Lemillion's quirk."

"Miruko, Hawks, Gang Orca, and the police squad will accompany myself and Lemillion inside. The rest of you wait out here in case any try to escape."

"Sweet. I'm ready to kick ass!"

"Roger." Best Jeanist said.

"I'll circle the building with Nejire-chan." Ryukyu shouted. *"Leave it to us!"*

"Did you hear that?" La Brava whispered over the comms.

"Loud and clear." Mona crouched on the corner of an adjacent building, watching the lively scene below. *"Good work, Oracle. Let's keep our eyes and ears peeled for anything on Joker."*

"Oracle?"

"Urg! I-I meant La Brava. I totally said La Brava!"

"... Right." La Brava sighed. *"I know Joker told us not to intervene, but it's really hard to sit here and watch from a distance."*

"I know, my dear. But we will be ready once he leaves that vile lab. I hope he's okay. Being trapped in a place like that... I can't even imagine."

"I-it's nearly been two days. I'm worried."

"This is Joker we're talking about." Mona flicked his tail as he watched the heroes ready themselves. *"H-he'll be okay. They're going inside, so be ready to move at any time."*

"Okay."

Mona watched Sir Nighteye step inside the insidious lab. He looked up at the first star twinkling in the heavens, where another brighter star lingered next to it like a twin.

“He’s okay.” He whispered to himself. “He has to be.”

“Guess the drug was too strong. Wake him up.”

A deluge of ice cold water doused him. He startled awake, groggy and sore from being cuffed to a chair for an endless night. His vision wouldn’t focus, but he already knew that he was still trapped in a hellish place. Cold concrete walls had long banished any sunlight or fresh air from this place. A useless camera was in the corner, recording everything and nothing.

But all of these paled in comparison to the disfigured demons peering at him with callous eyes. These were not human. They may have worn human skin and called themselves as such, but evil coursed through their veins like a drug. He was nothing more than an insignificant bug to be squashed. The lead demon smirked, revealing its rows of dagger-like teeth.

“No dozing off.” He said as Akira thrashed against the chair. “You still don’t get it, do you? Give it up!”

The other demons cackled as their leader kicked Akira in the chest. He was flung from the chair as bursts of pain exploded throughout his body, and he found himself splayed out on the floor. “Come on, cooperate.” The demon’s sharp heel dug into his temple. “Or what, you want another shot?”

“Akira?”

The horrified voice was lost to the nightmare.

Akira looked into the gleaming red eye of the camera.

"The camera?" The demon followed his gaze. Grinning, he knelt down and grasped Akira by the hair. "What, do you honestly think it can be used as video evidence?"

Akira remained silent, gathering what little embers of rebellion he could through the haze. The demon sneered. Akira's head was slammed into the ground.

"Didn't you hear my question?" A solid thud resonated through the room as the demon's boot kicked him once, then twice. He gasped and wheezed as the demon rolled his eyes. "Answer me, brat!"

"That's enough!"

The demons were banished, gone as fast as the wind. The interrogation room melted away into nothingness. Gentle hands cradled him and Akira found that the tight cuffs had suddenly vanished. Akira blinked several times as he recognized the wild indigo hair.

"Hitoshi...?"

"Fraid not, kid. Hitoshi doesn't have a dream walking quirk." Ayumu helped him sit up as Akira rubbed his head.

"Where are we?"

"You tell me." Ayumu looked around blackness as deep as a void. "Usually somebody's subconscious is a bit more... filled out. I've never seen one this dark."

"Th-they..."

Ayumu's insides roiled at the sheer hopelessness on Akira's face. "Akira, are you okay?"

"They're being suppressed. I can't hear them." Akira clutched his heart as it beat with the excruciating sharpness of broken glass. He

whimpered as he clawed at his own chest. "I can't feel them? Why!? Where are they!? Why can't I...?"

"Hey, snap out of it!" Ayumu firmly grasped his shoulders, his face set with fierce determination. "You'll be alright. Just hang in there for a little bit longer, okay?"

The dark nightmare realm shifted and Ayumu began to fade away.

"What's happening?" Akira grasped Ayumu's wrist as he became nothing more than a stray wisp. "D-don't go! Don't disappear and leave me behind like everyone else!"

"I'll be alright. You're just waking up." Akira stiffened as he felt an invisible hand ruffle his hair, and he stared into the blaze striking Ayumu's eyes. "I promise that help is on the way, okay? Just hang in there!"

"I-I..."

Ayumu vanished like a water droplet in a scorching desert, but his voice persisted through the blackness.

"Hang in there, Akira!!"

Akira woke up with a gasp, coughing as the dryness burned the back of his throat.

"Take a breath, kid!"

Akira blinked tears from his eyes, but the incessant buzz filling his head with cotton made it hard to concentrate. Still, his stiff muscles and joints creaked with misuse as he tried to move, but he was bound to a chair. Again. His heart rate spiked as he stared at the IV in his left elbow. The air was foul with heavy disinfectants and the constant hum of machinery came from behind his chair.

"Kid!"

Akira's head snapped to another bound in a similar chair. A lizard man dressed in ragged clothes.

"How are you feeling?" Concern fell over the lizard's face. "You've been out of it for a while. This is the first time that you're actually lucid."

"Ugh, I feel like death warmed over." Akira closed his eyes as the world decided to spin without his consent. "Where the hell are we?"

"I dunno." The lizard growled. "Some illegal lab I guess. Say, what's your name, kid?"

"Isn't it customary to introduce yourself first?" Akira attempted a weak smile. "Not that I already don't know your alias. I recognize you, Spinner."

"Y-you know who I am!?"

"Yeah." Akira opened his eyes. "I remember your video from those protests. You're a fan of Joker, right?"

"You bet!" Spinner's eyes burst with pure admiration. "Joker's awesome! He's so cool, I wish I could meet him! I..." Spinner's enthusiasm faded. "I started my own vigilante work because of him, you know?"

"Is that so?" Akira grimaced. "Do you... blame him for your current situation?"

"What!? Hell no! If anything, this is my own fault."

"How long have you been trapped here?"

"I dunno that either." Spinner wriggled in the seat, wincing. "I would say *maybe* a week judging by how my ribs are feeling, give or take a few days."

"Your ribs? What happened?"

"I-it... its stupid." Spinner sank in the chair. "I thought I was following a lead to help save people, but it was a trap. *Giran* that bastard-"

"You got kidnapped by Giran?"

"Yeah!" Spinner's eyes widened as he stared at Akira. "Wait, do you know him?"

"Unfortunately." Akira scowled. "His goons drugged and kidnapped me. He *laughed* as that black portal swallowed me."

"That asshole's targeting kids, too!?" Akira flinched at the sudden anger, and Spinner let it cool with a long sigh. "Sorry. Yeah, he was the one who got me. Here I was, thinking I was on a steady lead to save people, and I just got my ass handed to me. I was looking into the League Of Villains. Turns out that snake was in on the league-"

"He's part of the League!?"

"Yeah." Spinner furrowed his scaly brow when Akira started hysterically laughing. "Uh, you okay?"

"Oh, just *peachy* ." Akira stared into the blinding lights as his mirth faded. "Why did I never see it coming? It's ridiculous. Smokey was *right there* ! After everything we did..."

Spinner bit his lip. Whatever drugs the doctor fed him had to be messing with his head, but he felt that same burning anger as the kid's ashen face turned thunderous. With a grunt, the kid fidgeted with his right sleeve, pulling something out with his teeth. Spinner tilted his head, but he couldn't see anything from that side.

"What are you doing?"

Akira bore a dangerous smirk. "I'm not going to sit here like a damsel in distress and wait for some shoddy prince to rescue us."

"But I've tried escaping!" Spinner tugged at the cuffs binding him to the chair. "It's not possible."

“Nothing is impossible my scaly friend. Just... give me a minute.”

The hairpin wobbled in his grasp. The floaty feeling didn't help his concentration, nor did the pull of wires and the unmistakable rough texture of bandages around his head and torso. He decided not to think about it as he twisted his wrist at a painfully odd angle until the sharp point finally pierced the lock.

Spinner held his breath. Seconds felt like hours as Akira fiddled with the lock until they heard the sweet sound of the satisfying *click* . Spinner's sudden gasp stopped him from unlatching the cuff.

“Wait, someone's coming!” Spinner whisper-yelled. “Hide it, quick!”

Akira cursed under his breath as he fumbled with the pin. Their eyes went wide in horror as it fell onto the floor, where it lazily rolled under the chair. They exchanged terrified glances when the door was thrown open.

“You're finally awake!” A bald doctor with a bushy mustache rushed over to Akira's side, grinning. “The medication has kept your fever down and the painkillers seem to be working. Fantastic!”

“You know the last doctor I worked with was way more attractive.” Akira squinted. “Sorry, but I don't think you'd be able to pull off that goth look even if you tried. I'll have nightmares imagining you in fishnet stockings.”

Spinner made a noise between a wheezing cough and a cackle.

“Oh dear.” The doctor fiddled with the IV drip. “Perhaps the dosage is a bit too high for your weight. No matter, you're lucid enough that we can finally get to work.”

“Get to work on *what* ?” Akira snapped.

“Research, of course!” The doctor finished with the IV, before waddling over to a counter. He placed a thick file on it and turned

around, practically giddy. “And by the gods, *you’re* an interesting subject, my boy!”

“What?”

“Look!” The doctor opened the file, and a shiver wracked Akira’s body as the doctor hung several brain scans and an x-ray on the light box. He jabbed a finger at the first brain scan. “Here! This is where the human brain developed what we call the Quirk Factor. It’s the area of the brain where Quirks originate for the user. Quirkless people do possess this ‘factor’, except that their factor is blank, hence its why they have no quirk!”

“And...?”

“And *you* !” The doctor whirled around, his ear-to-ear grin made Akira’s stomach drop. “You don’t posses a factor at all! Your brain is of the same make as those predating the era of Quirks. But!!” He went to the next scan highlighted by a barrage of different colors. “Look at this! It’s the same area that harbors the quirk factor, but even with the suppressant the activity in this region of your brain is one of the highest I’ve ever seen among the Quirked population. It’s almost like... your body is trying to compensate for something that’s never been there. Like it’s creating a psuedo-quirk? My current hypothesis is that this is a gradual development over time, but what was the catalyst for the change?”

Akira was struck with silence as the doctor’s words faded into the background. Was he... *changing* ?

He remembers how Byakko and the other Personas said that this world had a strange energy to it, different from the Sea Of Souls that they were used to back home. But that was the kicker, wasn’t it? His Personas *had* changed during their stay in this world, becoming more than just simple Personas, or just mere copies of others. They were becoming *themselves* .

The true incarnations of myths and legends coming to life.

"By all means, you're quite the anomaly! An impossibility!" Akira's heart raced when the doctor looked at him with a twisting grin, his hands eagerly rubbing together. "Why, I would go so far to say that you shouldn't even *exist* ."

"S-so what!?" Spinner yelled. "What does that have to do with any of your screwed up research?"

"As if I expect some lizard to understand that he's *the* golden Subject of all test subjects!" He ignored Spinner's feral growl as he put a hand on Akira's shoulder. "Know that we'll be well acquainted for quite some time! I may even introduce you to Sensei if things go well!"

"To hell with this!" Akira roughly shrugged his hand off. "Do you really expect me to cooperate with you?"

"Oh, you don't seem to understand. You either cooperate..." Akira saw the treacherous twinkle from behind the doctor's goggles. He wheeled a small cart beside Akira, laden with multiple syringes and surgical tools. "... Or what, do you want another shot?"

Akira's ears began to ring, his skin prickling with icy needles of terror.

"You wove quite the tale when you were out of it, my boy." Akira was numb to the doctor patting his shoulder. "Interrogation rooms are quite terrible, aren't they? Whatever brutes you were trapped with had no finesse, but I assure you that these drugs before you are *far* more potent than whatever they gave you at the police station. Do we have an understanding, young man?"

Dread was a peculiar thing.

It froze all of the poor souls within its grasp, choked the air like a smog that burned their lungs. Their thoughts slowed like sap. The world turned into a blur of lifeless gray, losing all colors of the joys of life to useless white noise.

But before Akira could lose himself completely, a cataclysmic rumble ripped through the building and rained down dust upon them.

The doctor startled. "What's going on!?"

Akira didn't hear a thing. His tormentor was distracted, and his eyes snapped towards the syringes as the loud clatter disrupted the tray. With a wild cry, his hand broke free of the cuff and snatched one, wielding it as he would his knife as he jabbed it into his opponent. The doctor cried out in pain as the needle pierced through his shoulder, and it took mere seconds for him to crumple like a ragdoll.

Was someone shouting? He couldn't tell as he drank in several ragged breaths, but he still couldn't get any air as he stared down at the still form on the floor.

"Kid, KID!" Akira jumped and stared at Spinner, who smiled softly. "Just keep your eyes on me, okay? We're gonna be fine! He can't hurt you anymore, but we need to get out-" Another deep rumble shook the building. "We need to leave! Your one hand is free, so focus on the other cuff, yeah?"

Akira swallowed. With a slow nod, he worked on unlatching the other cuff with a spare needle from the tray. It took much longer than the first one, but he was free. He wasted no time removing the IV, ignoring the crimson bead in his elbow as he swung his legs over the chair.

"Good! You're doing great!" Spinner beamed. "Now move slow, okay? You really *do* look like death warmed over. I heard the doctor say that you had a bad concussion and something about a fever? You shouldn't even be on your feet."

"I'll be fine. I just..." Akira took another wheezing breath. "Jus' need a minute."

He grasped his head as a migraine pounded behind his eyes, and relentless dizziness made him woozy. He ripped off the rough

bandage and wires around his head, grimacing at the crimson splotches. They were tossed aside and he pulled himself into standing.

The floor wobbled, and he felt sick when he stepped over the doctor's unconscious body to help Spinner. The lizard man's words of encouragement went in on ear and out the other as the building trembled again, and sounds of fighting could be heard from above.

"Hey," Spinner grasped Akira's hand when the first cuff was unlocked. It was oddly warm despite the smooth scales. "We'll get through this. I know it!"

"R-right. Do you need help with the other one?"

"Nah, I got it!" Spinner grinned as he took the needle from Akira's hands. It was undone in record time. Akira backed up as Spinner stood and stretched out his arms. "Haha!! Freedom never tasted so-ouch!"

"Are you okay?"

"Yep." Spinner chuckled as he rubbed his ribs. "Still a bit sore, but I'll be fine!"

At that moment, the door flew open. "Doctor, we gotta go! I've already called-"

The head guard froze as he took in the scene. Spinner's grin turned malicious as he charged, the thug too stunned to see the hefty right hook before it was too late. Like the doctor, he was now splayed out on the floor with a solid *thump*.

"I've wanted to do that since I got here." Spinner shook the pain out of his hand. "C'mon, kid!"

"Wait."

Spinner jumped as another shower of dust rained down. “Why? We have to go!”

Akira glowered at the doctor. He shook his head as he staggered over to the counter, ripping the scans from the light box and shoving them back in the file. He held it out to Spinner.

“Can you keep this safe? It needs to be destroyed as soon as we get out of here.”

“Uh.” Spinner blinked. “Leave it to me!”

Spinner snatched the file and hid it in his clothes. Akira lingered by the tray, where the syringes glimmered with sickening insidiousness. Spinner gave him an odd look when Akira snatched one and held it like he would his dagger. He didn’t want to think about how the slight chill of something dangerous in his hand gave him some small comfort, a means to keep himself safe. He shrugged at Spinner.

“Better to be safe than sorry.” He whispered.

“R-right.” Spinner gently grabbed the opposite wrist. “Just be careful so you don’t stick yourself, okay?”

Akira nodded, and they left the horrid room behind.

The hall was blindingly white, and the lights flickered as the chaos overhead drew closer. Yowls and screeches and familiar battle cries echoed from the floor above, but Spinner lurched to a stop as another inhuman noise came from the next door.

“Lady Stubbs!?” Spinner, still dragging Akira, jumped into a room filled with kennels. “Lady Stubbs!!”

Spinner gasped as a ghoulish cat... *thing* mewled excitedly. He raced to the kennel and practically ripped it open, the cat scrambling onto Spinner’s shoulder with warbled purrs.

“Oh thank god you’re okay!!” He nuzzled her and kissed her on the forehead, then grinned at Akira. “Lady Stubbs, meet... uh... I never got your name, kid.”

“I...” Akira scratched her under the chin, but she shook his hand off.

“Merp!”

“R-right! We don’t have time for a meet and greet.” Spinner snatched his wrist and they were out of the room. “We were escaping!”

“What about the other quirkless people!?” Akira shouted as the earth trembled. “We can’t leave them here!”

“Crap.” They slid to a stop at an intersection. Spinner glanced in between the fork in the hallway. “You wouldn’t happen to know where they’re being held?”

Akira shook his head. Spinner cursed under his breath, but all the chaos overhead was forgotten when a pitch black portal yawned open. Spinner backpedaled as a sickly green Nomu with four arms dropped through. Its unblinking eye stared right at them, the wolfish grin widening to show rows of horrifyingly sharp teeth.

“... *A Nomu* .” Akira whispered.

“*Run !!*” Spinner turned on his heel and fled down the right path.

The Nomu howled like a wolf claiming its prey, the thundering footsteps running with blinding speed as the thing vaulted itself on all six limbs. They skid around the corner just as the Nomu pounced, gouging the floor where their bodies had been moments ago. Akira felt shards of concrete pepper his hair.

“Shit!”

They skid to a stop at a dead end. Spinner glanced between the towering wall and the Nomu for several seconds. A light came into Spinner’s eyes, a certain acceptance that Akira felt within himself far

too often. He shoved Akira behind him as the Nomu loomed at the other end of the hallway.

“Lady Stubbs, protect the kid!!”

“Merp!!” She leapt onto Akira’s shoulder.

“Wait, what are you-”

“This is what my hero would do.” Spinner grinned before he charged with a valiant cry.

Akira tried to summon his powers. Something. *Anything* . No, there was only dead weight, a black hole where there should be a sea of stars. *He* was dead weight. The syringe dropped from his hand. He glared at the silver band on his wrist, grasping it with his other hand. He tugged on it as the Nomu and Spinner met in the middle, Lady Stubbs flinched as her partner was slammed down with meaty fists.

The impact thrummed through Akira’s bones as he tried to rip the band from his skin. If pulling off his mask was doable, then this should be nothing compare to that pain. Small streams of red trickled down his wrist and dripped from his fingers.

“Merp!?”

Lady Stubbs flopped down from his shoulders, her legs latching around his bleeding wrist. Akira tried to push her off, but her claws dug into his skin.

“I need to get this off!” He cried. “Before.... before....”

Spinner scrabbled against the Nomu’s herculean grasp, but it was futile. The lizard man seemed to accept something as the Nomu’s other fists raised into the air. A slew of colorful words fell from his lips.

“Hey!!”

The Nomu froze, its beady eye glancing up at Akira. Lady Stubbs plopped onto the floor and arched her back with a hiss. A high pitched, manic chuckle escaped Akira as he picked up the syringe, ignoring the beads of crimson dripping onto the floor.

“What are you doing!?” Spinner gasped as he clutched his ribs.

The Nomu abandoned Spinner in favor of bleeding prey, sauntering slowly towards Akira like an overconfident predator.

“Stay back, Stubbs.” Akira fell into his natural battle stance, gripping the syringe with shaking white knuckles.

“M-merp!”

Lady Stubbs yowled as the Nomu loomed closer, its foul breath wafting over them, but she stood her ground by Akira’s ankles.

“Kid, are you crazy!?” Spinner shouted.

Akira did what any normal teenager would do in a drug induced stupor, trapped underground and seconds from meeting his death. He waited until the Nomu was within range before he raising the syringe with a wild cry. His stomach turned at the sickening *squelch* as he shoved the syringe in its eye and pushed down the plunger.

The Nomu reared back with a harrowing scream. Its head shook wildly as its limbs thrashed and flailed about in a blind rage. Akira stumbled back as the Nomu’s rampage turned in his direction. Spinner’s cry of panic was silenced as an overhead vent rattled and a hail of vibrant feathers whipped through around the Nomu like angry wasps.

Akira instantly recognized them, but he couldn’t even breathe as a sudden force tackled he and Lady Stubbs away from the danger. Akira’s vision was overtaken by a billowing red cape as they were set down.

“Stay here, okay?” Akira barely caught the vibrant cerulean eyes and golden hair of the young hero. “We’ll take care of the rest!”

The hero vanished into the floor before the billowing red cape erupted from the ground, the flash of a fist smiting the Nomu’s face and torso before vanishing into the ceiling, but the attacks did *nothing* . It returned moments later, ping ponging through the hallways.

Akira couldn’t hold on any longer. The edges of his vision were getting splotchy, and he was slowly losing feeling in his body from effects of the drugs.

Spinner crawled back towards Akira.

“Kid, we have to move while its distracted.” He panted as he forced himself to sit up, his eyes falling to Akira’s wrist. “... Kid, what did you *do* to yourself?”

A few darted crimson feathers hovered around them curiously. Lady Stubbs hissed at them, but Akira hysterically chuckled.

“About time you get here, Birdie.” He muttered as blackness overtook his vision. “You were almost too late.”

“Hey, you have to stay awake!” Spinner shook him. “*Kid!!* ”

The raid was reduced to chaotic screaming and fighting.

It was simple to take out a few thugs as they ventured further down into the basement, but all plans were cast aside as dark portals spat out a small group of Nomu.

“Lemillion, *go!!* ”

“Yes, sir!”

Hawks' feathers guided the young hero as he flowed through the walls like water, his mind split between that task and using his largest pinions to slice the Nomu that jumped at him. His nose wrinkled in disgust at a shower of red speckling the wall and marring his feathers, but the Nomu's skin was already stitching back together.

"Eugh! What are these things made of?" Hawks sputtered.

"What, are you scared!?" Miruko cackled as her earth shattering kicks blew another Nomu through the wall. "Do you want to call another bet!? I bet I'll win this time!"

"Nah, because then you'll owe me *several* buckets of fried chicken on top of what you already owe me!"

"How dare you!?"

"Now is seriously not the time for this!" Sir Nighteye waved his arm. "We must clear a path for the captives."

"Easier said than done!" Gang Orca grappled with a smaller Nomu, a blast of sound vaulted it backward.

Hawks opened his mouth, but stopped when his feathers encountered another Nomu deep within, chasing other frantic people through a corridor. He shivered as his feathers picked up the disgusting noise of some sharp object piercing its eye and the monster's scream made his stomach turn.

Lemillion intervened in just the nick of time, but-

'About time you got here, Birdie. You were almost too late.'

He knew that voice, however broken and tiny as it was. Joker's heartbeat was uneven and erratic, even as his body went limp against a wall.

Holy shit.

'You have to stay awake! Kid!?'

Hawks darted to Gang Orca's side, his voice deceptively calm despite his panic.

"Orca, I found *him*."

Gang Orca's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Yes and he needs our help. *Now*."

The whale man's growl rumbled like thunder. "Let's go."

"You can't split off!" Nighteye glared at them. "What are you thinking?"

"There's another Nomu further inside," Hawks glared back at him. "It's about to kill some of the captives!"

"Go!!" Miruko somersaulted around the Nomu, placing herself between them and Nighteye with a feral grin. "I got this!!"

Hawks gave her the two finger salute, and he and Gang Orca were off. Nighteye shouted at them, but he was kept at bay by the Nomu and Miruko's wild attacks.

"Listen, we need to get him out, do you understand?"

"That was the plan-"

"No, you don't understand!" Hawks shook his head as they crossed the next hallway and fled down another flight of stairs. "He needs to get *out*. He can't fall into the hands of the police or the heroes, even if they don't know his identity yet. Do you know what the *Hero Commission* would do to get a hold of powers like his?"

"Hawks..." Gang Orca steeled himself at Hawks' sudden vitriol. "Alright, but I want an explanation after we get him to safety."

“It’s a promise.” Hawks breathed a sigh of relief. “If anybody asks any questions, then let me handle it. I’ll take care of the paperwork after we get him to the surface.”

“Power!!”

They vaulted around the final corner just as Lemillion sent the Nomu back with a punch under its jaw. Hawks threw his arm back and launched one of his feather blades at it, and it screeched as the feather impaled its skin, thick crimson dripping from the wound. A large syringe stuck out from its singular eye.

“Hawks, Gang Orca!” Lemillion beamed at them.

“We’ll handle this.” Gang Orca pinned the squirming Nomu. “Get to the rest of the captives!”

“Y-yes!”

Lemillion was gone in a flash.

Hawks leapt over the two struggling behemoths and went to Joker’s side. Another was crouched by him, a green lizard that Hawks also recognized. It was almost ironic that the person who struck fear into the hearts of villains, who lit beacons of hope within people’s hearts, single handedly stood up against a *Nomu* with only a syringe, and ultimately, had Kunikazu shaking in his boots, was a mere *teenager* .

A teenager that was currently at anyone’s mercy.

He looked so tiny and powerless, his raven black hair falling over his eyes. Nothing like the grinning, confident, and insanely powerful vigilante that they encountered in the warehouse. Hawks winced at Joker’s wrist. A sort of quirk suppressant was clamped on, but the skin around it was torn and bloody as if Joker desperately tried to claw it off.

“Th-they...” Hawks eyes flicked to the lizard, who clutched Joker’s shoulder. “They had us locked in a lab, a-and they had this guy drugged up to the gills! H-he’s...”

“He’ll be okay.” Hawks knelt on Joker’s other side. He grabbed a bandage from his belt and gently wrapped the kid’s wrist, ignoring the growing ball of dread lodged in his stomach. “We’ll get him out of here, okay? I promise that both of you will be safe after this.”

“Merp!”

“Er...” Hawks’ eyebrows rose at the cat(?) putting a paw on Joker’s arm. “And you too, I guess.”

The kid stirred, his eyes misting over.

“Morning, sleeping beauty!” Hawks chirped as faint recognition came into Joker’s eyes, and he jerked his body away. Hawks frantically waved his hands. “Hey, don’t do that! Look at me!”

The lizard bit his lip as the dreary teenager complied, his breath leaving in ragged wheezes.

“You’re *safe* .” Hawks’ piercing gaze stared into dull silvery eyes dangling at the brink of consciousness. “I promise that I won’t let anybody touch you, little *Birdie* .”

His panic drained away by drug induced exhaustion. Joker relaxed, his eyes drooping closed. His brow knotted together as he tried to fight it, his hand scrabbling to grasp Hawks’ wrist. Hawks didn’t comment on how *weak* it was.

“There’s s-something guarding the other quirkless. I-it’s not a villain or a monster, he’s a victim of their cruelty, too.” Joker whispered, his voice like gravel. “You’ll get him the help he needs, right? He won’t be treated like a villain?”

Hawks encased Joker's hand within both of his, his eyes lighting up with righteous fire.

"We'll do whatever it takes to rescue *all* of the victims trapped here." The kid nodded, the willpower to stay awake fading rapidly. Hawks smiled. "You can let go, okay? We'll handle everything from here."

Joker didn't need any more urging as he closed his eyes, the grip on Hawks' wrist going slack. Hawks took a slow breath as the lizard exchanged a glance with the cat. An overwhelming surge of protective instinct overtook Hawks as he continued holding Joker's hand. He didn't care about the consequences he would face, he'd make sure that Kunikazu would *never* entangle Joker in his twisted web.

A crashing noise brought them back to Gang Orca's struggle.

"Watch him for a minute, 'kay?" Hawks winked at the lizard.

"O-okay!"

Hawks recalled his other feather still embedded into the Nomu, and it screeched over the splash of crimson. Gang Orca took his chance and landed a mighty blow to its face. It tumbled through the wall, spraying dust and debris into the small space.

"Go!" Hawks grinned maliciously. "Get them to safety."

"What about you?"

"I'll handle our little friend here." Hawks grinned as he twirled his feather blades. "Then I'll join Lemillion."

Gang Orca nodded as Hawks jumped through the hole in the wall. His heart dropped to the floor when he lumbered over to Joker. He cleared the tightness from his throat and stared at the lizard.

"Can you walk? I'll carry him."

“Y-yes!” The lizard winced and held his side, but he forced himself to his feet. The cat scrambled up to the lizard’s shoulder.

Gang Orca crouched beside Joker, his hand naturally ruffling the kid’s hair. These floofy curls *definitely* belonged to Joker. The hero gently scooped the child into his arms, a weight so small and yet so significant at the same time. Gang Orca tightened his grip, and with the lizard limping next to him, they were off. The sounds of battle had gradually died as they made their way upwards.

The lizard’s eyes darted around, but often fell to the teenager in his arms.

“Alright, that’s a wrap!!” Miruko suddenly shouted in the comms.

“Miruko: 1, Nomu: 0!”

“Gang Orca, Hawks, what’s your status?” Nighteye growled.

Gang Orca hummed. “I’m bringing the first victims to the surface. Hawks will be aiding Lemillion in getting the rest of the victims topside.”

“... Alright. We’ve suppressed most of the Nomu and are making our way down. We’ll meet up with Lemillion, and then we’ll be combing through the lab once the captives are safe.”

“Roger.”

“Don’t worry, Orca! I made sure that the way is safe and sound for ya!”

“Thank you, Miruko. We’ll be topside shortly.”

Luckily, Nighteye hardly gave them a second glance when they crossed paths in the corridor. Miruko lost her signature grin as she looked at Joker, but he couldn’t digest the expression on her face as they passed by each other.

Thank the gods that Nighteye decided not to use his quirk on the boy.

Mirio couldn't breathe as he allowed the demon's knife-like heel to permeate through his head. His senses snapped back into place as he canceled his quirk, staring at the split head of the demon as it howled in rage, spittle flying. He sank into the floor and rocketed skywards, his fist colliding into its stomach.

It flew back, retracting the knife-like spike back into its heel, before it collapsed.

Mirio narrowed his eyes as the demon laid there, unmoving, trying to catch its breath, but it was defeated. It... this wasn't a Nomu. It didn't have the exposed brain or any visible eyes, and the way it fought was like a desperate animal. He breathed a sigh of relief when the demon stayed down, turning back toward the captives with a smile.

"Is anybody injured?" He said.

"Lemillion!!" Hawks chose that moment to dive inside, scanning the vast room. His eyes widened as they landed on the downed demon. "Wait, that's..."

"He said they would come..." A woman slowly collapsed onto her knees, tears flooding her eyes. "And it was true!"

"The police should be here shortly!" Mirio crossed over the thick yellow line. "Is anybody injured? We'll be able to take you to the surface soon, I promise."

The group of people gawked at him, some blinking rapidly as they scrubbed their eyes.

An old man with bright blue eyes walked up to Mirio with a haunted expression. "This isn't a dream, right...? Are we really going to be free?"

“Yes!” Mirio grinned. “We’ll evacuate you once we’ve got confirmation that the route is safe.”

“We... we weren’t forgotten after all?”

“We’re really saved?”

“Oh my god, I can’t wait to taste fresh air again.”

“I can’t even remember what the sun felt like....”

Mirio frowned as the group of mostly quirkless adults broke out into tears of grief or happiness. His eyes landed on a sickly pale teenager laying unconscious against the wall, his stomach twisting into knots.

Just then, Nighteye and the remaining police squadron swarmed the room. The hero didn’t look happy as he allowed the police to escort everyone topside, and Mirio gladly carried the sickly teenager on his back. Nighteye adjusted his glasses as he looked at Hawks, who knelt down beside an unconscious monster.

“We’ll take this villain into custody.” He said.

Hawks glared at him. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

“Why?”

“He’s not a villain.” Hawks stood, clasping his hands behind his head. “Actually, I recognize this hero. I’ve gotten word from one of the captives that he was tortured into this state. He needs a hospital, not a prison.”

“Who is he?” Nighteye asked.

“Vayu, a hero that’s part of the underground group Embryon.” Hawks shook his head. “I’ve read that he’s been missing for a while. Kunikazu was *not* happy about it.”

“What do you mean?” Nighteye whispered as the last of the hostages were removed, remaining police officers scoured the room for evidence. “Why was he unhappy?”

“It’s the nature of Embryon’s quirks.” Hawks glanced down at Vayu with pity. “See, their quirks allow them to transform into these insanely powerful demons, but their diet, well...” Hawks frowned. “They need meat of the... *human* variety to survive.”

Nighteye flinched back. “No wonder the Hero Commission was upset.”

“Yeah.” Hawks dropped his hands and wrinkled his nose. “They keep this group on a tight leash, that’s for sure. Poor things.”

Hawks walked away as Nighteye ordered a stretcher to be brought down for Vayu.

Nighteye glowered as Hawks left the room, not that the latter even cared.

“Anything?” Kirishima’s watery eyes floated over his friends. “There has to be something!”

Ashido’s lips trembled as she scrolled through her phone, but she rapidly shook her head.

“I cannot find anything either.” Iida, not even having the energy to chop his hand, said from Midoriya’s bed. “My brother has yet to answer any of my calls.”

Midoriya swiveled around in his chair. “M-maybe he’s working on Kurusu’s case?”

“I... I don’t know.” Iida said, his brows furrowed.

“But that detective said that there would be a meeting about Kurusu’s situation?” Uraraka sat beside Ashido on the floor. “That can’t be coincidence, can it?”

“Well, my brother *did* get called away suddenly.” Iida sighed. “So.... it’s possible.”

“But why would Kurusu use himself as bait?” Kirishima barely held back another flood of tears. “Th-that doesn’t make any sense! Why didn’t he come to any of us for help!?”

“He’s just that type of person, kero.” Asui said, her usual stoic expression was marred by worry. “He didn’t want to burden anyone else. I get the feeling that he’s been alone for a majority of his life.”

“B-but...” Midoriya’s eyes misted over. “He’s not alone anymore!”

“I know.” Asui’s smile turned watery. “But sometimes it’s hard to get out of that mindset, kero.”

“Maybe he had a plan.” Todoroki leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “If he *knew* he was being targeted, then that makes sense.”

“N-not to sound mean, Todoroki.” Uraraka glanced up at him. “But why are you here with us instead of Momo? You’ve only met Kurusu once, right?”

Todoroki couldn’t meet anybody’s eyes as they all stared at him. Todoroki willed himself not to look at Joker’s mask sitting on Midoriya’s desk. Instead, he shrugged.

“You guys care about him a lot. Isn’t that enough? Besides, Momo and Fuyumi wanted to have a...” He tilted his head minutely, eyes narrowed. “‘Girl’s night in’? They wouldn’t allow either Natsuo or I into their rooms.”

Ashido opened her mouth, but they were all silenced by a shrill scream.

“I-I-Izuku!!!”

“Mom!?” Midoriya bolted out of chair, and they rushed into the living room. “What’s wrong!?”

Inko, with fat tears pouring down her cheeks, pointed a shaky finger at the headline on the television.

‘Another Major Hit To Traffickers Targeting Quirkless People!’

The scene was alive with flashing red and blue lights, police vehicles, a swarm of heroes and officers. A woman reported from behind a line of police tape, when a commotion at the building’s entrance caught their attention.

“Oh! It looks like something is coming to the surface!”

The camera zoomed in on Gang Orca rushing somebody out-

Kirishima and Ashido burst into tears as they recognized Akira. Uraraka collapsed into the couch, sniffing. Inko wrapped her arms around the girl and tucked her into the crook of her neck.

Iida ducked his head, his hands clenched into shaking fists.

Asui’s croak came out warbled.

Midoriya felt dizzy. Gang Orca had moved too fast to get any explicit details, but they *all* recognized that floof of raven black hair. The camera turned upwards as Ryukyu passed over with a graceful glide, her intern flying at her side.

Nejire-chan winked at the cameras, who had all but forgotten Gang Orca as they panned over Ryukyu circling the building.

“He’s going to be alright.” Todoroki had a strange gleam in his eyes as he glared at the television.

“Todoroki...” Midoriya mumbled over his own unwilling tears.

“We know that he’s a lot tougher than he looks.” Todoroki locked eyes with Midoriya, and Midoriya suppressed shivers at the intensity in his friend’s eyes. “You can all welcome him with smiles when he comes back. Isn’t that right?”

“Y-you’re right! W-we’ll always be here to support him, no matter what!”

Todoroki’s expression tightened, and Midoriya didn’t know how to digest that.

“I-I-I-” Ashido hiccuped and furiously wiped her eyes. “I’m going to k-kick his ass for worrying us so much!!”

“M-Mina!” Kirishima’s tears trickled to the carpet. “Y-you can’t do that!”

“Why not!?” She stamped her foot. “He’s an idiot who thought he could shoulder this all by himself!! I want to kick his ass as bad as I want to hug him!”

“It’s no coincidence.”

“Huh!? What do you mean, Iida?” Kirishima asked.

“I was just thinking.” Iida adjusted his glasses. “It’s all too coincidental. Kurusu knew he was in danger, right? Another illegal organization gets exposed after his disappearance, the *exact* same one that had taken him.”

Asui was silent as she poked her cheek in thought.

“Iida...” Uraraka pulled away from Inko and gestured to the television. “Are you saying that Kurusu is somehow responsible for this?”

“I-it makes sense?” Midoriya ran a hand through his hair. “I-if he knew, and had a way to tip off heroes before he got... kidnapped.”

“Kurusu is so manly!!!”

“Kiri, stop crying!” Ashido said as the next round of tears surfaced.
“You’re making me cry more!”

“I can’t help it!! How is he so cool, a-and brave!? We’re heroes in training, b-but how could we ever call ourselves heroes if we couldn’t even help our friend!?”

“Look!” Uraraka clutched her shirt as other victims were brought to the surface. “It... it looks like a lot of other people were saved.”

“Yes, but remember that he went through a lot of trauma.” Iida’s expression faltered, and they noticed the tears he didn’t shed. “We saw his current state. It’s impossible that he *won’t* have lasting scars from whatever he went through. Looking at this, it seems to be an illegal laboratory. Who knows what experiments these villains were conducting on innocent quirkless people.”

Wasn’t that a sobering thought?

Midoriya felt sick.

Ashido and Kirishima burst into tears once more. The rest weren’t far behind.

Todoroki remained stone-faced, but they all shared the same sense of pure relief and hope that their friend would pull through.

Aizawa stood rooted to the spot halfway across the parking lot.

“Well, it’s a good thing I requested that private medical tent to be set up, hmm? Nobody will bother them there.” Nezu, standing firmly on Aizawa’s shoulder, leaned against Aizawa’s head. “That boy was in quite a bit of trouble. Should we-”

“No.” Aizawa sank into his capture weapon. “I’ve learned my lesson, Nezu. We should stay away for the time being.”

“Ah, you are probably right.” Nezu flicked his tail. “He would be more comfortable waking up to the heroes who have gained his trust. I wouldn’t want to disrupt that. I noticed how Ryukyu purposely took the media’s attention away from them. How clever.”

Aizawa ground his teeth. “Nezu-”

“I know.” The rat sighed, his signature grin all but gone. “We heard the battle with the Nomu. This must be one of the League’s laboratories.”

“And yet, you still haven’t talked over the comms at all during this operation.”

Nezu chuckled. “The boy couldn’t send that email to these heroes while he was held captive, so he must have teammates. A team, which if I guessed right, are expert enough to listen in on our communications. I do wonder if they are watching us, even now.”

“I... you have a point.” Aizawa felt the impending migraine. “I doubt they’ll try to get to him while he’s surrounded by heroes.”

“Yes. For now, we’ll watch and wait. I do wonder what the boy’s next move will be when he regains consciousness. Will he try to run? Will Gang Orca simply let him go undetected? I do wonder if they’ll cover his involvement somehow? You are quite protective to make sure that he gets away unscathed. Isn’t that right, Hawks?”

Aizawa glanced upwards. They were hard to see, but several of Hawks feathers streamed over the building. One feather stopped over them. Nezu chuckled as his eyes fell to a shadow perched on the top of a nearby building. They couldn’t see Hawks’ expression from here, but they felt his predatory gaze jab through them in warning.

“So many possibilities!” Nezu grinned at Hawks. “This is quite fun!”

Aizawa rolled his eyes. “You are the only one who’s having *fun* .”

Nezu chuckled.

The hero would never admit that it sent a tremor down his spine.

Toshinori sank into his couch with guilt weighing him down.

The news had broken out about another illegal ring that had kidnapped *quirkless* people.

“While the numbers have yet to be confirmed,” The woman’s voice echoed across his deathly still apartment. *“What has been confirmed that this ring, while possibly being connected to the League Of Villains, has targeted mostly quirkless individuals. Many forums are up in arms, with one in particular garnering much attention. They’ve claimed to be a family member of one of the victims, said they begged police to search for their lost family, but was ultimately brushed off. Other supposed quirkless people are coming forward online, sharing their own experiences of extreme discrimination. Many are asking why these people were given up on. Was it truly because they didn’t have a quirk? We’ll have more on this story, as it breaks.”*

“What kind of hero am I?” Toshinori muttered. “If I’d known of these people.... no, that shouldn’t ever be an excuse.”

He clutched his burning side as he glared at the floor. He knew he shouldn’t beat himself up over this, that it was *impossible* to save everybody, but he was the number one hero! He could almost hear Nana laughing at him for thinking such things. Toshinori glanced at the word ‘quirkless’ staring back in bold letters.

Forgotten. Abandoned. Helpless. Devoid of all hope.

Is this what Young Midoriya had to go through before he received One For All? Why did he never talk about his trauma? Toshinori's face fell into his hands at the realization that *he* was the one who had crushed his successor's dreams that fateful day on the rooftop, and then he....

He abandoned the boy on said rooftop.

What was he thinking!?

Joker once again crossed his mind as another one of his biggest failures. He already pledged his support for Nezu's Vigilante Program. Would that really be enough? A boy his age, with a traumatic past of being All For One's lab rat... it may be more difficult to care for and rehabilitate him than they realize. Still, one thought was clear.

Perhaps it was wishful thinking on Toshinori's part, but perhaps one day he and Joker could save each other.

Hey, so I've decided that I'm going to be taking a break in September because of my mental health. The august chapters are already written so the update schedule will be as thus:

Out Of Kindness - August 14th

Fall Of Anger - August 28th

Fall Of Anger will be an exceptionally long chapter since I'll go on break right after, and then we'll continue with the Summer Camp/Kamino chaos on October 9th!

Out Of Kindness

Chapter 54: Out Of Kindness

“Fancy meeting you here, Giran.”

Giran whirled around to Joker, and once again he was sorely reminded that this was no mere vigilante.

This chapter title has a double meaning ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Akira wavered between wakefulness and slumber.

His mind was clear of the drugged haze, but his body yet prickled with pain. An impossibly heavy void roosted in place of his other selves, his heart heavy and his mind eerily still. At least he was warm. A soft blanket wrapped him in a cozy cocoon and brushed against his chin.

He slowly opened his eyes and stared up at a canvas ceiling. A tent, maybe? All sense of peace was thrown aside when his eyes caught another IV drip. He bolted upright and was about to rip it out-

“Whoa, easy!”

A gargantuan hand on his arm stopped Akira from removing it. He looked up to meet a familiar pair of blood red eyes that were full of softness.

“Deep breaths.” Gang Orca whispered. “You’re safe, I promise. This drip is a saline solution, and I’ve only administered antidotes to

counter the drugs those..." His face scrunched, such an odd look for a literal whale man. "*People* gave you."

"Where am I?" Akira relaxed as Gang Orca removed his hand. "How long was I out?"

"We're still at the scene. You've only been out for a few hours." The chair creaked as Gang Orca leaned back. "I figured it was best for me to wait for you to awaken. You gave everyone quite the scare with that SOS."

Akira stared at the hero in horror. He scanned the tent for any quick exits and his legs tensed, ready to bolt at a moment's notice. It didn't escape Gang Orca.

"Please don't be like that. We haven't shared your status with anyone. You're safe ." Gang Orca sighed as he looked down at his hand. "To think I didn't fully recognize you until I ruffled your hair. Something within me just... clicked. Is this some facet of your strange powers as well?"

"That's..." A manic chuckle escaped Akira's lips, and he ran a hand down his face. "Maybe."

Gang Orca studied him for a long moment. "Do you wish to go to the hospi-"

"No. No hospitals, no more *doctors* . I'll be fine once I'm able to heal myself." He held up his bandaged wrist, frowning at the deep red splotches on it. "You wouldn't happen to know how to get this suppressant off, would you?"

"The search teams found the control devices down in the lab. They're quite advanced compared to the ones the police normally use. Hawks managed to sneak one in here." Gang Orca reached into his hip pouch for a small device not unlike a normal PDA. Akira made to grab it, but Gang Orca held it away from him. "I will give it to you, but only *after* you tell me the truth. Young man, you look so

tired, and in more ways than one. Why did you put yourself in grave danger? What if something terrible happened and you were lost to us for good?"

Akira held his breath as Gang Orca scrutinized him like he did at the warehouse. Akira didn't have the energy to uphold the staring contest this time, and his eyes turned down into his lap, grasping the blanket with white knuckles.

"Using myself as bait was the only way. Before you ask, yes I would do it all over again if it meant that these people would finally be free. I was being targeted anyway, so this would've happened eventually." Akira chuckled, but the brokenness of it shattered Gang Orca's heart. "Those people had lost all hope that they would ever be rescued, that nobody *cared* enough because they weren't born with some fancy power."

"I see." Gang Orca released a long sigh. "I may have no right to ask this, but surely you have people who care about your well being?"

Akira's expression morphed, revealing a deep pain like the knife twisting in Gang Orca's heart. Gang Orca *knew* that look. He had experienced that grief when he failed to rescue someone close to him, and their family's cries of despair haunted him to this day.

"Most of them are gone." Akira whispered, quiet enough to not disturb any lingering ghosts. "But... I do have a few people who are waiting for me."

"They allowed you to walk into the lion's den like a sacrificial lamb?"

"No! That's..." Akira pinched the bridge of his nose. "They tried to talk me out of it, they really did. I was just too stubborn to listen."

Gang Orca contemplated for a moment. "I believe you should put more faith in the people who care for you."

Akira blinked, then stared at Gang Orca with wide eyes. The hero pinned him with an intense glare that had no real heat to it, but it made coils of shame slither in Akira's stomach.

"Do not tread this path alone, young man. I've seen many heroes who shoulder the weight all on their own, and they've ultimately been met with nothing but ruin."

"Ruin...?" Akira paled, but he hid behind a smirk. "Why do you care so much? You're really not going to let this go, are you?"

Amusement crossed Gang Orca's features. "No, I suppose not. We have not known each other for very long, but know that I *do* care about you. However strange it may seem, I admit that I feel a powerful bond with you. I... cannot explain it." Gang Orca looked at the device in his hand, before holding it out. "Here, this should deactivate the suppressant."

Lonely despair filled Akira's smile. "Thank you."

"Allow me? I have extensive training in first aid and plenty of field experience."

Akira nodded and Gang Orca undid the bandages. The skin around the suppressant was red and inflamed, throbbing with pain from where he tried to claw off his own flesh. The once gleaming silver band was stained, but he'd make sure to *thoroughly* clean it before they got back to the Raven's Nest. He fiddled with the PDA device as it searched for the suppressant, and the silvery band beeped.

The cuff fell onto the blanket with a soft *thump*. Akira gasped as the gaping chasm in his heart was filled with soft voices and the rustle of scales, feathers, the flutter of gossamer wings and the swish of silk. It almost became an unbearable flood as each Persona's senses were filled in all at once, their thoughts scattering in all directions in panic.

Gang Orca flinched as Akira hissed in pain, grasping his head as it nearly became *too much* . A lick of blue flame manifested, but Akira pressed it down before it could spread.

The brush of Arsene's feathers and the quiet rumble from Kohryu eased the pressure. His other selves calmed, slowly trickling through the empty mindscape, sewing the near shattered pieces of his soul back together. The world was once again filled with color and light.

He was... he felt *whole* .

Arsene was the first to truly absorb everything.

"Oh, Ren." Arsene's voice had never sounded so *broken* before.
"What have they done to you?"

"Big brother..."

"Master!"

"Little one..."

"Trickster, we have returned."

"Are you in danger!? We'll-"

"No!" Akira shook his head. "*I'm... I'm alright.*"

Akira choked back a relieved sob, but tears stained the blanket with dark splotches. A heavy hand grasped his shoulder. Gang Orca watched a broken teenager try to pull himself together, oblivious to the myriad of soothing voices washing away his anxiety. The kid's eyes gained a new life where they were deadened just moments ago.

"S-sorry." Akira wiped his face with the back of his hand. "I've just missed them so much."

“You do not need to apologize. I can see how your companions are more than just a mere quirk to you.” Gang Orca let his hand drop. “I would like to remove the IV before you heal.”

“Alright.” Akira held out his arm, grimacing as Gang Orca removed the needle with such gentle care. “... Thank you.”

Gang Orca grinned. “Think nothing of it.”

Akira snapped his fingers and Gang Orca shielded his eyes from the ribbons of light swirling around the tent. The last of the dreary haze cleared like sunlight piercing through a thick fog. His skin became smooth and undamaged.

“There. Good as new.” Akira threw off the blanket and swung his legs over the cot, pocketing the cuff and the device. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be taking my leave.”

“This tent is at the edge of the blocked off area.” Gang Orca rose from his chair and stared at the tent flap. “You’ll just need to take a left after you exit. It should be easy to sneak away. Oh, and kid...” Gang Orca reached into his pocket and forced a card into Akira’s free hand. “I’ve written my personal number on the back. Please don’t hesitate to use it if you need help, or even if you just need someone to talk to. Got it?”

Akira stared down at it, wide eyed, before nodding.

“Good.” Gang Orca shuffled on his feet. “One last thing, can I...?”

Akira grinned as Gang Orca flexed his hand. “Knock yourself out, big guy.”

The hero brightened as he gently ruffled Akira’s floofy hair. He pulled his hand away with a satisfied nod. Then, with a grin, he left the tent.

Akira followed after a moment. The flash of police lights splashed the area with streaks of red and blue and, true to the hero’s word, there

were plenty of shadows to slip away undetected. He smirked at Gang Orca, who was talking with Ryukyu less than a fifty feet away. Her draconic bulk blocked the tent from view.

They conveniently had their backs towards him, but he saw Ryukyu smile when she spotted him in the corner of her eye. Best Jeanist was on the other side of the parking lot, directing the squads of officers as they carried out brain-dead Nomu to hefty police vans.

Hawks was nowhere in site, but Akira spotted the vibrant red feathers whizzing over them.

But, as always, unwanted eyes found him. Akira locked eyes with Aizawa, who was leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the parking lot. The man tensed, scanning Akira head to toe.

Akira grimaced. He looked to the darkened streets behind the tent, and then back at Aizawa, conveying that he wouldn't be sticking around. The tension in Aizawa's shoulders fell away as he gave a small nod. Akira didn't know if he liked how the last of the tightness in his chest eased as man walked away. No fight or confrontation. No forced words. Not even a parental glare. Just... relief that Akira was *okay* .

"Come, let's leave this wretched place behind before we're noticed." Arsene said.

"Yeah. I've had enough." He did a quick sweep of his surroundings with Third Eye, chuckling as a red feather hovered over him. *"There's someone you'll want to meet, first. I think everybody would like him."*

"Oh?"

"You wouldn't happen to know where Spinner went, would you Hawks?" Akira whispered.

To his surprise, the feather suddenly pointed towards a park down the street.

“Sweet. Thanks for everything, Birdie. I can take it from here.”

Akira breathed a small sigh of relief when the feather flew off on its own.

He crept around the perimeter to avoid any cameras. Miruko spotted him. She maliciously grinned as her boisterous cackle echoed across the parking lot, all reporters swarmed her as she kicked through the air, describing the fiery battle against the Nomu.

Akira winked at her before diving into the shadows, walking down the street and into the adjacent park. Another quick flash of Third Eye located his target. He smirked as he stopped beside a tree.

“Were you going to hide here all night, Spinner?”

“Buddy!?”

“Merp!?”

Spinner and Lady Stubbs dropped from the branches, with leaves and small sticks clumped in their hair. Spinner nearly face planted into the ground, clutching his side, but he grinned at Akira nonetheless.

“You’re okay!” Spinner clapped him on the shoulder. “I was really scared for a while! I thought you’d be taken to a hospital?”

“No. As you can see I’m perfectly fine.” Akira chuckled. “They released me after I woke up in the tent. Do you still have that file?”

“Yep!” Spinner handed it over. “I made sure to keep it hidden. Uh, how did you know I was in that tree?”

“Oh, I quite like him already.” Ishtar said.

“Me too! Can I play with his kitty cat?” Alice giggled. *“She looks soft.”*

"You can actually tell the gender of that creature?" Seth shook his mighty head. "I would never be able to decipher that mystery."

"Seth, that is quite rude." Shiva said. "But I admit that I am in the same boat."

"Hush, now." Ishtar sighed with a gentle smile. "We do not wish to distract the Trickster."

Akira made to adjust his glasses out of habit, but he didn't have them. He let his hand fall with tiny smirk.

"Lucky guess." He eyed the thick file with a frown, before turning back to Spinner and Lady Stubbs. "If you have nowhere else to go, then do you want to come with me back to Musutafu?"

"Musutafu...?" Spinner's eyes widened.

"Unless you want to stick around here?" Akira gestured to the vibrant lights flashing down the street. "The invitation is always open. It's your call, Spinner."

Akira walked past them as Spinner bounced on his heels.

"Merp."

"What?" Spinner gawked at Lady Stubbs. "You really want to go with him?"

"Merp."

"Well, you do have a point. Joker is rumored to be in Musutafu..." Spinner bit his lip as he stared at Akira's fading back. "We could be killing two birds with one stone! Plus, I want to make sure that the kid is alright. He seems fine, but I know how people can hide their pain."

Lady Stubbs huffed. *"Merp !"*

"Okay, okay! Hey kid, wait up!"

“Stop calling me kid. I have a name, you know.”

“R-right. Sorry! Er, I never got it though!”

“Kurusu Akira.”

“Nice to meet you! My name is Shuichi Iguchi!” Spinner puffed his chest and matched Akira’s easy smile. “We made up our minds! We’ll go to Musutafu with you!”

“Nice. I hope you don’t mind if we take a small detour first?”

“Fine by me!” Spinner followed as Akira ducked into an alleyway. “Have you been here before? Do you know where we’re going?”

“Nope.” Akira shrugged. “But those who wander aren’t always lost.”

Spinner deadpanned as Lady Stubbs slowly blinked. “Okay, are you sure you don’t have any brain damage?”

Three shadows dropped down and landed in front of them. Spinner felt a surge of protective instinct as he jumped in front of Akira, Lady Stubbs flattened her ears against her head and let out warning growls.

“Run, Akira! We’ll hold them off!!”

“First name basis? Oh dear.” Gentle Criminal traced his facial hair, eyes bemused. “I certainly hope that you don’t think of us as common brigands?”

La Brava rolled her eyes. “We’re not here to rob you!”

“You... you’re not?” Spinner squinted at them, before looking at Akira. “Do you know these guys- hey!!”

Morgana had jumped from Gentle Criminal’s shoulder, using Spinner’s head as a stepping stone. Akira chuckled as Morgana

crashed into his chest, and the last knot in his stomach disappeared as he ran his fingers through Morgana's soft fur.

"I've missed you too." Akira said as he hugged Morgana to his chest.

Morgana sniffled as he looked up to his partner. "A-are you okay?"

"Is that a talking cat!?" Spinner shouted.

"M-merp?" Lady Stubbs' head tilted at an unnatural angle as she eyed Mona with interest.

"Hey, I am not a cat!!" Morgana glared at the pair.

"I'm surprised you don't recognize him." Akira chuckled as he walked around Spinner. "Especially these two."

"W-wait." Spinner's eyes flew to Akira. "A talking cat that looks an awful lot like Mona... Gentle Criminal... La Brava..." Lady Stubbs huffed as her partner slowly put the pieces together with a tilted head. "A-and from this angle you kinda look like..."

Akira smirked as a whirl of blue flames changed his clothes. Spinner's brain screeched to a halt as stared at the elegant majesty of Joker's costume. Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged quick glances. Morgana rolled his eyes.

They all stared at Spinner, whose jaw went to the ground. Lady Stubbs' ghoulish eyes were just as wide as her partner's. Nobody moved for several seconds.

"Spinner? Earth to Spinner?" Joker waved a blood red glove in front of the lizard's face. He didn't even blink. "I think I broke him. Whoops."

"A-are you sure this was a good idea!?" La Brava shouted as she frantically waved her arms. "We barely know him!"

“He saved my life down there.” Joker shrugged. “I think that’s good enough, and he wants to come back to Musutafu with us.”

“He... saved your *life* ?” Gentle Criminal stepped closer to Joker, his expression mournful. “We saw how you were when they brought you to the surface.”

“Y-yeah!!” La Brava’s eyes filled with tears. “We were so worried!! What happened down there? What did they do to you!?”

Joker blanched as he recalled the faces of the other quirkless people. Of Kaien’s pale, sickly demeanor, and the fact that most people lost all hope.

“Well, I... you see...” Joker cleared his throat. “Can we not do this here? I don’t really want to talk about it right now.”

Spinner snapped out of his reverie. “B-but you.. they... you had... the dru-”

Spinner’s throat clogged when his *hero*, his entire inspiration for going into vigilantism, threw him a pleading glance. He snapped his jaw close.

“O-oh, okay. Later, then.” La Brava’s expression flashed with hurt, but it was gone as fast as it came. “By the way, what’s that file?”

“... My brain scans.” Joker sighed. “That twisted doctor down there was interested in how I supposedly have a quirk, but no quirk factor.”

“*What* ?” La Brava’s eyes went wide. “But that should be impossible?”

“See for yourself.”

Joker handed it over. Gentle Criminal looked over her shoulder, frowning. La Brava drank in the information, her eyes slowly raising to meet Joker’s with a regretful grimace.

“Huh, I guess that could explain why our powers are different here?” Morgana whispered. “We *have* been changing a lot lately.”

Joker touched his mask, frowning. “Like how my mask doesn’t disappear anymore.”

“Yeah, but I guess that’s a good thing.”

“What are you going to do with them?” Spinner nodded at the scans. “Do you still want to destroy them?”

“Destroy them?” La Brava frowned. “But-”

“Yes, it would be too dangerous to keep them around for anybody to stumble upon.” Joker took them from La Brava. A wisp of Cerberus’ hellfire reduced the files to ashes, and they watched the ash filter through his fingers. “Oh, I also have a present for Kaito. They had quirk suppressants on everybody. Well, except for Spinner and Lady Stubbs.”

“Heh, you can’t really cancel out a mutation quirk!” Spinner said.

“A quirk suppressant?” Gentle Criminal said. “I suppose he would put that to good use.”

“Yeah, it’d really help him!” La Brava glanced up at Joker. “But what do we do now?”

“First, I was going to ask you guys if you were okay with Spinner and Lady Stubbs joining the team.”

“I have no objections!” Gentle Criminal said.

“Same, especially if they saved your life.” La Brava smiled at them.

“Yeah, they’d fit right in!”

“Merp!”

“How many times do I have to say that I’m not a cat!?”

“... Merp.”

“T-thanks I guess? This fur isn’t easy to groom!”

Lady Stubbs nodded. “Merp!”

“A-are you serious!?” Spinner grinned. “You’re really letting us join your team!?”

“Dead serious.” Joker held his hand out to Spinner and Lady Stubbs. “What do you say, you two?”

“Hell yeah!” Spinner latched on to Joker’s hand and shook. “Count us in!!”

“Mreow!!”

“Welcome to the team.” Joker matched Spinner’s grin. “Now, the next order of business. I wanted check on the quirkless victims before we go home. Shirogane Kaien was one of them.”

“We finally found him!?” Morgana bounced on his paws. “Oh, thank god. How was he?”

“He’s... he’s been through a lot. He was in the worst condition out of everybody else.” Joker shook his head and they flinched back at his thunderous scowl. “It was Giran. *He’s* the one who’s been taking quirkless people and who knows how many others. Smokey was there too, so he’s been doing the League’s dirty work this whole time.”

Morgana’s fur stood on end. “What!? After all he put us through, *he* was the one who took you!?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to let him get off scott free.” Joker chuckled darkly. “First, a hospital visit, then we’ll have a little *chat* with Giran. La Brava?”

“Y-yeah!” She blinked rapidly at the information and whipped out her phone. “Just one moment... aaaand... here! I know what hospital they’ve been taken to, it’s not that far away!”

“Great. You guys go on ahead for a second.”

“What?” Morgana furrowed his brows.

“I just want to talk to Spinner for a minute.” Joker shifted on his feet. “Alone.”

Morgana flicked his tail, but didn’t object.

“Alright.” Gentle Criminal smiled sadly at Joker, and allowed a hesitant Morgana onto his shoulder. “We’ll just be on the rooftop whenever you’re ready.”

“We won’t be long.” Joker said.

La Brava looked like she wanted to say something, but she shook her head as she squeezed Gentle’s hand. Without another word, the trio bounced up to the rooftops, leaving Spinner and Lady Stubbs alone with Joker.

“Merp...?”

“She’s right.” Spinner’s fading shock was replaced by contemplation. “I think you should tell them what went on. We barely escaped by the skin of our teeth!”

“I just... I don’t want to worry them. They didn’t like the plan, but we know what it was like down there. It was... it was *hell* .”

“Kid, er- *Joker* .” Spinner looked his hero in the eye. “I know, I was trapped down there too. But they’re your teammates, yeah? Teammates are supposed to lean on each other for support!”

“Teammates, huh?” Joker’s eyes glazed over to a memory of a certain engine room, and it was gone with a shake of his head. Gang

Orca's warning was still fresh, too. "Maybe you're right, but it's not the right time. We have things to do. But you did save me down there. I really owe you one."

Spinner's eyes exploded with stars. "Don't mention it!! We're friends now, comrades! But, uh..." Spinner looked down at his tattered clothes. "I'm gonna need a new costume."

Joker smiled. "That's good."

"Why do you say that?"

"Let me put it this way." Joker slowly circled Spinner. "Do you want to just be known as a Joker ripoff? A *copy* ? Or..."

"Or...?" Spinner scrunched his brow. Lady Stubbs ghoulish eyes never left Joker. "What are you trying to say?"

"Or do you want to make a name for yourself, separate from me? You've proven yourself capable, but you need to grow comfortable in your own skin and evolve from there. The last thing people need are two Jokers running around. Does that make sense?"

"Oh! I get what you're saying!" Spinner grinned, but it fell just as fast. "But I honestly have no clue what I would want."

"Don't worry. We have plenty of time to figure it out." Joker patted his shoulder, but frowned when Spinner winced. "Do you want to be healed? You took a lot of nasty hits from that Nomu."

"I-if it wouldn't be too much trouble?" Spinner blinked rapidly. "It won't hurt, will it?"

"Nah." Joker snapped his fingers, and Spinner nearly jumped out of his skin at the light surrounding he and Lady Stubbs.

"Oooh, I feel good as new!!" Spinner prodded his side, grinning when there was no pain. "Thanks, man!"

“Don’t mention it.” Joker glanced up to the heavens. “Come on, we’ve kept the others waiting long enough.”

“Right! Lead the way, Joker!!”

Joker smirked as he shot out his grapple.

Spinner squawked as he watched Joker sail through the air, his tailcoats elegantly flowing before he disappeared over the rooftops.

“Come on, Lady Stubbs!” Spinner latched onto the wall as his partner clung on his shoulder. “We can’t fall behind!!”

“Merp!!”

Shirogane Kaori clutched her little brother’s hand.

He seemed so tiny as he lay in the hospital bed, covered in wires and tubes. Her eyes misted over as she felt how clammy his skin was, or heard his rasping breaths. How he was now so underweight that she could see his cheekbones.

“How is he?”

She jolted from her chair and whirled around, but her shoulders dropped in relief. “J-Joker...?”

He hadn’t seen Kaori since that night, but she had waned significantly. Her once vibrant strawberry hair had dulled, her eyes were painted with dark circles, and she was as thin as her brother.

“The one and only.” He bore a tiny smile as he stepped up to Kaori’s bed, vibrant colors splashing from his footsteps.

“I-I knew it.” She sniffled as crystal tears flowed down her face. “I knew you would find him! I... I...”

“Here.” Joker held out a red and black handkerchief. “I came prepared this time.”

“Th-thanks.” Kaori hiccuped and tried to stem the flow. “Y-you...”

Joker stiffened as she suddenly wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. She jumped back after a moment, her face turning cherry red.

“I’m sorry! I just...”

Joker grasped her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry it took so long to find him.”

She shook her head, her hair bouncing around her shoulders. “I’m just glad he’s safe and sound! But the doctor’s don’t really know what they... what they did to him. They don’t know when he’ll wake up.”

“I can help.”

Kaori blinked. “Huh?”

She watched Joker lay a hand on her brother’s head. A heavenly light escaped from under his fingers. Kaien’s breathing evened out, and some of the hollowness of his cheeks filled in. Joker stuck his hands in his pockets and smiled at her.

“He’ll be alright now. Trust me.”

True to his word, Kaien began to stir. Joker stepped back as Kaori rushed to his side, gaping.

“Kaien?”

Her brother opened his eyes, their color as bright as the setting sun. He blinked several times as he scanned his surroundings, before he finally saw her.

“Sis...?”

“Kaien!!” The tears came back in a flood, and Kaien grunted as she hugged him. “I can’t believe it!”

“Kaori, what’s going on?” He wrapped his arms around her, taking in her warmth as tears stung his eyes. “What’s happened? It feels like I’ve been trapped in some nightmare.”

Kaori’s watery chuckle bounced around the room as she pulled back. “Let me introduce you to someone first!”

She turned around and froze. Joker was gone. The window was open, allowing a gentle breeze to freshen the hospital room.

“Sis? Who are you looking for?”

“N-nothing, nevermind.” She scooted a chair closer to his bed and sat down, tightly clutching his hand. “You just focus on getting better, okay? We have lots to catch up on.”

“Y-yeah.” Kaien smiled that same smile that she had so dearly missed.

They had a lot to talk about, but Kaori knew that everything would be alright now.

After all, they had all the time in the world together.

“Thank you for speaking with me. I know that this wasn’t easy for you or anybody else trapped down there.” Tsukauchi rose from his chair. “Please, try to get some rest.”

“W-wait!” Kagome latched on to his sleeve, making Tsukauchi’s eyes go wide. “What happened to Ren!? Is he okay?”

“Ren?”

“Oh!” Mirio beamed. “Does he have dark hair, pale skin, silver eyes?”

Relief washed over Kagome. “Y-yes! He was taken to the lab before we were rescued. He was... they were not kind to him.”

“Don’t worry!” Mirio nodded. “He was one of the first victims I encountered. Hawks and Gang Orca made sure he got out safely.”

“Good. That’s...” She released a long sigh as she sagged into the bed. “That’s good. I’m so glad.”

“Yes.” Tsukauchi gently took his wrist back from her grasp. “Get some rest. You’ll need your strength.”

They left the room, and Tsukauchi hovered in front of the door as it closed. His eyes were downcast as he stared at his note pad.

“What’s wrong, detective?” Mirio asked.

“Did she really say that the kid’s name was ‘Ren’?”

“Er, yes?” Mirio chuckled. “Why?”

“It’s nothing.” Tsukauchi wrote the name on the notepad and circled it several times. “I’m going to make a quick call if you wanted to regroup with Nighteye.”

“Sounds good!”

They parted ways. Mirio marched towards the ICU, where he had last left his mentor with another doctor. Nighteye stood in front of an observation room, speaking quietly with another doctor. Mirio glanced into the green haired person inside, sleeping peacefully. Wasn’t this the room where they kept that-

“ It’s not a villain or a monster, he’s a victim of their cruelty, too.”

Right. A *victim* . That’s what Hawks had said.

“Sir?” Nighteye looked to his smiling protege, his heart easing.
“What’s going on?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Nighteye glanced at the man. “In fact, something has gone right.”

“Yes.” The doctor looked down at his clipboard. “We thought that Vayu couldn’t regain his sense of self to transform back so early. Considering the state that Lemillion and Hawks found him in, it should have taken extensive amounts of time and gradual therapy for him to come to his senses.”

“So, it’s nothing short of a miracle?” Nighteye asked.

“In this case... yes.” The doctor tucked the clipboard under his arm.
“We’ll know more when he wakes up.”

“I see. Thank you for informing me.”

The doctor nodded, and they walked away.

“Sir, are you okay?” Mirio asked as they passed several rooms. “I know something is bothering you!”

“It should be nothing. This case could be closed, but there are pieces missing from this puzzle.”

Mirio frowned. “Like what?”

“The other heroes who got the SOS have been acting strange. Hawks and Gang Orca went against orders. Miruko did too, just indirectly.” Nighteye said. “They won’t reveal who their inside man was, and are quick to change the subject or avoid it altogether whenever I ask. They’re hiding something. I don’t know *what*. ”

Mirio scratched his head. “Do you think it’s related to how your quirk acted up?”

“... Maybe. In fact, that may be the key to solving this.”

“I could ask Nejire!” Mirio grinned. “She probably knows *something* .”

“No, its too early for that. The last thing we need is Ryukyu getting suspicious, and then we’d have an angry dragon on our tails. We’ll have to keep our eyes and ears open for the time being, understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good.” Sir Nighteye smiled softly at his protege. “Let’s call it for now. It’s been a long couple of days and we could use a break. Sound good?”

“Yes! Actually, I read that there’s this place that serves really good miso ramen!” Mirio beamed. “If you’re hungry?”

Nighteye’s chest filled with buzzing warmth. “Lead the way.”

“He told them that his name was *Ren* ?”

“Yeah.” Tsukauchi set his notepad on his desk. “No last name, though.”

“Hmm!” Nezu swirled his tea from the other side of Tsukauchi’s desk. “I wonder if this is another alias, or perhaps its a part of his real name?”

“It’s not like he’d give a straight answer if we asked.” Aizawa sank further into Tsukauchi’s couch. “He never does.”

“True, I could search in the database for someone his age named Ren.”

“I’m afraid it would be a fruitless endeavor, detective.” Nezu said. “If Kurusu Akira’s file is falsified as we believe, then there’s no doubt that this ‘Ren’ will never be found.”

“I guess.” Tsukauchi glanced at the cork board behind him, the map littered with various notes on Joker’s exploits. Sapporo was untouched. “He didn’t look so good when he was brought to the surface and he wasn’t at the hospital. Do you know what happened to him afterwards?”

Nezu’s ears pricked. “Oh, I believe we have guests that will share just that.”

Aizawa sat upright. “What?”

There was a sudden knock on the door. Aizawa and Tsukauchi’s eyes widened as Ryukyu, Gang Orca, and the former Ingenium came inside.

“Good evening!” Nezu said with a grin. “Come inside!”

“This is my office.” Tsukauchi muttered under his breath, but he threw on a weary smile anyway. “Do any of you want tea or coffee?”

“No.” Ryukyu crossed her arms and scowled. “I doubt we’ll be here long enough for a cup.”

“No need to be that way, Ryukyu.” Tensei grinned as he took the chair next to Nezu. “I am curious as to what you called us here for, Nezu.”

Gang Orca remained silent, but chose to sit on the couch next to Aizawa. The latter grumbled as Gang Orca took up most of the space.

“Ah, I actually called your whole group here.” Nezu swiveled his head around.

“Best Jeanist and Miruko are still helping with that lab in Sapporo.” Ryukyu uttered.

Gang Orca hummed. “Hawks has been swamped in... paperwork.”

“Is that so.” Nezu smiled. “Ah, should we get to the meat of this little arrangement? I do hope that everyone present forgives me for being so brash.”

“Spit it out then.” Ryukyu leaned against the wall. “What’s so important that you called us here so suddenly? The last thing I expected was a message from U.A.’s principal.”

“Very well! Then I will get to the point.” The tip of Nezu’s tail twitched. “We know that you’ve been working with Joker to solve these kidnapping cases.” The heroes stiffened. “And that he was responsible for the most recent raid in Sapporo. I know you all worked to get him out of there, and made it so that he wouldn’t be interviewed by the police. Is this correct so far?”

“That’s not-” Tensei spoke up, but Nezu held up a paw.

“There’s no need to be hostile or secretive.” Nezu reassured. “In fact, myself, Eraserhead, and Detective Tsukauchi have known his civilian identity for quite some time.”

Color drained from Tensei’s face.

“You know who he is!?” Ryukyu glared at Nezu, her eyes turning reptilian. “If you’re planning on doing *anything* to him-”

“Ryukyu, calm down.” Gang Orca crossed his arms, the couch creaking ominously as he peered at Nezu. “If the principal of U.A., one of the smartest beings on earth, knew of Joker’s identity and has yet to do anything about it, then there must be a solid reason. Am I correct?”

“Yes.” Nezu set his tea on the desk, the gleam in his beady eyes intensified so much that it sprouted goosebumps on everyone’s arms. “In fact, I would like nothing more than to save him from a grisly fate.”

Gang Orca growled. "Does this 'grisly fate' have something to do with the Hero Commission?"

"The Hero Commission?" Tensei blinked.

"Yes." Nezu and Gang Orca stared at one another. "How did you know?"

"Hawks." Gang Orca stared down at his hands. "He was absolutely *adamant* that we get Joker out of that place without anybody's knowledge. He warned me that Joker should never fall into the hands of the police.... or of the Hero Commission's."

"Are you aware what would happen to him without me properly gaining custody over him with my Vigilante Program?"

"With his reputation, I would say Tartarus." Gang Orca said.

"Yes, but it's a lot worse than just throwing him in a cell." Aizawa glared at the floor.

"Explain." Ryukyu demanded. "What's worse than a cell in Tartarus?"

"First, I would like to make a deal with you." Nezu looked in between the heroes whom have gained Joker's trust. "This offer would extend to all of the heroes in Joker's group."

"What kind of deal?" Tensei furrowed his brow.

"It's to keep this young man safe." Nezu glanced at Ryukyu. "If I disclose what the boy's fate would be in the hands of the Commission, then you must promise to give me your support when we try to finalize my program. After all, your encounters have all been quite public, going so far as an apology and then working alongside him for a rescue mission. Your voice carries significant weight." He looked in between Tensei and Gang Orca. "As would yours. Iida, you've given him support over social media for several weeks, and him healing you speaks highly of his character."

“Yes.” Tensei frowned as he stared down at his fists. “I owe him a lot.”

“And Gang Orca.” Nezu’s smile became soft, genuine. “I can tell you have a soft spot for him, just as I do. Given the current circumstances, I would also have let him walk away from that medical tent in Sapporo.”

Gang Orca’s eyes narrowed, but he relented. “Yes. If this ensures that Joker stays clear of the fate that had Hawks so frightened, then I will do anything to help.”

“Wonderful!” Nezu sighed in relief, but even that faded into a dismal expression. “But let’s start from the very beginning, shall we? Here is what Kunikazu Hiroto would do if Joker ever fell into his clutches.”

By the end of the night, these heroes would acquire a vastly different view of the Commission.

The three men were as silent as those sent to the gallows.

Their master, highlighted by the dozens of screens behind him, rapped his fingers against the chair. Each *tap tap tap* solidified the fear in their hearts. A black hair pin lay on the floor in between them, snapped into pieces.

“Explain to me *how* this happened.” All For One Said, his unnaturally calm voice made the hairs raise on the back of their necks, or in Kurogiri’s case, made his wispy body tremble. “Why did I need to waste precious Nomu to save you? How were you shown up by a bunch of quirkless people?”

“I-I don’t know.” The doctor, still woozy from his own medication, stammered. “B-but they have no other information to work with. With the servers wiped, they should have no knowledge of my operations in Jaku or in any other-”

All For One raised his hand. "That's not what I'm asking. I allowed this project because you assured me of its importance to the Nomu research and that it wouldn't be located. So the question remains, how did... Ah, Giran. Your heart rate is rising. Do you have something to say?"

Giran flinched. "N-no, sir. It's just..."

Tap tap tap tap.

"Go on."

Giran swallowed thickly. "The last quirkless person my boys grabbed looked familiar. I thought nothing of it at the time, but if he was the one wearing the tracking pin, then I might have a theory."

Tap tap TAP .

"Explain."

"These are the same heroes that Joker worked with. Now, considering that the boy had a tracking pin, and that he looked familiar, there's a chance that this boy was... in fact..." Giran ducked his head. "Joker himself."

The tapping stopped. The silence was deafening as All For One absorbed the information, his servants were frozen, not even risking the action of breathing. Then, a chuckle. All For One threw his head back and howled with laughter, one of his hands pounding the chair arm as he took several breaths to calm down.

The three of them shifted, unsure of how to act.

"I see ." All For One donned a manic grin. "Can you tell me more about this 'quirkless' young man?"

"Y-yes, sir!!" The doctor rubbed his hands together. "In fact, I managed to save several brain scans and x-rays from this subject. The boy was quite astonishing!"

“How so?” Kurogiri spoke for the first time. “Shouldn’t you have figured out that he had a quirk based on those scans?”

“No!” The doctor vibrated in excitement. “By all means, he should truly be quirkless! There was a complete absence of a quirk factor within his brain and the activity was vastly different from all the other subjects, quirked and quirkless. By all means, his very physique should be impossible!”

“But we’ve all witnessed his creatures’ powers.” Kurogiri stated. “Him not having a quirk is impossible.”

“Indeed, that’s why he’s such a mystery!” The doctor threw his hands up and chuckled. “Despite a lack of a quirk factor, his brain acted as if he *did* have a quirk! A true Singularity!!”

“Does this Singularity have a name?” All For One asked.

Giran shoved his hands in his pockets to hide their shaking. “The informant stated that his name was Kurusu Akira.”

“Kurusu Akira. *Kurusu Akira* .” All For One savored the name like one would a gourmet dish. “How wonderful!”

Kurusu Akira. An enigma, a *Singularity*. What was he, truly? If the doctor was right, then this paradox shouldn’t even exist. If All For One had eyes, they would widen significantly at a sudden realization.

What if Joker was thrown through time? Time travel quirks were exceedingly rare, and most hardly had the strength to tamper with a few seconds. All For One had lived through the first quirk wars, dictated the underground with an iron fist for nearly two-hundred years, and not once did he ever hear of this boy. Did he come from the future? No, that wouldn’t explain his lack of a quirk factor.

Or...

Did the mystery around this boy extend even further? What did Yaldabaoth, a false god, have to do with this? The boy had demons, gods, and beasts of legend at his disposal. If gods and devils were involved then-

Would Joker even be from *this* world?

... Perhaps an alternate reality?

He appeared without an inkling of information on him and took Japan by storm.

As if he appeared out of thin air.

“Sensei, should we ready some Nomu for his immediate capture?” Kurogiri broke him from his epiphany. “We know his identity, thus if we can ascertain his schedule and plan for the perfect strike-”

“Not so fast, Kurogiri.” All For One chuckled as he leaned back in his chair. “No, this capture requires *finesse*, something the heroes never had at their disposal. Plus, this is Joker we’re talking about. We need an audience, a stage to perform a fantastic show that will captivate the masses. Kidnapping him silently just won’t do. He needs to believe that he has the advantage over us and I have the perfect-”

Suddenly, Giran’s phone began to ring. The man went white as he ripped it from his pocket and tried to silence it.

“Wait. Answer it.” All For One said.

Giran nodded as he raised the phone to his ear. “This is Giran... Joker?”

All For One’s grin widened.

“O-okay. Where do you want to meet? Right. I’ll be there.” Sweat beaded on Giran’s brow as he hung up. “H-he said... he said he ran into money trouble, and that he wanted to take me up on my offer to

buy items from him. The meet-up is in the Musutafu Warehouse District tomorrow night.”

“Oh, we know he won’t be selling you anything, Giran.” All For One’s chuckle sent ice through Giran’s veins. “No, you were the one who sent him into the doctor’s clutches. This was *your* screw up, but here’s a perfect opportunity to redeem yourself.”

“S-sir?”

“I have a plan.” All For One grinned maliciously, and Giran had never felt so small in his entire life. “If you want to keep your pathetic life, then this is how things will pan out...”

Giran absorbed everything his master said, lest he be reduced to a bloody paste right then and there.

Giran huddled in his jacket.

Yes, it was summer, but the chill in his bones hadn’t let up since the whole mess with the lab, and now he was being offered to a pissed off vigilante like some sacrificial lamb. The sky was as black as ink with the new moon, painting Musutafu’s Warehouse District with deep shadows. A loud crash startled him, but he sighed in relief as two cats bolted from the knocked over garbage bin.

“Just my nerves getting to me.” He muttered as he walked through the alley. “I just need to-Shit!!”

A flurry of feathers and sharp claws raked the back of his head, and a raven’s shrill calls screamed in his ears. He muttered several colorful swears as it finally flew away to god knows where.

It was far too dark to see its 3 legs.

He rubbed the back of his head to make sure he wasn’t bleeding, but his whole mood soured as he shoved his hands in his pockets. Joker

should be around here somewhere. The warehouse they would meet up in came into view, stained by rust and the aroma of sea salt.

He reached for the door when he heard it.

Thud.

He blinked and looked up towards the inky sky.

Thud.

A massive black shape soared through the dark heavens, but he couldn't see it until it was too late.

THUD!

Time seemed to slow as Seth parted the curtains of nighttime shadow, his peerless golden eyes gleaming like bright lanterns. The wind was knocked out of Giran when giant claws ripped him from the ground. He shouted as the wind whipped around him, with Seth cackling as they soared higher and higher with his mighty wing beats. They dove through a lone cloud. Giran shivered when he was soaked with chilly water droplets.

He saw the city lights twinkling like rivers of gold far below, before Seth dove at a sharp angle. There was nobody else to hear his screams, but Seth *reveled* in it. The dragon's claws released their crushing weight, letting Giran free fall for only a moment before his body crashed onto a gravel rooftop. Pain burst through his ankle, sharp gravel sliced into his face and hands as he skid into a pathetic stop.

With a groan, he sat up and scanned his surroundings.

"Fancy meeting you here, Giran."

Giran whirled around to Joker, and once again he was sorely reminded that this was no mere vigilante.

The way Joker was perched on the air conditioning unit was like a dignified king sitting on his throne. This King Of Shadows had one leg crossed over the other, one hand delicately cupping his smirking face as he leaned his elbow upon his knee. There were no lights on the rooftop, but this twisted court of darkness was painted in the subtle golden glow from the surrounding city, such a gleam was cast back into the king's fiery citrine eyes to give them a predatory glare.

Those eyes sent terror trembling into Giran's bones. It was a certain fear he only felt for one other man, another demon king festering under the streets below.

Seth landed behind Joker, shaking the foundation of Musutafu's tallest skyscraper to its core. The dragon slowly raised its head, its breath leaking hell fire as it stared Giran down with bloodlust and gleeful malice. Seth's current size should've dwarfed Ryukyu in that video, as his tail was long enough to wrap around the building, his claw tips of his wings digging into either side of the rooftop.

Joker stepped down from his throne, his smirked widening when the *crunch* of his boots made Giran jump. The dragon's hot breath washed over him in hissing laughter, smelling of ash and brimstone.

"Joker." Giran attempted a shaky smirk. "What a nice night for a ride, huh?"

"Quite." Joker stalked around him in a smooth gait. Seth watched carefully, the smaller wings upon his neck quivering. "Tell me Giran, how long have you worked for the League?"

"Heh, straight to business. That's what I've always liked about you, kid."

"*Don't* call me a kid." Joker stopped and faced him fully. "Just answer the question."

"You know how we businessmen work." Giran dug a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. "We have a strict code of conduct-"

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You sold me out as easy as breathing. Was everything we accomplished part of some twisted joke to you?” Joker resumed his walk, splashing the dark rooftop with colorful footsteps. “Are Mr. Compress and Toga part of the League? Is Todo the one who started all of those fires in this as well?”

Giran took a long drag of his cigarette, but didn’t answer.

Joker sighed sharply. “Seth.”

Seth’s hot breath knocked the cigarette from Giran’s hand. He tried to crawl away as Seth opened his great jaw over him, but it was useless. The dragon snatched the hood of his jacket and slowly swung his head to dangle Giran over the side of the building.

“N-now hold on!!” Giran kicked his feet through open air. “Y-you’re a phantom thief right? You wouldn’t kill a man!”

“Oh, / wouldn’t.” Joker tilted his head as he stood at the edge, his blood red glove resting over his heart. A downright devilish smirk split his face in half. “But you see, my companions don’t always hold the same values as I do. They have a mind of their own and I don’t have the patience to stop them unless you talk. We could do this all night.”

“Hehe, wh-what are you talking about? I could go on for a lot longer than a single night.” Giran smirked. “Do you think you’re the first person to ever torture me for information? Besides, I don’t think you’d be able to stomach it.”

“You hear that, Seth? He thinks we’re going easy on him.”

Seth cackled and open his jaw.

Giran plummeted.

His own screams meshed with the winds that sang for his imminent death, blowing his hair back and making his jacket flap wildly. Those golden rivers were coming up to meet him, but he was plucked from

the sky with the aid of leathery wings, his vision swirling as Seth tossed him back onto the rooftop. He coughed and gagged as vertigo nearly overwhelmed him.

Joker's boot prodded his side. "Are you going to spill the beans?"

Giran bit his tongue. The sharp pain in his ankle lanced through his whole leg, and he was sure that cuts and bruises marred his body.

"We'll do it the hard way, then. If Seth doesn't scare you, then maybe Cerberus will have better luck."

Seth faded from existence like ash from a dying star, and a blue pyre brought forth a massive white beast. Giran scrambled back as Cerberus wagged his tail and showed off canines as large as his forearm. He crouched low and crept towards Giran like a hunting lion.

"Cerberus." Joker pointed at Giran. "Fetch."

The hound was upon him in instant. The rest of the world fell to a pained blur as Cerberus shook his head as if he were a regular mutt with a chew toy. Cerberus hopped and pranced across the rooftop, looking as happy as Joker had ever seen him as he dragged a man across rough gravel.

"Stop." Giran's body pathetically hung from Cerberus' jaws. Joker knelt beside him as Cerberus panted excitedly, tilting Giran's face up to look him in the eye. "Well?"

"Y-you don't understand." Giran sputtered. "They'd kill me if I spilled everything!"

"Well, they're not here, are they? It's *me* you have to worry about right now." Joker stood with a long sigh. "Cerberus, drop him."

The hound released him. He was too weak to get up, his body wracking with pain.

“Master, I hope I didn’t break him too much!” Cerberus said.

“Nah, you did good.” Joker scratched Cerberus behind both ears, and Cerberus rubbed his massive head against Joker’s body. “But we’ll have to let someone else take over.”

“Aww, okay! I had fun anyway, Master!!”

“Last chance, Giran.” Joker towered over him as Cerberus vanished. “I’m extremely tempted to have Vasuki mess with your mind. Don’t even get me started on what *Alice* wants to do to you, but then you’d be no use to anyone.”

“So, what’s next?” Giran splayed himself over the ground. “Is it the tiger? That faerie woman from the hospital? The other dragon? But that one would cause quite the commotion, huh?”

“Nah.” Joker chuckled. “I think it’s finally time that I let her have some fun.”

Joker snapped his fingers.

Giran gawked as a wisp of flame brought forth a tiny pixie wearing a purple-blue leotard. She wore long gloves and boots of the same color. Her wings fluttered as fast as a hummingbirds as she darted around him, laughing as she tugged on strands of his hair.

“Oh, you think you’re so tough, huh?” Pixie giggled like a songbird. “I’ll show you!”

A frantic laugh escaped Giran before he could stop it.

“Seriously, Joker?” Giran smirked as Pixie pouted, her face growing red. “Is this really the worst you can muster? I’m *shaking* in my boots-”

Pixie waved her arm. The air charged with prickling static and he was blinded by a bright light. He slowly lowered his hand as the light faded, and pure terror made every hair on his body stand up. That

air conditioning unit was *gone* . A smooth crater now marred the rooftop, but any trace of the unit was erased from existence.

There wasn't even a speck of dust left.

"Haha, look at your face!" Pixie hovered with a deceptively cruel smile. "My Megidolaon is one of the strongest in the stock and that was only a small *taste* of what it can do." She fluttered closer and whispered in his ear. "So, what will it be, you silly man? Should I use it to take your arm first? Your legs? Should I vaporize your insides? You know Joker can just heal you. We can play this game for the rest of eternity!"

"Y-you're shitting me!" Giran took a swipe at her, but she gracefully zipped away. "I won't do it, I won't!"

"Ah, that's a shame." Pixie shook her head with a bored sigh. "If you really won't talk, then I guess you'll just die a meaningless death." She held up her hands as they charged with orbs blinding white light. "Goodbye, human."

The light became brighter. The smell of brimstone was erased by ozone. Giran glanced at Joker, who looked as bored as the pixie. He was really going to...?

"W-wait!!" Giran scooted back. "Alright, alright!"

The light dimmed. The little demon snorted as it fluttered over to sit on Joker's shoulder.

"Then spill it." Joker slowly walked towards Giran as he continued to crawl backwards. "And you better tell us *everything* ."

"Yes, the League has been behind everything. Toga, Mr. Compress, the *fires*-"

"Why?"

“Beats me.” Giran sighed as he looked to the starless heavens above. “They paid me handsomely, so I never bothered with *why* they do anything.”

“Fine, then give me the locations to their hideouts.”

“Heh,” Giran’s smirk returned. “You know that they went to ground when their lab in Sapporo was taken down in that raid. Even I don’t know where they’re currently hiding.”

“Well, you better get working, otherwise-”

Giran waved a finger. “It would be impossible for you to stop their next attack if I waste all that time searching for them. I might not know *where* they’re hiding out now, but I know where they’ll strike next.”

Joker’s eyes widened. “Talk.”

“They’re going to attack the hero course’s Summer Camp.”

Pixie tilted her head as she playfully swung her legs to and fro. “The Summer Camp...?”

“Yep.” Giran coughed as he forced himself to sit up. “1-A has garnered quite the reputation since the USJ. The brat leading the League is getting pretty fed up with your fame, so he wants to one-up you by either kidnapping students or killing them.”

Joker scowled. “Give me the League’s numbers and the camp’s location.”

Giran hacked a throaty laugh. “They haven’t been able to get the location yet, but it’s only a matter of time. As for numbers, well... they’re growing...”

Giran would wake up a few hours later in the empty warehouse with no memory of his arrival. He was oblivious of the plans he spilled to

Joker under the instruction of his master, but what he did find was a black and red letter in his jacket pocket.

'To the Lord of Sloth - If you know what's good for you, then leave Japan and never come back. This is your one and only warning.'

For some reason, Giran shivered at the scent of ozone on his clothes, the lingering fear of death clinging to him like a shroud.

Eh, Japan was getting too dangerous for his likes anyway.

Maybe it was time for him to disappear.

Kaito paced in front of his desk.

He couldn't get that image out of his head. Akira, unconscious in Gang Orca's arms, most likely drugged and who knows what else. While the news never shared Akira's identity, those few seconds of him being brought out had replayed in his head over and over .

His hunger pains were forgotten as he prowled back and forth. He couldn't even stomach Akira's curry while he was choked in silent loneliness. Kaito never craved such human interaction before the kid showed up, but the constant presence of Akira, Morgana, Manami, and Tobita over the last few months had spoiled him beyond repair.

It didn't matter that Manami had texted him that the kid was *safe*, that they just had some minor business to take care of before coming back, he just wished that they would be home already.

Finally, that sanctified chime rang throughout the empty nest.

His electric blue eyes met weary silver, and his mind was thrown into a confused mesh of *pain drugged trapped torturehelpPLEASEMAKE ITSTOP!*

He clutched the pendant hidden under his shirt as he relived everything in explicit detail. A sick sort of satisfaction coursed through him after witnessing Giran's fate before he was thrown back into his own shoes.

"We're home." Akira whispered, his expression flashed with guilt as the others poured inside. "I was hoping to give you your present before you saw anything, but..."

Kaito wasn't thinking when he rushed forward and wrapped Akira in his arms, Morgana shifting around Akira's shoulders.

Akira chuckled. "What are you doing? I'm fi-"

"Don't you *dare think* you can lie to me and say you're fine." Kaito pulled back, but his hands gripped Akira's shoulders as he stared him dead in the eyes. Kaito softened when he saw the small crack in Akira's facade. "You don't have to hold everything in or pretend to be so strong all the damned time. You're allowed to show your feelings, so please don't hide it from us, okay?"

"What are you talking about? I'm happy that the mission was a success." Akira's smile faltered. "I'm *fine* . I-I'm not pretending... I..."

That single crack spider-webbed until it shattered the dam. Akira's shoulders trembled as he tried to blink away tears that came like an unstoppable flood, his expression finally collapsing under the weight of his grief. Kaito heard Manami gasp as the first tears dropped onto the floor, and Akira ducked his head and bit back sobs.

"Akira..." Tears gathered in Morgana's eyes as he snuggled into his partner's hair.

Kaito drew the kid back into his arms. Akira slowly melted in the warmth and hugged back, his fingers digging into the back of Kaito's shirt.

Manami sniffled as she joined in, desperately clutching onto the both of them.

Tobita cleared his throat, but his eyes were far from dry when enveloped his small family into his arms.

They weren't bothered by Akira's sudden change in clothes as Arsene came into existence behind them. Arsene's velvety wings encased them in a gentle cocoon as his arms curled protectively around them. He took a moment to rest his head atop his Trickster's fluffy hair, when the new additions caught his eye, gaping at him with watery eyes. Arsene raised a wing.

"You're a part of this family now." Arsene tilted of his head. "Care to join in?"

Spinner sniffled alongside Lady Stubbs and he dove into the crowd with open arms. Lady Stubbs prummed happily as she rubbed her face against Joker's hair.

Arsene closed his wing as everyone was enveloped in loving warmth.

His Trickster *finally* cried freely for the first time since they were thrown into this chaotic world.

Writing the end of this chapter, and even rereading it still gets to me xD I had literal tears in my eyes and had to stop a few times just from the feels.

Anywho, only one chapter remains until the Summer Camp arrives, and hooo boy the next chapter will be a bit intense. I'm still taking a break over September, but I bet October is going to be wild xD If I remember correctly, last years October was also around the time Price came out so its a bit fitting that two of the top climaxes of this story happen in the same month, but just a year apart.

Edit: We still have one Persona reveal left! I wonder who the Observer could be? ;)

Fall Of Anger

Chapter 55: Fall Of Anger

“Oh, I think we both know that you’re no simple barista, Kurusu Akira. Or do you prefer that I call you Joker? You go by many names, don’t you Ren?”

Hey everyone! If the schedule remained as normal, then this chapter would definitely have to be split in half (big surprise, huh?), but since I’m taking a break for just over a month I decided to give you two chapters worth of content to munch on! Gundoru and I have officially nicknamed this chapter THE CHONK.

Enjoy! :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[Joker]

It’s been four days since the Quirkless people were rescued.

The public question why they were so easily abandoned. Don’t you think that’s a bit hypocritical? I labeled myself quirkless, I’ve experienced first hand how they are treated. I bet they would’ve ignored me just like the people they’re criticizing.

Well, there are exceptions. The Shinsou family and 1-A have kept tabs on me through text, and I assure them that I’m fine and recovering at home.

But in reality....

It was like reliving the interrogation room all over again. Only worse.

It's not all bad news though. We gained more allies. Spinner and Lady Stubbs. You guys would love them. Spinner fits right in, and he's learning how to make tea from Gentle Criminal. Stubbs and Mona cuddle on the couch together, I even got a picture of them playing like kittens! (Don't tell Mona though!)

Mona still denies that he's a cat, of course. Not that Lady Stubbs minds. I swear she has a quirk of some sort, but I don't know what it is.

I wish I could hear your voices. Just once. I see little everyday things that remind me of everyone.

Mona has gotten better at hiding it, but I know he misses you too. I heard him mutter 'Lady Ann' in his sleep a few nights ago. It was.... heartbreaking.

Loading....

[ERROR! SERVER NOT FOUND!]

A flare of hot anger made him toss his phone on the desk, and then he ran a hand through his hair.

"Akira...?" Morgana blearily popped his head out from their nest of blankets. "Are you okay?"

"I'm alright, just frustrated. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay." Morgana studied Akira, ears drooping.

The bags under Akira's eyes have darkened, but... he wasn't hiding his feelings anymore. There was an openness in the group since he

broke down in everyone's arms, and the Raven's Nest experienced a few quiet nights as Akira recovered, full of laughs and literal mountains of curry.

"Do you think you'll get any sleep?"

"I feel too restless." Akira muttered as he stared at his computer. "I've been trying to keep myself busy though."

Morgana curled up in his lap. Akira's hand wove through his fur as they looked at the screen. News articles such as '*Ryukyu and Gang Orca In Talks For Better Mental Health Care Facilities!*', '*Quirkless: The Outcasts In Society*', and '*Mysterious T-san Returns With A Blog: Tips To Hone Your Situational Awareness!!*'. Morgana's eyes trailed to the open notebook on the desk, Akira's smooth handwriting lining the pages.

"What's this?"

"An apology present for the Shinsous'." Akira flipped through the pages. "All of Sojiro's recipes and different coffee brands. I've even written down that thing we tried yesterday. I'm pretty sure they won't forgive me so easily for scaring them, but its a start."

"I think they'll like it. Are you still worried about the Summer Camp? Is that why you can't sleep?" Morgana scratched his ear as Akira frowned. "I remember something about the Wild Wild Pussy Cats from Nezu's office, so that should narrow it down quite a bit. It'll be okay as long as Manami can crack the location."

"I know, but..."

"But?"

"I don't know." Akira closed the notebook, his fingers tapping on the cover. "I think we should warn them."

Morgana hummed. "Why don't we tell Eraserhead?"

“What?”

“He’s their teacher. I know you don’t want to hear this, but he *has* kept up his end of the deal. I know he isn’t Sojiro, but he’s still the Hierophant, right?” He gently nudged his partner’s hand. “What’s the harm in letting him know?”

Akira bit his lip as he felt Kohryu’s curiosity peak. “... You’re right.”

“Haven’t you learned that I’m *always* right?” Morgana sputtered as Akira patted his head.

“What about when you ate spoiled tuna-”

“I only did that *once* !!”

“Oh, and how can we forget that one time in Leblanc-”

“Sh-shush!!” Morgana’s fur bristled. “We do not speak of ‘that time’! Ever!!”

“Alright.” Akira smirked. “The next question is *how* . I feel like a text or a phone call would only give him more questions. He’d know where to find me anyway.”

“Then the only option is to meet up with him.”

“... Yeah. Do you think the others will let us out of their sights long enough to talk to Eraserhead?”

Morgana snickered.

“If that man does try anything, then I reserve the right to give him a Megidolaon in the face!”

“*Pixie, no.*” Arsene muttered.

“*Pixie, yes!*”

"I'll help." Alice swayed her hips. "Your Megidolaon followed by my teddies."

"Yes!! You're the best little sister ever!"

Akira ignored Pixie's ominous cackling as he scooped up Morgana and left the cubicle.

Aizawa trudged into his apartment, greeted by the sound of Marshmallow's excited chatters. She weaved to and fro around him as he walked into the kitchen. Marshmallow went over and pawed at her favorite cabinet.

"Mic said he fed you while I was away, so don't act adorable to get more food."

She tilted her head for maximum cuteness. "Mreow?"

"Fine." He groaned as he reached into the cupboard for her food bowl. "You win this one."

Marshmallow's motorboat purr thrummed through the kitchen as she devoured her dinner. Aizawa slowly ran his fingers through her fur, but his thoughts drifted far from Marshmallow's food.

Kurusu's silence shouldn't be a surprise, the kid should be allowed some downtime. Still, that didn't stop him from being worried. He shook his head to clear that dreadful image of a drugged teenager in Gang Orca's arms.

Another exhausted sigh escaped him when his phone buzzed once, twice.

"I swear if Nezu did something stupid again-"

It was an unfamiliar number, but chills ran down his spine because he already knew who it was.

[???

Guess who, Eraserhead ;)

We need to talk ASAP.

A location was sent next.

Marshmallow huffed when her owner left in such a hurry. He just got home! Oh well, if his sleeping bag was covered in white fur by the time he got back, then it was his own fault.

Aizawa reached the barren rooftop with nothing but the breeze accompanying him. He narrowed his eyes as he reached for his capture weapon. He was being watched. Then, a raven's cry echoed overhead.

He looked up in time to see a feathered blur grasping his capture weapon. Aizawa swore as its powerful wings tugged him a few inches. It flew away before he could take a swing at it, cawing as if laughing at him as it perched on the edge.

"What the hell is so-" Aizawa gaped at the raven's *three* legs.
"Funny?"

The sharp intellect in its eyes were just like Nezu's. He rubbed the back of his neck and came to a startling realization.

"It was *you* !" Aizawa took a step closer. "Are you one of Joker's?"

The raven soared to the next building, where it perched on a satellite dish. It peered at him in expectation. Aizawa grumbled into his capture weapon as he followed, and the raven took to the sky once more. The bird never flew more than ten meters in front of him, the noises of the city's night life trilling in the streets below.

Finally, it came to a building where familiar shapes lingered.

The raven landed on Joker's extended arm, ruffling its feathers as Joker gently ran his fingers down its back.

"Joker?"

The kid looked at him and *smirked*. Mona was on his shoulder, eyes narrowed.

"Eraserhead. Wonderful night to be out, isn't it?"

"I guess." Aizawa pocketed his hands and relaxed back, noticing the tension draining from Joker and Mona. "Though your messages were pretty surprising."

Joker sobered as he raised his arm. "You know what to do."

The raven took off into the inky sky. His eyes fell back to Joker at the crunch of footsteps and crinkle of a plastic bag. Joker's tailcoat gently swayed as he walked to the edge of the rooftop and sat down, kicking his legs as he sent another playful smirk at Aizawa.

Mona sat beside Joker, tail twitching.

"Well, Eraser? Care to join me?" Aizawa was unsettled, but he complied by sitting a good distance away. "Here."

Aizawa caught the paper wrapper and raised a brow at Joker, who held a similar item. Joker unwrapped his to reveal some sort of fried bread.

"It's curry bread." Joker grinned. "I was going to try and get it on the menu for the cafe. Congratulations, you're the first taste tester. Well?"

Joker scrutinized him as he took the first bite. The outside was perfectly crisp, the inside nice and fluffy. The kid's godlike curry complimented the texture, with spice and a hint of delicate sweetness in the aftertaste that balanced everything out.

“... It’s delicious.”

“Sweet! I was worried that frying it might overcook the curry.” Joker reached into the bag for a thermos. Aizawa’s mouth watered when Joker handed him a lid full of coffee. “Freshly brewed kona coffee. It’s my personal favorite.”

Aizawa hesitantly took it. The coffee was smooth and had a deeper flavor, and it enhanced the taste of the curry to another level. He frowned as he took another sip under Joker’s watchful eye, that playful smirk plastered on his face like a masterfully crafted mask. Was this some sort of peace offering? This was... a whole new territory.

As Tsukauchi *nicely* put it, he had been an absolute idiot. He let his protective anger get the better of him last time they were at the cafe, and any other encounter with Joker had been rocky at best, down right *murderous* at the worst.

He would let Joker take the lead, so if he had to deal with an extended silence under Mona’s scathing gaze, then so be it. Aizawa lost track of time as they ate their midnight snack, the city ambience washing over them. Joker crunched up the empty wrapper and stuffed it back into the bag.

“I honestly don’t know what to think of you, Eraserhead.” Joker stared up at the sky with a contemplative expression. “In some ways, you’re exactly like somebody that I cared about, but in others you’re completely different.”

“Joker-”

“It’s funny how some part of me wanted to forgive you right away. A bigger part still wants to hate you for what you did, but...” Joker leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his hair shielding the uncertainty in his eyes. “I don’t want to *hate* anybody. I don’t want to let this anger get the better of me.” He put a blood red hand over his heart. “I just... don’t want to *hurt* like this anymore.”

Stunned was the perfect term for how Aizawa's brain screeched to a stop. This was... Joker was being open and *vulnerable*. Aizawa shook himself out of it and cleared his throat.

"Joker, I might be similar to this person, but don't think for a second that I'm some replacement for them." Aizawa scrunched his brow when Joker inhaled sharply. "... Is that what you thought?"

Joker scratched the back of his neck. "Maybe?"

"I see." Aizawa let out a long sigh. He almost put a hand on Joker's shoulder, but withheld when Mona's fur bristled. Instead, Aizawa gestured towards the twinkling city lights. "Think of how many similar people are living in Musutafu. They could have the same hobbies or lifestyles, but in the end they still have their own lives and experiences that make them different from each other. Makes them *unique*. I don't want to pretend to be this person you looked up to, either. Wouldn't that be an insult to them?"

Joker's eyes went wide, head swiveling to study the cityscape.

"Yeah. That makes sense." Joker's facade cracked with an honest smile. "I can almost hear him calling me an idiot, and then he would lecture me in the most parental manner ever, almost like he was my real..." Joker cut himself off with a frantic shake of his head, fresh tears stinging his eyes. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. This... this is *not* what I called you here for."

Aizawa straightened. "Then why *did* you text me? I figured I would be the last person you would ever want to talk to."

Joker stared at him for a long moment. "Before that, why don't we call a truce?"

"A truce?" Aizawa gaped as Joker extended his hand. "Are you sure? Kid, I don't want to force you-"

“Like I said, I don’t *want* to hate you anymore. Besides, what I have to say is a lot bigger than our little feud.” Joker’s smile crinkled his golden eyes. “Unless you want us to keep going at each other’s throats? It... won’t be easy, but we could have a fresh start?”

Aizawa grabbed Joker’s hand. Suddenly, a surge of warmth in his chest extinguished a sickly, Reversed weight in his heart. The warm and caressing glow was like a phoenix being reborn from the ashes as everything was set right. He barely kept his surprise from showing as Joker took his hand back, staring down at it with a thoughtful frown.

“Interesting.” Joker mumbled as he flexed his hand.

“What was that?” Aizawa asked as the odd warmth faded.

“Nothing to worry about.” Joker shook his head, but all mirth fell away into a grave seriousness when Joker looked Aizawa in the eye. “Eraserhead, your students are in danger.”

Kaito marveled at the band on his wrist. The intricate lines reflected a dull rainbow of colors whenever he held it up to the light. How could something so beautiful be used for evil? This thing was a curse on Akira, but for somebody like him it was a *blessing* .

Akira smiled as he came up to the front desk. “Getting used to it?”

“Yeah. It’s strange, but it’s not bad. I can’t *believe* I actually have to ask this.” He looked back to Akira, Morgana perched on his shoulder. “How did it go?”

“It was...” Akira tilted his head and tugged on his bangs. “Nice?”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming up.”

“But it’s a bit weird being on speaking terms with him. He listened to everything we had to say and Eraserhead said he would let Nezu

know about the Summer Camp right away.”

“I’m surprised he was so calm. Still, I don’t know what they’re gonna do about it.” Morgana chimed in. “Are they going to cancel it?”

“I doubt it.” Akira frowned. “They didn’t cancel the Sports Festival after the USJ.”

“Yeah.” Morgana sighed.

“Well, I’m glad you came back safe. You two should get some rest.” Kaito leaned back in his chair and lazily swiveled back and forth. “You still look exhausted from your ordeal.”

“You better watch out Morgana, Kaito might take your job.”

“Hey!” Morgana scoffed. “But he’s right. Aren’t you visiting the cafe tomorrow? You’ll need your energy for that.”

“Yeah.” Akira rubbed the back of his head and chuckled. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“What’s the worse that could happen!?” Morgana rolled his eyes. “Risumi is probably going to strangle you with a hug or something.”

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about!” Akira pouted. “And Hitoshi… I’m gonna have to make it up to him somehow.”

“Your curry is a good start.” Kaito said. “But you have such a heavy curry debt already, I can’t even imagine how high the interest will be.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Akira walked towards the lounge door. “Good night!”

“Night.”

Kaito smiled after the door shut. The silver band gleamed as he stared at it with a rush of appreciation. Is this what it was like to feel

normal, to not know every excruciating detail of the people you lay eyes on?

He could get used to this.

The Blue Lotus had never been so barren by the way the 'closed' sign hanging on the door. Akira shuffled his bag around and wiped the sweat from his palm, grip tightening on the little notebook in his other hand. The chime from the bell rang hollow over the empty booths and bare tables, the silence near deafening until the pounding of footsteps echoed from the kitchen.

The kitchen door burst open and Akira was nearly knocked back by the body crashing into him. Akira caught the faint scent of coffee on Hitoshi's clothes before the boy pulled back, but he pinned Akira with a tearful glare.

"What the hell were you thinking!?"

Akira couldn't squeeze out an answer before Risumi interrupted him.

"Language, Hitoshi!" She rounded on Akira, and he felt guilt creep up his spine at her puffy eyes. She gently hugged him. "Oh sweetheart, we're glad that you're safe."

"Y-yeah." Akira smiled as he melted in Risumi's calming scent. "Good to be back."

Risumi pulled back, but Akira stiffened as he was entrapped in another pair of arms. Ayumu's scent was stronger than Risumi's, with a slight hint of spice that made Akira feel... *safe*. His throat tightened when Ayumu stepped back and placed sturdy hands on Akira's shoulders, in the exact same manner as when he rescued Akira from that nightmare.

"You know you can talk to us about *anything*, right?" Ayumu asked.

Akira's eyes flicked to Hitoshi and Risumi, then back to Ayumu. "You didn't...?"

"No, I believe that people have the right to share their dreams only if they want to." He said softly. "I'm not going to intrude on that, but we know that you didn't come out of this completely unscathed."

Akira's gaze fell to the floor, his free hand knotting into a fist.

"I... I just..." A broken chuckle escaped him. "I-it was hard, being trapped down there."

"But you knew you were in trouble." Risumi didn't accuse or sound angry, just... sad. "Why didn't you come to us for help?"

Akira shrank further on himself. "I just didn't want anybody else to get hurt. I thought that if anybody should bare the pain, that it would be me.... and me alone."

"How can somebody so smart be such an idiot?" Hitoshi muttered. "We would've had your back if you just said something!"

"I know. I think... I just let certain things get to my head. I'm sorry, it won't ever happen again."

Hitoshi frantically shook his head and hugged Akira, who chuckled and hugged back. Risumi smiled as she joined in, wrapping both of her boys in sugary warmth. Ayumu smirked as they all pulled away, and he gently ruffled Akira's hair.

"Dear, what's that?" Risumi pointed to the notebook.

"Oh." Akira held it out. "It's my apology, as Hitoshi put it, for being an idiot. There are new recipes for curry and a curry bread that we could add to the menu. Of course there are coffee brands in there that'll enhance the flavors too. It's... it's color coordinated to keep track of everything."

“Thank you, this is a lovely gift.” Ayumu peeked over Risumi’s shoulder as she flipped through it. “But you aren’t suggesting that you want to get back to work so soon?”

“Yeah, you just went through hell!” Hitoshi said. “Do you ever take a break for yourself?”

“Maybe? I’ve been feeling too restless at home.”

Risumi glanced up from the notebook, eyes hardening in a motherly way. “You do look exhausted, Akira. You could always rest in our apartment. My quirk would guarantee that you get a good few hours of sleep.”

Akira’s eyes widened. “I... I would like that. Thank you.”

“No problem.” Risumi beamed. She looked past him when there was a knock on glass. “I hope you don’t mind, but I called a few of your friends.”

Akira glanced over his shoulder as familiar faces peeked in the window.

“We can turn them away if you’re too tired.” Ayumu said.

“No, we can let them in.” Akira sprouted a smile.

Risumi nodded as she went to open the door. Two bodies rushed in and crashed into Akira.

“Aniki!!!”

“Oof!”

Akira was floored as familiar faces flooded the cafe.

Kirishima and Ashido clutched onto him for dear life, a river of tears splotching his shirt.

Iida gasped, his arms chopping wildly. "Kirishima, Ashido, at least give him some room to breathe!!"

"I'm... sorry!!" Ashido wailed into his shoulder. "I never thought I'd see him again!!"

"Same here!!" Kirishima's hug was rib crushing. "Never do something like this again, dude!"

"Can't... breathe..." Akira wheezed. "Do you mind letting me go...? The floor is comfortable, but I don't want to get to know it this well."

Ashido's sobbing turned into a wet cackle, and she unhanded him. Kirishima sniffled, but did the same. They both helped him into standing.

"... Here." Akira reached into his bag and handed a handkerchief to Ashido. "I came prepared."

"Thank you!" She wiped her face as Akira scanned the others.

Iida and Midoriya stood at the door, with the latter looking like a kicked puppy as he stared at Akira in utter disbelief. Uraraka shuffled back and forth, her hands in tight fists.

"I'm sorry, but I had to call them." Risumi said. "They were so concerned about you."

"Y-yeah! We didn't want to overwhelm you with everyone, so we thought a small group would be better." Midoriya, teary eyed, approached, his hands wringing together. "I'm so sorry!"

"I-" Akira's brow scrunched together. "Wait, why are you sorry?"

"You were in trouble, and I never noticed how much you were hurting!" Midoriya's lip wobbled. "A-and after.... we didn't know what to do."

“Yeah!” Uraraka wiped tears from her eyes. “Y-you’ve already done so much for me, but I couldn’t do anything to help you in your time of need! I’m really sorry!”

“But it wasn’t your fault.” Akira said, frowning. “Any of you.”

Midoriya was about to object, but Iida spoke first.

“While I am glad that you’re okay, Kurusu,” Iida gently chopped a hand. “I have some questions, if you don’t mind?”

“Shoot.”

Iida squared his shoulders. “You *knew* you were going to be kidnapped, didn’t you?”

“... Yes.” Akira sighed as the shocked stares of 1-A pierced through him. “Listen, I know someone who has a quirkless brother who was also kidnapped. She went to the authorities, but they cast him aside like trash just because he was quirkless.”

“Wh-what?” Midoriya’s face fell in horror.

“That’s.... that’s unmanly!!” Kirishima shouted. “Why would they do that!?”

Akira’s expression hardened. “Why do you think?”

The mood in the cafe plummeted.

“Look at it this way,” Akira said softly. “And I don’t mean this against you, but do you remember how you reacted when I first told you that I was quirkless?” Akira sighed when Kirishima flinched, and the others lowered their gazes. “The quirkless are abandoned, bullied, or... worse. The police would’ve jumped in to save any quirked person, but for those of us who don’t have a supposed ‘quirk’, well.... I think you get the idea.”

Risumi and Ayumu exchanged glances behind the counter, Ashido looked like she was about to be sick.

“I know that things need to change, but that doesn’t ignore the fact that you had us.” Iida’s anger was reminiscent of that time in Hosu. “We’re your friends, and that won’t ever change!”

“Iida’s right!” Kirishima sniffled. “We would’ve helped you, no questions asked!”

“I know that now.” Akira’s smiled at Hitoshi. “I was alone before I found this place, and I’ve been rejecting all of the bonds I’ve made here because of that. I... I’m not making that mistake again.”

His job as the Wildcard was to use the bonds he forged as a source of strength. He and Morgana were stranded, and nothing would change that until they were able to meet up with the others and find a way home. And yet, he had pushed everyone from this world away, in turn weakening himself.

Hitoshi grinned.

“But that still doesn’t answer how you were found so quickly.” Iida said. “My brother-”

“Ingenium, right?” Akira asked, to which Iida firmly nodded. “I know somebody who is pretty good at programming, so they made a tracker for me when we figured it was only a matter of time before I was targeted. Ingenium is a good hero, and we knew that he wouldn’t abandon people just because of their quirk.”

It wasn’t the complete truth, nor a complete lie. A perfect middle.

“That’s honestly badass.” Ashido said with wide eyes. “And so smart!”

“If not completely reckless.” Iida sighed.

“That must have been terrifying!” Uraraka said.

“You... you are *okay*, right?” Midoriya asked. “We saw you on the news when those people were brought to the surface...”

“I... I don’t want to lie and say that I’m fine, but I am recovering.” Akira involuntarily shivered as the doctor’s eyes flashed in his mind. “It’ll just take some time.”

The cafe was stilted in silence, until Kirishima locked both hands on Akira’s shoulders.

“You can talk to us any time!!” Kirishima gently shook Akira. “I don’t care how many times we have to pound it into your head, but you’re not alone anymore, Aniki!”

Akira blinked. “Aniki?”

Kirishima’s face burned. “Y-you know what I mean!!”

“You said that when we first came in!” Ashido shouted.

“D-did I?” Kirishima chuckled as he turned cherry red. “I don’t remember!”

“Of *course* you don’t.” Ashido elbowed him with a knowing look.

“What are your plans for this weekend?” Midoriya blurted, and Kirishima threw him a thankful glance.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Oh! Our class is taking a trip to the mall!” Ashido threw her arm over Akira’s shoulders. “How about you come too!?”

Akira blinked as the others looked at him in expectation. Kirishima was giving him the largest puppy dog eyes, and paired with Midoriya’s they were almost too much.

“That reminds me, I have some shopping to do myself. I... I guess I could meet you there?”

“What do you need? We’ll help you out!” Kirishima said.

“Glasses, for starters.” Akira’s smile strained. “My last pair was lost when... wh-when...”

“Say no more, bro!” Kirishima said.

“Whoa, now that you mention it...” Ashido squinted. “Your eyes are a lot more intense without them!”

“If it’s not too much trouble, could I come too?” Hitoshi crossed his arms and playfully glared at Akira. “I feel like I need to keep an eye on this troublemaker.”

Akira pouted. “Hey-”

“The more the merrier!” Ashido had an ear to ear grin. “We’re meeting at the Kiyashi Ward shopping mall!”

“Great.” Akira smiled back. “We’ll be there.”

“Alright!” Iida chopped his arms. “We have checked on our friend, but we don’t want to overstay our welcome!”

“Awww....” Ashido squeezed Akira tighter.

“He’s right.” Midoriya smiled at Akira. “We’ll tell our classmates about this weekend, okay?”

Akira nodded.

Ashido reluctantly let Akira go, and the others waved as they left the cafe in peace.

Risumi stepped around the counter after a moment of silence. “Say, what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’m not sure.” Akira shrugged. “Why?”

“The cafe is closed and you look like you could use a day of relaxation.” She put her hand on his head and smiled softly. “How about a movie day with us?”

“Yeah!” Hitoshi suddenly perked up. “We have plenty of snacks and we could all have dinner together.”

“We have a hefty collection of movies to choose from.” Ayumu smirked. “Trust me.”

Akira looked in between the three Shinsous’.

“You can’t exactly say no to puppy dog expressions like those.” Arsene said. *“Though the 1-A class seem to be masters at them, too.”*

“My heart, they are too adorable!” Titania cried.

“Please, big brother!? I want to watch movies, too!”

“How can I say no?” Akira smirked.

“Yes!” Hitoshi grabbed Akira’s wrist and he was whisked through the cafe.

Risumi smiled as their excited footsteps raced up the stairs, their mutual laughter made her heart soar. She adjusted her glasses as she began to follow, but stopped when she didn’t hear Ayumu’s footsteps.

“Dear, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just...” Ayumu chuckled. “It’s nice to see them smile after everything, that’s all.”

“I agree.” She went over and locked arms with her husband. “Shall we? We shouldn’t make our boys wait too long.”

“Yeah.” They left the cafe behind and went upstairs. “I bet Hitoshi is already digging through the Ghibli movies.”

They poked their heads into the living room and watched Hitoshi ramble excitedly about the growing pile of movie cases on the table. Akira listened with rapt attention, amused. But they noticed how his eyes lit up when Hitoshi held up the first Ghibli movie.

The rest of the day was spent watching movies, sipping hot chocolate, and eating more curry than what should be humanly possible.

Akira didn’t remember much of the next movie they started. He was wrapped up in blankets on a comfortable couch, his eyes slowly drooping. His soul settled as Risumi wrapped an arm around him and held him close.

Between her cozy scent and Arsene’s soft encouragement, he needed nothing more to drift off in a place that smelled like home.

“Uh, how long have they been like that?” Shuichi stared at the scene he just wandered into.

Joker *in full costume* sat cross legged on the lounge floor, his eyes closed and expression set in calm concentration. Across from him was a four armed, blue skinned being sitting in a similar manner, divine instruments in each hand. The snakes around his body stared eerily at him, their tongues flicking.

“By my count....” Tobita flipped open his platinum pocket watch, which now ticked pleasantly. “Three hours.”

“Three hours!?”

“He’s trying to master his bond with Shiva.” Manami didn’t bother looking up from her laptop.

“Sh-Sh-*Shiva!*? ” Shuichi felt his scales tingle. “Like.... *Shiva Shiva* ? The Hindu god of destruction?”

“That’s the one.” Manami stated.

“And you’re not freaking out!?”

“Not really.” Manami sighed as she finally looked up. “You get used to them being around. Like one time Akira and Morgana were cuddling with Cerberus.”

“And when we baked cookies with Alice.” Tobita leaned back on the couch with a sigh. “I hope to do so again. She’s a lovely girl... when she’s not utterly terrifying.”

“Oh, and this morning when Pixie switched the salt and sugar.” Manami cringed. “I never want to taste salty tea again!”

“I’ll make sure to test all of our spices from now on.” Tobita shook his head and chuckled. “They do keep us on our toes.”

“Right...” Shuichi eyed Shiva, his hesitation slowly fading as he set a bag on the table.

“Any luck?” Tobita asked as he peeked inside.

“Yeah!” Shuichi grinned as he dug through it and splayed each item on the table. “I found a decent leather jacket and cargo pants! I even managed to get a pair of combat boots. Oh! I found this Joker mask pin I could put on too! I’ll still have to restock my knives somehow, but it’s a start!”

“What about gloves?” Manami asked.

“Couldn’t find any, but I’ll keep my eye out for something stylish.” Shuichi sank into the couch with a loud sigh. “Hey, are we still training with Shinsou today?”

“Yep!” Manami shut her laptop. “We’ll go as soon as-”

Shuichi screeched when the flash of blue flames blinded the lounge, but Manami and Tobita were unaffected. The light faded and Akira opened his eyes with a grin.

“Another one down!”

Shiva chuckled and bowed his head. “I knew you could do it, Trickster.”

“Thanks.” Akira looked around the lounge, eyes landing on Shuichi and his gear. “Oh, you’re back already? What time is it?”

“Just past noon.” Manami said. “Are you good to go? We’re meeting Hitoshi in an hour.”

“Yeah.” Akira nodded as he stood up and stretched, his joints creaking. “Shiva’s bond was harder than Alice’s. I’m sorry it took so long.”

“Don’t worry!” Manami beamed at him. “We have time.”

Shuichi marveled when Shiva disappeared like fading stardust. His awe locked him in place for a few minutes, and he snapped out of it when Akira waved a hand in front of him.

“Are you coming?”

“Y-yes!!” Shuichi nodded frantically. “Let’s go!”

For once in his life, Shuichi felt as if he finally belonged somewhere.

Hitoshi’s world was a flipped blur as his back slammed into the mat.

“Ouch....” He wheezed as Akira helped him up. “How are you so good at this?”

“Practice. You learn fast when your life is in danger. Remember that you shouldn’t be so flat footed.” Akira took a wide stance and put a

fist over his center. “Keep this part of your body lower, and be quick on your feet. Staying still for too long can be fatal.”

“Right...” Hitoshi wiped the sweat from his brow. “Can we practice something else for a bit? I’ve tasted enough of this mat for the last hour.”

“Okay.” Akira stood fully and tilted his head. “You’ve graduated from making lock picks, how are the smoke bombs coming along? Manami said that you’re doing really well with hacking, too.”

“Heh, well enough, but...” Hitoshi grinned sheepishly.

“But what? If there’s something new you want to learn, then just say so.”

“Weeeelll, you use both daggers and a gun, right?”

“Ah, I see.” Akira tapped his chin and studied Hitoshi. “You’re filling out nicely, but you’d need more physical and hand to hand training before I’m comfortable showing you how to fight with a dagger. What about a gun safety lesson? We’re not shooting any targets today though, we don’t want anybody calling the police.”

Excitement lit up Hitoshi’s eyes. “A safety lesson is a good start.”

Akira nodded, and the rush of bright blue flames donned his costume. Hitoshi took a moment to study his friend’s costume up close while Joker took out two pistols and removed their magazines.

“Uh...” Hitoshi blinked at them, his jaw nearly dropping. “Where the heck do you get guns like *that* ?”

Joker froze. “The Velvet Room.”

“Velvet Room?”

“Yeah.” Joker smiled at him, but Hitoshi saw the sorrow in it. “It’s a place where I could get new *friends*. But... it was more complicated

than that. I could strengthen them or execute them in a certain way to get items and weapons.”

Hitoshi turned bone white. “E-execute?”

Joker solemnly nodded as he held up the guns. He looked over to the angelic gun in his right hand.

“Nataraja, the gun I received when I executed the Voice of God, Metatron.” Joker looked to the wickedly black gun decorated with a demon’s grin on the barrel, devilish wings and other ancient, golden designs were ingrained in the lever and grip. “This one is the Tyrant Pistol. I received this from the one who rebelled against God and fell from heaven, Lucifer.”

Hitoshi sputtered. “What else do you have up your sleeve?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m wearing armor from Satan. Morgana’s weapons are from Mother Harlot and Kohryu respectively... wait, armor...” Joker glanced at his other teammates around the gym. He’d definitely have to arm them with Metaverse gear, anything to give them the advantage in the upcoming showdown. But that was a thought for later. “Anyway, back to the guns. Which one do you want?”

Joker asked pleasantly as one would about the weather. It’s not as if the weapons were remnants of Biblical figures or anything! Hitoshi’s eyes flicked between them.

“U-uh... that one?” Joker nodded and handed him the Nataraja. The silvery metal was ice cold, and divine power thrummed through Hitoshi’s body the moment he touched it. Almost as if it were still *alive*. “It’s... heavier than I thought it would be. This is pretty cool.”

“Let’s get one thing straight.” Hitoshi jumped as Joker locked a hand on his shoulder, his grip like iron. “A gun is *not* a toy, it’s a tool you use to either protect yourself or the ones you love. Remember that it’s a weapon that can easily take a life, yours included. I won’t

tolerate you using this knowledge to hurt anyone on purpose. Do I make myself clear?"

Hitoshi suppressed shivers. He's never heard such a serious, commanding voice from his best friend before. He swallowed thickly at the thing he held in his hands.

"C-crystal. I promise not to abuse it."

"Good. Now, I'll explain the parts of a pistol and then how to properly wield it...."

Meanwhile, Shuichi whistled from his spot by the far wall.

"How does Joker know all of this stuff?" The lizard man asked. "He's so knowledgeable for a kid his age."

Tobita, surrounded by a swarm of locks, exchanged glances with Manami. Lady Stubbs and Morgana were sunning themselves on the other side of the gym, oblivious to the conversation.

"I'm afraid that is not our story to share." Tobita stared down at the small padlock in his hand, the other twirling the pick. "Perhaps you could ask?"

Shuichi watched when Joker expertly held the gun, staring at an invisible target as if he was ready to shoot. Hitoshi tried to copy, and Joker dropped his stance to fix the flaws in Hitoshi's.

"Stubbs and I are still new to the team. It's too early for another heart to heart!"

"I don't think so." Shuichi furrowed his brow as Tobita sighed, lingering regret etched into his face. "You are one of us now, and I think he might be comfortable enough to tell you. Know that whatever he tells you is the absolute truth. It sounds outlandish at first, but..."

Shuichi tilted his head. "But?"

“We reacted badly when he first shared his story, which caused a big rift between us.” Manami traced a finger around her keyboard. “I think... maybe that’s why he pushed us away when he came up with his last plan. We’re just now rebuilding our trust with him.”

“But you know that it’s not your fault, right?” Shuichi said. “And it’s not really Joker’s either.”

“If... if you say so.” Shame made Manami avoid their eyes.

“Say, how’s your progress my dear?” Tobita asked, and she jumped at the change of subject.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’ve located several of the Wild Wild Pussy Cats’ estates and several mountain lodges, but there’s not a single clue as to which one the hero classes will be training at.”

“Maybe you should take a break, yeah?” Shuichi leaned against the wall. “You’ve been at it for days, and burnin’ yourself out won’t help anything.”

She shut her laptop with a sigh. “Yeah, I just don’t want to fail.”

“We won’t.” Tobita brightened with a smile. “If anything, we could always use Eraserhead to get the location.”

“It’s risky. Joker just got on even terms with him and we don’t want to ruin that.” She frowned, and they looked to Hitoshi and Joker when they heard dual *clicks* .

“Congratulations.” Joker smirked. “You would’ve fired your first shot had it been loaded.”

Hitoshi, awe-struck, slowly nodded. Joker laughed as a loud rumble echoed from Hitoshi’s stomach.

“Who wants curry at the Raven’s Nest?” Joker called. “No detours this time, I promise.”

“Ooh, me!!” Shuichi yelled.

“Same.” Hitoshi handed the gun back. “I’m *starving* .”

“I won’t object.” Tobita stood and worked a crick out of his neck.
“We’ve made plenty of progress today!”

Joker tucked the two weapons in his costume pockets, then let the transformation fade away. Hitoshi grinned as they collected their things and the sleepy, sunbathed felines before heading home for the day.

Yatagarasu floated on the summery breeze as he watched his Trickster weave through the crowd below. Hitoshi stuck by his side and they approached the massive building, the Kiyashi Ward Shopping Mall. Yatagarasu landed on the edge of the rooftop.

This mall had no roof, it was open to the sky and allowed Yatagarasu to listen in on several floors worth of boisterous noise. Colors and music adorned the place, and the aroma of distant restaurants wafted in the wind. Sometimes, these vast human constructs still managed to surprise him.

“Ah, I am glad he finally gets time to relax.” Ishtar murmured as the Trickster ventured inside. *“The constant action has not been good for him.”*

“Indeed. He has been pushing himself too hard.” Yatagarasu sighed contently as the wind brushed over his feathers. *“I feel bad that I’ve been out more than anyone else. The Trickster promised that we would visit the beach sometime before the Summer Camp.”*

“Don’t worry about it.” Arsene said. *“I’ve already had my reward, and everyone will get theirs in due time.”*

“Hmph, I only wish for the Trickster to be happy.” Ishtar brushed invisible dust from her silky skirt. *“I don’t need any other reward.”*

"I have to agree." Shiva danced in place. *"He is the only one that matters."*

"I'm only happy that I'll see my green child today!!" Cerberus wagged his tail. *"That's enough of a reward for me!"*

"Of course." Byakko swished his tail as he lounged around the mindscape. *"It doesn't surprise me."*

"Hmmm, now that I think on it..."

"What is it, Auntie Titania?" Alice asked sweetly.

"Cerberus, aside from Midoriya's hair color reminding you of Orthrus, do you feel a bond with him because he is the Chariot?"

"Ooh!! Maybe?"

"It makes sense." Seth's toothy grin sharpened. *"As Kohryu is connected to the Hierophant, Cerberus is connected to the newly dubbed Chariot. Perhaps the bonds are easier to feel now that the Trickster has accepted them in this world."*

"Oh-ho?" Black Frost rocked back and forth on his heels. *"Does anyone else fe-hee-el connected to the humans here, ho?"*

"Hmm," Byakko blinked slowly. *"As Temperance, I've rather enjoyed Tobita's company, but that doesn't mean much."*

"Well, it's obvious that the Yaoyorozu Heiress is my favorite, aside from the Trickster, of course." Titania said.

"Awww." Alice pouted and scuffed her shoes into the ground. *"I haven't felt anybody except for Big Brother!"*

"Perhaps we should be thankful that nobody has been labeled 'Death'." Shiva whispered. Alice stuck her tongue out at him.

They looked over to Seth as he cackled and licked his lips.

Kohryu tilted his head. *“What do you find so humorous, Seth?”*

“The human whom I’ve felt close with is....”

“Is what? Who’s the Tower?” Pixie huffed and buzzed around Seth’s head like a mosquito. *“Stop being stingy you overgrown lizard!!”*

Seth brimmed with pride. *“Bakugo.”*

Yatagarasu felt his bond twinge as the Trickster suddenly sputtered.

“H-hey, are you okay?” Hitoshi put a hand to Akira’s shoulder. “Do you need something to drink?”

“I’m fine. Perfectly fine.” Akira chuckled as he settled down. “Just... my friends. Their conversations still surprise me sometimes.”

“R-right. If you’re sure.” Hitoshi let his hand drop. “Where do you think Class 1-A wandered to? You’d think finding a such a loud group wouldn’t be that hard.”

“In a mall this packed?” Akira got out his phone and scrolled through his texts. “I’m honestly not surprised.”

Hitoshi crossed his arms and scanned the mass of people filtering through the vast open space. Idle chatter and footsteps overtook the music playing on the overhead speakers, and alluring scents wafted from the food court nearby. The sticky heat of summer clung to their skin, and Hitoshi was half tempted to get an ice cream or something.

“Kurusu! Shinsou!”

“Ashido.” Akira smiled as Kirishima, Jiro, and Kaminari trailed behind her. “I was wondering where everyone was.”

“Sorry, dude!” Kirishima, as always, had a sunny smile. “Our class already met, a-and we tried to make Iida wait for you, but....”

“Kurusu and Shinsou can meet up with us after!!” Ashido deepened her voice and chopped her arms. “We should stick to this ridiculous schedule I have to get everything we need!!”

Kirishima grinned. “Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

“Whoa.” Kaminari lingered behind them, gaping at Akira. “So it’s true? You really did escape from a- Yeowch! What was that for, Jiro!? You got me right in the eye!”

“Nothing.” Jiro she crossed her arms, her ear jacks pointed at Kaminari. “You just tend to ask stupid questions. Ignore this idiot, Kurusu.”

“It’s okay.” Akira said. “So when do we meet up?”

“The food court at 3!” Ashido gently elbowed him. “We’ll eat and hang out after!”

“Is everyone here?”

“Nah.” Kirishima rubbed the back of his neck. “I tried to get Bakugo to come, but he wouldn’t budge. Todoroki and Yaomomo said they had an appointment or something today, so Iida is getting their stuff for camp. How about you?”

Akira checked his list. “There’s a shop on the second floor I need to visit.”

“Aww, all of our stuff is on the first floor.” Kirishima said.

“Hey, we’re meeting up at 3, right?” Akira smiled at him. “We’ll see you then?”

“Yeah!”

“See you in a bit, Kurusu!” Ashido said with a wink.

“I’m... glad that you’re safe, Kurusu.” Jiro mumbled and she wouldn’t look him in the eye. She grabbed Kaminari by the elbow and dragged him off, the others followed.

“I’m sorry! It was just a question!” Kaminari shouted as they disappeared into the crowd.

Hitoshi chuckled. “To the second floor, then?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Akira paused when he felt a shiver go down his spine, and he looked over his shoulder with a frown. He didn’t see anything suspicious within the crowd, but there were so many people. Whatever the reason, the sensation was gone as fast as it came.

“What’s up?” Hitoshi whispered.

“Just had a weird feeling.” Akira shook his head. “It could be nothing.”

Hitoshi deadpanned. “Knowing our luck, it’s something bad.”

Akira snorted. “Let’s just keep an eye out, okay?”

“Right.” Hitoshi sighed. “Hey, at least I know how to tell when I’m being followed.”

Akira smirked. “You have a pretty good teacher, huh?”

Hitoshi playfully glared at him.

He checked over his shoulder one last time before they headed towards the second floor.

As it turns out, Akira isn’t the only one who could attract trouble.

Fuyumi led them through the hospital ward. There were plenty of windows to allow sunlight inside, and wide open spaces with plush seating to make it more comfortable. Momo remembers the large garden they passed on the way here, full of fragrant summer flowers and floating butterflies.

“Are you sure about this?” Momo bunched the hem of her shirt with her fists. “I... I wouldn’t want to be intruding on anything private.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Natsuo lightly nudged her on the shoulder. “Actually, I think this visit might help you out.” Natsuo frowned. “You know, about your parents.”

Shoto pursed his lips, but nodded.

“Besides, I told her all about you.” Fuyumi beamed. “She’s been wanting to meet you, so please don’t feel as if you are intruding in our lives, okay?”

“Okay.” Momo returned her smile, if a bit small. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it, dear.”

They reached the room. Momo didn’t know why she was so frightened. It was simple as walking through the door, but it was a door that held secrets that shouldn’t ever be for her ears. Shoto must’ve seen her expression and gently grabbed her wrist. His hand seeped with gentle warmth.

“It’s okay.” A minuscule smile shown through Shoto’s stoicism. “We’ll go in together.”

“Don’t worry, Momo-chan!” Natsuo grinned. “If you need some privacy, then Fuyumi and I can step out for a couple of minutes.”

“Yeah, I’ve been wanting to see the koi fish they put in the new pond in the garden.” Fuyumi said. “We’ll be just outside?”

“Okay.”

“We’ll see you in a bit, then.” Shoto said.

Natsuo winked at Momo, before the two siblings walked down the hall.

“I don’t know why I’m so intimidated.” Momo whispered.

“You shouldn’t be.” Shoto slowly blinked. “I’m sure she’ll treat you as family.”

Shoto opened the door before Momo could say anything more. The room wasn’t much, but it was homely. Pictures of the Todoroki siblings hung on all of the walls, and the vibrant flowers on the table added a small touch of color to an otherwise monochromatic room.

A woman sat at the edge of the bed, hair as white as snow falling down her back. She looked up from the book in her hands, smiling. This woman had the same sort of delicate beauty as a forest in the middle of winter. A solitary, still sort of scenery where golden sunlight twinkled from freshly fallen snow, that same twinkle that sparkled within Todoroki Rei’s gray eyes.

“Momo, thank you for coming.”

Rei set her book on the table and Momo found herself wrapped within the woman’s arms. Momo was encased in the pleasant scent of juniper berries, and all of her anxieties were washed away as she melted in the embrace. Rei pulled back with her hands on Momo’s shoulders. She stared at Momo as a mother would when she was proud of her child. She gave Shoto the same loving expression as she hugged her son.

“Come, sit!” Rei gestured to the chairs in front of her bed. “Are you hungry? Thirsty? I can have the nurses get something.”

“No, I’m alright. Thank you.” Momo said as she sank into one of the chairs.

“Shoto?” Rei frowned. “Are you okay?”

Shoto tore his eyes away from the amaryllis flowers in a glass vase on the table.

“Yeah.” He took the other chair, his hands resting on his knees.

“Why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself, Momo?” Rei asked as she sat at the edge of the bed, Iida would sing praises at how perfect her posture was. “Natsuo and Fuyumi have said a lot! And Shoto-”

“Mother.” Shoto stared at the floor as the tip of his ears turned red.

Rei chuckled. “In any case, I’m glad that the both of you are here.”

Momo tucked some stray hair behind her ears. “I’m afraid there’s not much to say. I want to be a hero, I’m the Vice Class Rep of 1-A. Um... my favorite color is red?”

Shoto huffed. “You’re selling yourself short.”

“What? How?”

“You’re really smart and courageous.”

“O-Oh, I don’t think-”

“No?” Shoto glanced at her with an odd intensity. “We used your plan in our final exam. Aizawa-sensei didn’t know what hit him, and we were one of the first to pass. You can’t say that you’re not smart because of that.”

“W-well, I guess...” Momo ducked her head.

“And doesn’t your quirk make it so that you have to know the molecular makeup of everything you make?”

“Th-thats...”

They were interrupted by a giggle. Rei put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” She said. “You two are just adorable, that’s all.”

Shoto and Momo exchanged glances, then hastily looked away from one another. One could barely see Shoto’s smile, but the redness on Momo’s cheeks was blatant for the world to see. Shoto recovered first by clearing his throat.

“Mother, do you know why we brought Momo here?”

“... Yes.” Rei sobered and glanced between Momo and Shoto. “Are you sure you want to share this, Shoto?”

Shoto nodded. “I’m sure. This might help Momo make a decision on whether she wants to forgive her parents or not.”

Momo’s heart pounded. “I’m sorry, but what are you talking about?”

Both Todoroki’s stared at her. All happiness drained out of Rei as a heavy weight settled on her shoulders. Shoto’s hand traced down his scar, and Rei put a hand over his with a sad smile.

“It’s about Shoto’s scar. I.... I’m the one responsible for it.”

Momo startled. “... What?”

“It’s a long story.” Rei withdrew her hand and stared out the window, her eyes misting over in the memory. “I wasn’t a good mother. Being the number two hero’s wife wasn’t... easy. Eventually I couldn’t take the pressure and I snapped.” Shoto glared at the floor as Rei looked at him, and then her eyes trailed over Momo. “Shoto’s left side reminded me too much of my husband. That night as I was boiling water for tea, well....”

Momo’s eyes went wide. She looked in between Shoto and Rei in alarm.

“You mean...?”

“Yes. He was only five years old.” Rei sighed and looked down at her hands. “I didn’t even realize what I was doing until I heard Shoto screaming.” Rei’s voice shook as tears came into her eyes. “I-I tried to make it better with my quirk, but.... the damage was already done.”

Silence overtook the room.

Momo didn’t like the implications. Natsuo was always sour whenever he talked about Endeavor, how Shoto had not used his fire until the Sports Festival, how pained Fuyumi became whenever she spoke of either parent. And now, with this...

It didn’t paint a good picture of Endeavor.

“It took a long time for me to work up the courage to see her again.” Shoto said. “It wasn’t until this year that I saw her for the first time in a decade.”

“Do you... do you blame Endeavor?” Rei and Shoto stared at her in shock, and her face burned in shame. “I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have-”

“No, it’s alright.” Rei patted Momo’s knee. “Do you see those flowers?”

Momo looked at the red and white flowers. Shoto did too, but his expression became pinched.

“My husband delivers fresh flowers every morning. He’s not allowed to see me yet, but the nurses change them every day.”

“He... he does?” Shoto sat at the edge of his seat. “But why?”

“The amaryllis has many meanings in the flower language.” Rei stood up and went to the table, her hands cupping the largest one. “This type of amaryllis means love and passion. They are my favorite flowers, and I told Enji that on our very first date together. He

remembered after all this time. I think, in a way, he still cares for us.” Shoto scoffed. Rei’s hand dropped from the flower and turned towards them. “I know, Shoto. This doesn’t mean that he’s a good person, or that he should be forgiven, but you’ve told me that he *is* trying to change. That has to count for something.”

Momo studied the flowers, her brow wrinkled.

“It’s the same for your parents too, dear.” Momo jumped and looked up at Rei’s kind smile. “All parents make mistakes. We’re all human. But, as Shoto chose to forgive me for what I did, you have the choice of forgiving your parents for their actions. Of course, your forgiveness doesn’t excuse them.”

“You can take as long as you need.” Shoto pinched his bangs, right where the red and white colors bled together. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes.”

“I... thank you.” Momo rose from her chair and wrapped her arms around Rei, who chuckled and reciprocated the hug. “You’ve given me a lot of think about.”

“It’s no trouble, dear. Thank you for coming to meet me.”

They parted when there was a knock on the door. Fuyumi and Natsuo poked their heads in.

“Should we come back later?” Fuyumi asked.

“N-no.” Momo said. “It’s okay.”

Rei smiled. “Please, come in.”

“So, we looked at the koi fish in the garden!!” Natsuo beamed as he stormed inside. “And there was this huge black one with white spots around its face-”

Fuyumi sighed. “Wait until you hear what he named it.”

“Oh come on, sis!” Natsuo threw his arms up. “You can’t say that it doesn’t remind you of Joker!”

Momo covered her chuckle as a wheezing cough escaped Shoto.

“Joker the koi fish?” Shoto said incredulously. “Seriously, Natsuo?”

“Come on, Shoto! You have to see it to believe it! Hey, maybe it could be one of Joker’s mythical friends!”

Fuyumi facepalmed as Rei laughed.

“It is almost lunch time.” Rei said with a smile. “And I’ve yet to see the pond. Should we have a picnic in the garden? You can introduce us to Joker the koi fish.”

“Heck yeah!!” Natsuo beamed.

Momo couldn’t help her smile. Her eyes lingered on the amaryllis flowers for a few moments before they trailed out of the room. Rei saw her staring, and gently squeezed her hand. Momo squeezed back.

Perhaps....

There might be a glimmer of hope for her parents yet.

Izuku wandered through the crowded mall, thinking about which stores to visit when an arm curled around his shoulder and a husky voice whispered in his ear.

“You were the one who got all beat up at the Sports Festival, right? Would you happen to be the one who ran into the Hero Killer in Hosu, too?”

Izuku froze.

“Man, I seriously can’t believe I’d ever see *you* again in a place like this.” A deathly cold hand clutched his neck. “This must be something like fate, or destiny.”

Izuku’s blood turned into ice when he stared into Shigaraki’s blood red eyes. They gleamed with malice, and his cracked lips were spread into a manic grin.

“Why don’t we have tea or something, Midoriya Izuku?” Shigaraki chuckled as Izuku’s breath hitched. “Oh, calm down. You wouldn’t want to attract any attention, right?”

“You...” Izuku grit his teeth together, sweat beading on his face. “You know I could just shout for help. The heroes would be on you-”

“Oh?” Shigaraki’s grin widened further, a site that sent shivers down Izuku’s spine. “It’s pretty crowded today. How many people could I kill before they even show up? Twenty? Thirty? *Fourty* ? How many lives will be reduced to dust?”

The faces of his friends, of *Akira*, flashed in his mind. All of these people wandering around, going about their day would be.... He rapidly blinked the tears from his eyes as his hands curled into tight fists. His shoulders relaxed, even as biting pain came into his palms.

“Good. Now, come on, I just want to talk.”

Izuku stumbled as Shigaraki dragged him over to a bench underneath a tree. They were quiet for a while, and Izuku wondered if Shigaraki could feel his pounding pulse.

“You know what really pisses me off?” Shigaraki grumbled. “It used to be the Hero Killer and his stupid ideology, but now nothing makes me more pissed off than Joker. Look at this.” Shigaraki glared at a nearby store with Joker merch. “Why is nobody even looking at me anymore? The League Of Villains’ name is all but dust. What made people follow Stain? Why do people look up to Joker so damned much? What’s the difference between me and them, Midoriya?”

“I don’t agree with the Hero Killer, but...” Midoriya swallowed despite Shigaraki’s clammy fingers. “But I can understand him. For both me and the Hero Killer, it began with All Might. At the very least, he wasn’t destroying everything just because he wanted to. He didn’t just abandon it in vain like you did.”

“... And Joker?” Shigaraki growled.

Izuku’s hair stood on end from the bloodlust seeping from Shigaraki’s eyes.

“With Joker, h-he’s...”

Meanwhile, Akira and Hitoshi wandered through an accessory shop on the second floor. Akira held up the gray framed glasses and noticed the little stripes of colors on the sides. He frowned. They were pretty cool, but not what he was looking for. He put them back and looked around the other shelves.

“How do I look?” Hitoshi asked seriously.

Akira looked at Hitoshi, and bit back his laughter. “*What* are you wearing?”

“What?” Hitoshi grinned as he pushed up the large glasses with googly lenses, a fake nose, and a curly mustache. “Is it not my style?”

“Oh, it totally fits you perfectly.”

“Why don’t we go somewhere else?” Hitoshi took off the glasses and set them back in the case. “Like that Joker merch shop on the first floor?”

“Really? You... Oh.” Akira stepped around Hitoshi and picked up some bright yellow gloves. These looked exactly like Skull’s. A sudden lump in his throat made it hard to breathe, and the leather creaked as he held it tightly.

“Akira, are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.” He cleared his throat and held up the gloves. “I just... Shuichi said he couldn’t find any gloves the other day. He might like these ones.”

Hitoshi frowned, but he didn’t push anything as Akira paid for the gloves and they swiftly left the store. They stopped next door and looked into the glass display. Hitoshi squinted into their reflections.

“Well, I don’t see anybody following us.”

Akira huffed. “Trust me, I would know if people were following us. But hey, it’s good practice for you.”

“Yeah, good practice being paranoid.” Hitoshi muttered.

Akira chuckled. He was about to say something when Alice gasped.

“Oh, this is -!!”

“Alice? What is it?”

“Akira?” Hitoshi frowned when he saw Akira go rigid. “What’ wrong?”

“This feeling! I’m sensing.... a Reversed Death!!”

“Wait, what do you mean a Reversed Death?” Arsene asked.

“What are you-”

Alarm spread through the mindscape as Alice forced herself into reality, Yatagarasu squawked as he was thrown back into the mindscape. Nobody saw the flurry of sapphire cinders as she burst out of the nearby store. Hitoshi jumped out of his skin when he saw the rush of a blue dress fly past.

“Alice, return at once!” Arsene shouted.

"No, this is important! I must know who bears this bond!"

"Alice!" Akira hissed as he bounded after her.

Hitoshi sputtered, but shook himself out of it and followed.

Alice's small form weaved between the crowd with ease, and she skipped down the escalator to the first floor. Akira nudged past people with Hitoshi at his heels, but it was so crowded. Alice came to a stop about thirty feet from a tree, where familiar figures sat under its shade. It took Akira and Hitoshi a moment to catch up, and Alice frantically tugged on Akira's sleeve.

"There." Alice whispered as she pointed at Shigaraki. "That's him."

Midoriya was as pale as a ghost as Shigaraki's hand grasped his neck. Akira looked around the oblivious crowd, a surge of anger swelling in his stomach.

"Hitoshi, stay back." Akira ordered.

Alice disappeared as Akira stepped forward, Hitoshi was too stunned to move.

"-spired hope in a lot of people. He gives them what they need to continue through their day, no matter how hard their lives are. He's extremely powerful and charismatic, but he also shows compassion and kindness. With him.... he's somebody that people can aspire to be."

"I see." Shigaraki dryly chuckled. "Oh, it's like a weight off of my chest. Why they piss me off, why you irritate me so much.... I truly understand now!" Izuku struggled to breathe as the grip on his neck became a vice. "Everything is because of All Might, and the hope that he brings alongside Joker."

Izuku's vision became spotty and he clawed at Shigaraki's fingers.

“Why was I so worked up? I just need to kill that hope that I *hate* so much! Oh, I’m so glad we had this talk, Izuku!”

Suddenly, the air around them became heavy, the shadows at their feet wavered. Shigaraki’s head snapped towards a boy with blazing silver eyes chalk full of wrath. This aura... it was coming from the boy as he stepped closer.

“What do you think you’re doing to my friend?” Akira whispered oh so calmly, but his voice sprouted shivers upon the other two. “Let him go. *Now* .”

Terror chilled Izuku to the bone. He couldn’t let Akira get hurt! Not after he already failed Akira once before! Izuku just imagined him turning into dust-

“I-it’s fine!” Izuku wheezed. “Don’t come close!”

“Oh, it looks like I’ve attracted quite a crowd!” Shigaraki beamed as he threw his hands up, his malice and giddy madness all but gone. “So you’ve had friends with you? Sorry about that.” He leaned in and whispered to Izuku. “I’ll get angry if you follow me, so don’t even try.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets as he began to stroll away.

Izuku gasped for breath and rubbed his bruised neck. Akira rushed to his side, rubbing smooth circles around his back as he regained control of his breathing.

“W-wait, Shigaraki!” Izuku called.

Shigaraki stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“What does All For One want?”

Shigaraki smirked. “Who knows?”

With that, he walked away, the crowd weaving around him until he was gone.

“Izuku, are you okay? Who was...?”

“It was Shigaraki Tomura.” Izuku muttered. “That same guy who attacked the USJ.”

“Should we call the police?” Hitoshi approached as he looked at Akira with uncertainty.

“Yeah.” Akira handed over his phone to Hitoshi. “Speed dial 4 is for Detective Tsukauchi. Tell him what happened.”

Hitoshi reluctantly nodded as he took Akira’s phone and dialed.

“That wretch is long gone.” Arsene growled.

“How dare he touch my green child!!” Cerberus howled with rage.
“I’ll... I’ll-!!”

“Calm yourself, Cerberus.” Shiva placated. *“Midoriya will be alright.”*

“Yes, but there was something else.” Seth rumbled. *“A name. All For One. Shigaraki seemed to know him, so he must be a part of the League.”*

“But... we’ve never heard that name before.” Ishtar said.

“Izuku.” Akira tightly grabbed Izuku’s shoulder to ground him. “Who is All For One?”

Izuku flinched and flailed his hands. “N-Nobody!! I-”

He broke off with a coughing fit, and Akira decided to ask nothing more despite his deadly curiosity. The police swarmed the mall a few minutes later. The place was evacuated, Izuku was taken to the police station and the rest of 1-A split off to go home. Akira and Hitoshi blended into the retreating crowd, but a familiar face rooted Akira to the spot.

“Detective.” Akira tensed when Tsukauchi approached. “Do you need something?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” Tsukauchi held up his hands in placation. “I know you wouldn’t want to go to the station, so you’re free to go.”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “Just like that?”

Tsukauchi bore that stupidly soft smile. “Just like that. I’ll take care of Midoriya, so you don’t need to worry.”

“... Thank you.”

“We should go home.” Hitoshi clutched Akira’s arm. “My parents are probably worried.”

“Right.” Akira smirked at Tsukauchi. “See ya.”

They crept away from the sound of police sirens and into the safety of the alleyways. Akira grabbed his phone from the bag, and let out a long sigh.

“How much do you want to bet that Manami is going to murder me?” Hitoshi snickered as Akira dialed and held it up to his ear. “Manami-”

“WHAT DID YOU DO NOW!?” Akira held it away from his ear. *“It’s already on the news! We can’t even leave you with Hitoshi or any of the hero course students!? Ugh, why do we never learn...”*

“Hey, it’s not my fault this time!” Akira grumbled. “It was the Handy Man from the USJ and Hosu. He nearly got Midoriya.”

“What!? Is he okay?”

“Yeah.” Akira frowned. “Handy Man got away, though.”

“I can check the cameras?”

“You could, but he’s long gone. Smokey probably got him out the moment he could.” Akira sighed, but that nagging sensation yet plagued him. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything!”

Akira looked around to make sure the coast was clear. “Can you look up somebody named All For One? Midoriya said that name to Shigaraki, so he might be connected to the League.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best!” She let out a long sigh. *“Are you guys coming home?”*

“Yeah, we’re on our way.” Akira hesitated. “I promise. We’ll be home in no time.”

“Alright, we’ll be here!”

With that, he hung up. Hitoshi pinched the bridge of his nose as they exited the alleyway and blended into the crowd.

“I’m craving caffeine.”

Akira snorted. “I’ll make you some coffee when we get back.”

“And you’ll tell me what the hell you’re planning next.” Hitoshi muttered. “Don’t think I can’t see what you’re putting together.”

“You’re too smart for your own good.” Akira shoved his hands in his pockets as they approached the station. “We don’t have a solid plan yet, but I’ll explain everything as best as I can. No secrets this time.”

Hitoshi glared at him. “Promise?”

Akira grinned and held out his fist. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Hitoshi smiled and fist bumped back.

He learned a hell of a lot on the train ride home.

“It’s not your fault, Midoriya.” Tsukauchi smiled from across the table. “You kept calm and prevented a lot of people from getting hurt. That’s more than what a lot of pros would be able to handle.”

“But I gave him *advice* .” Izuku frowned into his cup of untouched tea. “He said he wanted to kill All Might a-and Joker. What if something really does happen to them because of me?”

Tsukauchi reached over and patted his hand. “We’ll do everything in our power to prevent that, I promise.”

There was a knock on the door, and Tsukauchi allowed Officer Tamakawa inside.

“Midoriya’s mother is here to pick him up.” He said.

“Right.” Tsukauchi gestured to the door. “You have my card. Feel free to call me if you need anything, alright?”

Midoriya nodded, and Sansa escorted him out. Tsukauchi ran a hand down his face with a long sigh, and left to go into the viewing room next door, where Aizawa and Nezu waited.

“This is no coincidence.” Nezu said as the door closed. “Joker warns us of an impending attack on the Summer Camp. Only a few days pass before an encounter with Shigaraki Tomura.”

Aizawa glowered. “You’re still going through with it.”

Nezu smiled calmly.

Tsukauchi only felt impending doom. “You have a plan to counter it?”

“Of course I do!” Nezu’s beaming grin sent shivers down their spines.

“You’re not going to tell us about your ‘brilliant’ plan until afterwards, aren’t you?” Aizawa grumbled.

“My dear Eraserhead, you know me so well!” Nezu hopped down from his chair and swung the door open. “I’ll let you gentlemen know how it turns out!”

Tsukauchi and Aizawa could only stare at each other with mutual dread when Nezu’s chuckles echoed down the hallway. The mouse-bear-dog wandered through the halls, stopping when his ears picked up chatter by the back exit, the door open by just a crack.

“Do you also have times where you can’t save everyone?” Midoriya asked.

“I do. A lot. There could be any number of people suffering right at this very moment, and yet my hand cannot reach out to help them. I’ve failed more people than I dare to count.” Nezu’s ears pricked at Toshinori’s pained voice. “But Young Midoriya, you cannot wallow on those you can’t save. You remember their brave sacrifice and strive to do better in the future. Does this make sense?”

“Y-yes!”

Nezu smiled.

Perhaps All Might could be molded into a fine teacher yet.

Akira groaned as he opened his eyes to a familiar ceiling.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Hitoshi chuckled from the armchair. “How are you feeling?”

Akira sat up and rubbed his eyes, the fluffy pink blanket pooling around him.

“Better.” He said as his eyes landed on the coffee table. “Uh, what are those?”

“They’re for you.” Hitoshi set aside his laptop and pushed the massive pile of cards towards Akira. “From the regulars. Most of them came by today and wouldn’t take no for an answer. I stole some of the chocolate that Haru-san dropped off though, I hope you don’t mind?”

“Knock yourself out. I don’t think I can eat this all by myself.”

“Sweeeet.” Hitoshi shamelessly plucked a kit kat from the pile.

Akira chuckled as he opened the first get well card from Akane. He smiled at the officer’s attempt at sketching their signature coffee and curry combo. Akira opened his mouth, but Hitoshi beat him to it, his lips stained by a chocolate smudge.

“The cafe has been really quiet today. Everyone knows that mom and dad wanted some space. Oh, and they left plenty of tips for you downstairs.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after five.” Hitoshi huddled down in the chair. “You slept pretty hard, but its understandable. Yesterday was crazy.”

Akira chuckled as he set the card down. “I’m never taking your mother’s quirk for granted. Or Titania’s Dormina for that matter.” He stood and stretched. “Do you think your parents will let me work today?”

“Eh, maybe.” Hitoshi said as he balled up the empty wrapper. “Like I said, it’s been a quiet day, so I think they’d allow it.”

Akira nodded and made his way to the bathroom to wash up. He stared at himself in the mirror. His face had more color, and he felt rather refreshed after his quirk-induced nap.

“I didn’t have any nightmares.” Akira’s Personas surfaced.

“Ah, that is good.” Ishtar smiled.

"We made sure that you had a peaceful slumber." Arsene said.

"Thanks." Akira frowned as he turned on the faucet to wash his face.
"I... I had a nightmare when I was at that lab. It wasn't pretty."

"Big brother..."

"I'll eat any of Master's nightmares!" Cerberus said, grinning.

"You can't eat nightmares." Byakko huffed.

"You don't know that!!"

Akira chuckled as he wiped his face with a fresh towel and did his best to tame his wild floof. An impossible task in its own right, but he didn't want any customers to be turned away because he had constant bedhead. He left the bathroom with a shake of his head, smirking as Hitoshi swiped another candy bar.

"You'll make a decent thief at this rate." Akira slipped on his shoes.

"Hey, I have a pretty awesome teacher." Hitoshi said over a mouthful of chocolate. *"Just don't push yourself too hard, okay?"*

"Yeah, I know." Akira reached for the door. *"Morgana should be around here somewhere. I'll be fine."*

Akira trekked downstairs. The usual scents calmed him as he crept into the kitchen, where Ayumu had just got a fresh batch of cookies out from the oven. He glanced over at Akira, smirking.

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Like a baby."

"Good. Here." Ayumu shoved a warm chocolate chip cookie in his hands. *"I have a feeling you're going to ask if you could work. You need some energy."*

Akira took a bite. "Is this a new recipe?"

"Yep!" Ayumu grinned as he moved the cookies onto a cooling rack. "We've been getting enough customers to buy better ingredients. This one has a decent quality chocolate that I cut into chunks, and paired with some flaky salt... well...."

"It's probably the best cookie I've ever had." Akira wiped his hands on his pants.

"Thanks, kid." Ayumu nodded to Akira's apron. "Go ahead. Risumi is at her usual station."

Hitoshi was right. The cafe was much quieter than usual, with only a handful of patrons in the booths.

"You look better." Risumi smirked from the register. "Amazing what a little bit of good sleep can do. Right?"

Akira ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Risumi scanned the cafe.

"Do you need- hey, what's wrong with your hand?"

"Oh, I-" Risumi startled when Akira suddenly grasped her bandaged hand. "Akira, it's okay. It was just an accident."

"Accident?"

Risumi nodded as Akira reluctantly let go. "A customer accidentally dropped a plate, and I cut my hand when I cleaned it up. They apologized profusely and offered to bandage the wound. I'm fine, dear. Promise."

"O-okay." Akira took a breath. "If you say so."

"Yes, well..." Risumi looked around the cafe. "The dinner rush is already over, but I thought there would be more customers today."

Akira shrugged. "Hey, maybe the curry craze is finally calming down."

"I hope not. That's our main source of income!" She shook her head, still smiling. "Oh, and your tips are in that jar over there. You've got quite a haul!"

Akira gaped on the jar filled to the brim with yen notes.

"I can't take *all* of this."

"Sweetheart, the regulars love you." She ruffled his hair. "They were so worried after what was shown on the news. They wanted to do more, what with all of the cards, but they felt that it was the least they could do to make you feel better."

Akira blinked slowly. "You're trying to make me feel guilty so that I'll take it, aren't you?"

"You deserve it, kiddo." She smirked. "Is it working?"

"I....yes."

Their stock was a little bit depleted thanks to Hatsume and supplies for camp, and Akira giving his last paycheck to Daichi certainly didn't help. Akira had no regrets, though. The rest of the evening was rather quiet and unassuming. Risumi handled the patrons, while Akira stood back and washed dishes, occasionally going into the kitchen to steal another cookie from Ayumu.

It was later in the evening when Risumi quietly cursed under her breath.

"What's wrong?" Akira frowned as Risumi stared down at her phone.

"It's nothing." She sighed as she pocketed the device. "A shipment of our usual ingredients will be delayed, and I'll have to figure out something else until they get here."

“Oh.”

“It's no big deal. I'll use the office computer. We have enough funds stored away to have some ingredients expedited.”

“I can hold down the fort.”

“Are you sure? It's okay if you still don't feel well enough.”

“Gee, I don't know.” Akira watched as the last patron put yen on the table and left. “I don't think I can handle this crowd.”

Risumi laughed. “I suppose you're right. I'll just be in the office, and Ayumu is always in the kitchen. Just shout if you need anything, okay?”

“Will do.”

Risumi walked away with graceful, silent footsteps, and disappeared down the hallway to the main office. Akira sighed as he leaned against the counter in an unusually silent cafe. The quiet made it easy to think.

They were running out of time.

He had channeled Arsene's mother hen energy (he ignored Arsene's indignant huff) when he texted Midoriya or any of the other 1-A kids to see how they were coping after the mall incident. They assured him that they were doing fine, but...

They won't be fine after the Summer Camp.

Manami had no luck narrowing down the locations. Akira might be forced to swipe somebody's phone and place a tracker on it like Oracle did that one time, or maybe break into Aizawa's apartment and do it that way. That didn't sit right with him, though.

And All For One...

There was nothing, aside from rumors about a bogey man of the underground, but the forums Manami found it on were *ancient*, enough to where nobody from that forum would still be alive today. And yet... something significant had passed between Midoriya and Shigaraki yesterday, they acted as if the legendary bogey man was still alive.

All thoughts were cast aside the *all* of the wind chimes outside rang. His fear sparked his Personas' ire, and he felt their powers creep under his skin as he stared out the door. The bell rang, and Akira had just stopped himself from gaping as none other than Principal Nezu stepped inside. The rat's beady eyes intensified as he spotted Akira before he dove into a booth, entwined paws on the table top.

"What is he doing here?" Arsene growled.

"Shall I erase his memory, Trickster?" Vasuki whispered. *"It will give us time to flee."*

"No." Akira swallowed as he grabbed a notepad. *"We don't even know if he knows yet."*

"But considering Eraserhead's promise to let him know the League's plan, well...." Arsene's dark power swelled, but he wouldn't release it until Akira gave him the green light. *"You can't call it a coincidence."*

"What can I get for you?" Akira put on his best smile, his pen at the ready.

"Ah, I'll take two cups of your finest tea!" Nezu chirped.

"Alright. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Akira tried not to make it seem like he ran from the table, or that he was scanning the cafe for all possible exits. Should he get Ayumu or Risumi...? No, they shouldn't be dragged into this. Akira took a deep breath to steady his hands, making the golden brew just as Tobita did countless times.

With both warm cups in his hand, he went back to the table. He set one in front of Nezu, but frowned as he held the other one.

“Waiting for a friend?” Akira asked.

Nezu took a sip. His eyes were blown wide and his immaculate fur suddenly stood on end. “This tea is absolutely superb!!” He said as his eyes turned to Akira, then to the other cup in his hands. “But to answer your question, no. Why, the other one is for you!”

Thankfully Nezu couldn’t hear the frantic whispers in his head as the rat-bear-dog-thing waved a paw to the opposite side of the table.

“Please, sit. We have much to discuss. Don’t worry, I came here alone and nobody else knows of my current whereabouts! You may do as you wish, but I would suggest hearing me out.”

Akira sank into the end of the booth, drawing on his Personas’ strength to keep a good poker face. Hopefully Nezu couldn’t see his bouncing knee.

“I don’t know what a simple barista would have to talk about with the principal of a hero school.”

“Oh, I think we both know that you’re no simple barista, Kurusu Akira. Or do you prefer that I call you Joker? You go by many names, don’t you Ren?”

The temperature in the cafe plummeted.

“I don’t care how cute he is, I’ll let my teddies take care of him!”

“No, let me eat him instead.” Seth growled. *“He’d barely make a mouthful, but I’d love to hear the crunch of his bones within my jaws!”*

“Eugh, no Seth.” Ishtar sneered. *“Haven’t we warned you of the diseases that rats carry?”*

“Hush, everyone.” Arsene slowly spread his wings. *“We cannot distract the Trickster right now!”*

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Please don’t play dumb. It’s unbecoming of you and it wastes our precious time.” Nezu took another sip, his smile never falling.

“Besides, we have far more in common than one would think!”

Akira narrowed his eyes. “How do you figure?”

“I wasn’t always the chipper principal you see before you!” Nezu gently swirled his cup. “I do love children. The reason why I became a teacher is because young minds still have room to grow, to nurture, to learn kindness and compassion for their fellow peers. Quite unlike the adults that kept me captive in a laboratory. I still remember the experiments they enacted upon me, their wicked smiles have haunted my nightmares for years. It was like....” Nezu slowly looked up to Akira, unblinking.

Akira understood. He found himself answering softly.

“Like you’re a lowly pawn in a game played by those who consider themselves gods.”

“Precisely .”

They didn’t know how much time had passed as Nezu and Akira stared at one another, but one such powerful bond, shared by nobody else on the planet, was forged. Someone that truly *understood* . Akira’s throat clogged, the words refusing to form.

Nezu’s eyes softened, as did his smile. He reached into his vest pocket and produced a card.

“What’s....” Akira cleared his throat as his voice trembled. “What’s that?”

“This-” Nezu waved it. “Is the time and place where you shall send your raven to Aizawa, who will provide the location to the Summer Camp.” Nezu’s smile widened as Akira straightened. “I will give this card to you, but know that if you take it you will be agreeing to what I propose.”

“And that would be...?”

“A partnership. I know that you and your team would find a way to the Summer Camp anyway, so how about we make this easier for the both of us? Take this card, and I will work something out with the Wild Wild Pussy Cats. We would team up to protect the students.”

“But how are you going to convince them to work with *me* ? Why not outright cancel the camp to save yourself some trouble?”

“And waste this opportunity? If I cancel it now, then we would have no knowledge of their plans for the future! We would lose our biggest advantage over the League.”

“But Giran probably left out a lot of details. This attack could be bigger than we imagine, and with all of these unknown elements, how do you plan to keep the students safe?”

“Well, then isn’t it for the best that we pool our resources together to prevent a tragedy?” Nezu’s grin turned wicked. “Do you think they will account for *us teaming* together? A united front stands a better chance of being successful.”

“How do I know that you won’t just turn on me after its done? I’m not walking into a trap.”

“I’m afraid that you’ll just have to take my word that your safety is guaranteed. I know it’s not the most ideal situation, but what would you be willing to sacrifice to ensure that these children make it through unscathed?”

An ultimatum. An honest choice with no pretty lies tied to it. Akira could refuse, find some other way, or he could take the deal. They wouldn't have to hide from the group of heroes this way, but on the other hand-

"Would the students know about me being there?"

"I'll leave that up to you." Nezu said. "But know that the Wild Pussy Cats and any U.A. staff would be informed of your presence, deal or no." Nezu chuckled as Akira's expression soured. "Did I mention that they have excellent hot springs? You'd be able to use them and any other accommodations freely with such a partnership!"

Oh yes, Manami mentioned that *all* of the Pussy Cats' locations had hot springs.

"But this deal is a bit unbalanced, don't you think?" Akira leaned back, eyes narrowed. "My team would be the most at risk from both sides."

Nezu smirked. "Then what do you propose?"

"You let my team walk after this whole ordeal is over, and..."

"And?"

Akira stared the rat in the eye. "You let Mona and I investigate the USJ."

"Oho, why the USJ?" Nezu tilted his head when Akira didn't answer. "Ah, well I suppose you wouldn't mind if Eraserhead and I tagged along? It's still on U.A. grounds, and I'm interested in what sparked your attention!"

"Fine."

It might be the best deal, all things considered. Slowly, Akira reached over the table. Who would have thought that taking such a small card bore the weight of an entire world?

“Excellent!” Nezu beamed.

“I don’t want the students knowing I’m there.” Akira said. “At least, not at first.”

“We’ll do everything to keep it as such.” Nezu finished his tea and sighed happily. “Well, the tea was delicious, young man. I won’t overstay my welcome.” Nezu slid from the booth and straightened his vest. “I bid you a good night, Kurusu Akira.”

Nezu grinned at him one last time before he vacated the cafe. Akira sat there, his untouched tea had long lost its warmth as he stared at the white card. This location was on U.A. grounds, and within two days time.

“Okay, I’ve taken care of - Akira?” Akira hastily tucked the card away as Risumi stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“Uh, nothing.” He stood and collected the cups. “A friend stopped by. I served them some tea. That’s it.”

“Yes, well...” Risumi pursed her lips when Akira wouldn’t look her in the eye, instead choosing to wash dishes in a heavy silence. “How about we close early? It has been a rather slow day.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Risumi ignored the familiar sprout of worry as she grabbed a paper bag and stuffed it full of sugary treats. She packed the mass of tips inside too, protected by a plastic bag.

“Here.” She gently shoved it in his hands, he blinked down at it before she wrapped him in her arms. “Come here anytime you need a break, okay? We’ll be here for you. Always.”

“I will, promise.” He chuckled. “You can tell Hitoshi to keep all of the chocolate upstairs. I’ll pick up the cards next time, okay?”

“Okay.” She set a hand on his absurdly fluffy hair. “See you later?”

His eyes gleamed as he grinned. "Later."

Risumi only kept the tears away until Akira left.

Akira walked on in a semi-daze.

"Akira, where are we going? What did Nezu want? Do you think he's setting up a trap?... Akira? Akira, answer me!" Morgana sighed as Akira kept quiet, instead focusing on the breeze he commanded. "Well, nobody is following us, at least."

Morgana didn't know where Akira was going, but this wasn't the way to the Raven's Nest. Akira himself didn't realize where he was until he stood in front of an apartment door, his hand raised to knock. It opened to a familiar woman with kind green eyes, who brightened upon seeing him.

"Kurusu!!" Inko attacked him with a warm hug, not that he objected. She stepped back with a grin. "Sweetie, I'm so happy to see you! Would you like to come in?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to Izuku." Akira gave her his best version of the puppy dog eyes. "If that's okay?"

"Of course!"

She ducked back inside and Izuku emerged minutes later. He took one look at Akira's crestfallen expression, his eyes wide.

"Mom, we'll be at Dagobah!"

"Alright, be careful, okay? Text me if you need anything!"

"I will!" Izuku shut the door and they were off.

An amicable silence floated between them as they walked the darkened streets, their shadows dancing under each street light they

passed. Akira spoke when they heard the sound of waves and the air took on a familiar saltiness.

"I like your shirt." Akira smirked. "Very fashionable."

"Thanks?" Izuku laughed, his shirt literally said 't-shirt' on the front. "My classmates don't find it very funny though."

"They're missing out on good humor."

Akira stopped when they reached the seawall stairs, planting himself on the top step as he hugged his bag to his chest. Morgana didn't dare move. Izuku shuffled on his feet, but he sank next to Akira, his eyes staring out into the vast ocean.

They took a moment to admire how the moon painted the sea a beautiful silver.

"Are you okay, Akira?" Izuku asked softly.

"I was going to ask you the same, honestly." Akira looked at Izuku with a frown. "I know that guy didn't leave without giving you scars, even if they aren't visible."

Izuku swallowed. "That's not as bad as being kidnapped and almost experimented on."

"Since when was this a competition? We both went through something traumatic." A beat of silence passed before Akira nudged Izuku. "What a pair we make, huh? Trouble makers to our core."

"Yeah." Izuku's smile dropped as he looked down at his scarred hands. "Why did you want to talk to me? N-not that I'm complaining or anything!! It's always nice to talk to you but I guess I'm just curious?"

Akira snorted as he ruffled Izuku's hair. "I wanted to see you before you left for that camp. That's soon, right?"

“Yeah!” Excitement sparked in Izuku’s eyes. “I honestly can’t wait!”

“Yeah...” Akira stood and dusted sand from his pants. “I’m sorry I can’t really talk long, but I wanted to ask something before you left.”

Izuku stood. His smile made Akira’s heart hurt even more.

“Of course! You can ask me anything!”

“I just...” Akira looked down at his shoes, his voice just above a whisper. “We’ll always be friends, won’t we?”

Izuku blinked several times, his mouth dropping. Akira’s pounding heart counted the seconds that ticked by, with only the sea breeze washing over them.

“How can you ask that?” Izuku beamed. “Of course we’ll always be friends, no matter what!”

“Right. Of course.” Akira rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. “Thanks, Izuku.”

“No problem!” Izuku glanced at Akira’s bag as he heard a phone chime. “Do you have to go?”

“Yeah.” Akira shook his head. “I should’ve been home for dinner a bit ago. They get worried when I don’t respond. I should get going.”

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

“Nah, thanks for the offer though.”

Akira waved as he walked down the street, leaving Izuku on the seawall stairs. Izuku watched until he saw Akira blend in with the shadows.

If only Izuku knew that would be the last time he ever set eyes on Kurusu Akira.

“Kurogiri, are Compress and Twice done yet?”

“Not quite, but they are close.” Kurogiri said as he finished wiping his favorite mug. “Why are you in such a rush, Shigaraki Tomura?”

“You know why.” He snapped.

“... Of course.”

“Toga.”

“Hmm?” Toga leveled him a sadistic grin as she clutched a vial with a tiny globule of blood inside. “What’s up, Shiggy?”

“I told you not to call me that.” He muttered. “I want you to keep an eye on Mr. Compress when we launch the assault.”

“Oooh?” Her cat-like eyes narrowed. “So you noticed he’s been acting different, too?”

“No shit. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Sure! But you owe me big time! Can I cover Compress in pretty red!?”

“It’s not wise to rush.” Kurogiri sighed. “We should wait and watch until we are certain of his intentions. Besides, Sensei made it clear what would happen to Compress if he ran or became a turn coat. I wouldn’t wish *that* fate on anybody.”

“Fiiiine.” Toga splayed herself over the bar with a dramatic huff. “I’ll watch him. Hey, Kurogiri! Make me a drink!”

“You are not old enough, Miss Toga.”

“Ugh, nobody wants to have any fun! I’m bored!”

Shigaraki ignored their bickering.

Sensei was adamant that he wanted Joker first, and what Sensei said goes. However, any potential betrayers and the hero brats were fair game.

He couldn't wait to watch them all struggle like worms.

"That's when I accepted this card from Nezu- what, hey!"

Manami snatched the card from Akira. "Okay, so we'll have the location, but I want us to get one thing straight, mister!"

Akira swallowed as the others looked at her in surprise.

"What would that be?" He asked.

Manami puffed her cheeks and put her hands on her hips. She was rather intimidating despite her tiny stature.

"Whatever plan you make, we *all* have to agree on it." Manami raised her chin in a challenge. "We're all in this *together* ! Got it?"

"But I'm never really alone, remember?"

Manami repressed her urge to kick him. "You know what I mean!"

"She has a point." Kaito said over his plate of curry. "Neither Hitoshi or I will be there to look after you, so you should rely on one another while you're there."

"We are all a team, are we not?" Tobita said as he took a sip of freshly brewed tea.

"Yeah!" Shuichi crackled his knuckles. "We have your back!"

"Merp!"

Morgana cackled at Akira's side. "We can't really argue against that, can we *Leader* ?"

“Okay, okay.” Akira held up his hands. “We are a team, and I realize that now.”

“I’ll hold you to it, mister!” Manami said. “I know you broke some promises before.”

Akira huffed. “... Sorry.”

Manami shook her head. “In any case, we should discuss our first problem.”

“Er, problem?” Shuichi raised a scaly brow. “What problem?”

“Think about it!” Manami paced around the lounge. “This is a *Summer Camp* .”

“Yeah, and?” Akira asked.

“*Meaning* that there won’t really be any trains to take us to whatever mountain lodge the camp will be at! How are we going to get there?”

“That’s true.” Tobita set his cup on the table. “You don’t think we could ask U.A. for transportation?”

“No.” Akira wrinkled his nose. “I’d prefer not to owe them any favors. If it comes down to it, we can always ride Seth. He’s grown in size so he would be able to carry everyone.”

“No, no, *NO!!*” Morgana was on all fours. “No more dragon rides! Nope! Nu uh! I can’t take it!”

“Then what do you suggest, Morgana?” Akira asked.

“Well, if you have to ask....” Morgana grinned at him.

A smirk bloomed on Akira’s face. “Wait, do you mean...?”

“Yep!”

Kaito slowly blinked. “Do you mind sharing with the rest of the class?”

Morgana chuckled. “It’ll be easier to show you. Come on!”

He hopped down and sprinted out to the front. Excitement bubbled in Akira’s chest as he followed, with his confused teammates right behind him. He got out his phone as they went outside.

“What are you doing?” Kaito asked.

Akira’s grin widened. “I have to get your reactions. It’ll be great.”

“You know, that just scares me more.” Manami said.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about?” Tobita asked as he patted her head.

“Okay, it looks like the coast is clear!” Morgana said as he looked up and down the street. “Manami, the cameras around here won’t catch anything, right?”

“Right! My program still loops old footage so that we won’t be seen leaving the Nest.” Manami crossed her arms, frowning. “... Why?”

“It’s finally my time to shine!!” Morgana cackled as he balanced on his back legs, waving his front legs in a wide arc.

“Morganaaaa....transfoooooorm!!”

He jumped into the air with a fantastic spin, and Akira bit back his laughter when everyone cried out at the puff of smoke, before a large black van crashed onto the street. This van had three yellow stripes painted on the left side of it. Morgana’s blue eyes were the headlights, with his ears at the top, and a tail sticking out from the bumper.

“Wh-wh-wh-” Manami wasn’t the only one lost for words.

Akira snapped a picture of everyone’s faces, laughing.

“Wait.” Akira walked over and patted Morgana on the hood. “How long could you transform like this?”

“I felt the change a while ago!” Morgana’s voice echoed from the radio. “Why?”

“You could’ve, I don’t know, told me about it earlier?”

“And ruin the surprise!?” Morgana bounced on his front wheels, the headlights brightening. “You’re not the only one who likes to keep their cards close to their chest! I had to wait until the right moment! So, aren’t I amazing!?”

“Is *that* why you made that Spotlight post!?” Shuichi frantically circled the van, taking in the details. Lady Stubbs was sniffing Morgana’s front bumper. “That’s so cool!! Stubbs, can you turn into a van too!?”

Lady Stubbs jumped back with a hiss.

“Wha- No I’m not insinuating that you are fat!”

“Merp!”

“Yes, we all know it’s just the fluff!”

Akira sighed.

“Alright.” Tobita blinked several times as he approached the driver’s side. “Does anyone have a license?”

“Does that one weird dream with Nezu count?” Akira asked.

“I’m afraid not.” Tobita chuckled.

Akira opened the passenger door and stuck his head inside. “But I never needed a license to drive him around.”

“Ah, then perhaps I should drive this... er... Mona?” Tobita’s expression twisted in amused confusion. “If that is alright? I do have

my license, and I would rather us not get in trouble with the authorities before we get to the Summer Camp.”

“Fine by me!” Morgana prummed. “Just go easy on my meowtory engine, it’s really sensitive! You hear that? Be gentle!!”

“... Meowtory engine?” Kaito whispered.

“I-I’m.... not going to ask.” Manami stated.

“Don’t worry!” Tobita laughed as he pet Morgana’s hood. “After all, I am not called Gentle Criminal for nothing!!”

“Oh, this will be entertaining.” Arsene muttered.

Akira had to agree.

“Everyone line up in alphabetical order!!” Iida chopped his arms as his classmates loaded their luggage.

“But it’s open seating, Iida!” Ashido cried as she dove inside.

Aizawa snorted as Yaoyorozu gently patted Iida’s shoulder. A rustle came from above, and he looked into the branches of the tree he lingered under.

“About time.” He said to the three legged raven. “I thought you would be too late.”

Yatagarasu shook his head as he dropped from the branch to perch on Aizawa’s shoulder, the talons digging into his skin.

“Joker is never late.” Yatagarasu said. “Now, the location?”

“... Right.” Aizawa dug into his pocket for piece of paper. “This is where the camp will be. The buses will be leaving soon, so I would suggest following behind at a reasonable distance if you don’t want the students to see you.”

“Got it.” Yatagarasu opened his wings.

“Wait, aren’t you going to take it?”

“No need.” Yatagarasu chuckled. “I’ve already sent the location to the Trick- to Joker. He has heeded your words as well. He promises to take along his fair share of coffee so that you won’t run out.”

Aizawa’s eyes widened. “You can communicate telepathically?”

The bird’s eyes twinkled before he took off in a rush of feathers. Aizawa sighed as he crunched the piece of paper and stuck it back in his pocket.

Todoroki looked skywards at the darting shadow, only catching a glimpse of a strange bird before it disappeared over the tree line. The rustle of grass drew his eyes over to Aizawa, who walked out from the same direction. His teacher exchanged glances with Vlad King with a firm nod.

For some reason Vlad King’s frown deepened, but he returned the nod.

“Strange...” Todoroki muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Midoriya asked.

“Nothing.” Todoroki pushed his luggage into the compartment. “Do you want to sit together on the bus?”

“Sure!”

The thought of the strange bird stayed in the back of Todoroki’s mind as they prepared to leave.

“Alright, I think that’s everything.” Akira stared at the list as he listened to the Monabus’ gentle purring. “You doing alright, Morgana?”

“Yeah, I’m fine!” Monabus huffed. “We’ll be late if we don’t leave soon!”

“Shotgun!” Manami cried as she was the first to dive inside.

“Hey, I wanted that!” Shuichi cried.

“Too late!” Manami smirked. “First come, first serve!”

Shuichi sighed as he hopped in back with Lady Stubbs. “Fine, you win this one!”

“I’m still having trouble coming to terms with this.” Hitoshi leaned against the wall, frowning. “How is it that Morgana can turn into a *bus* ?”

“Human cognition is a powerful thing.” Akira closed the back doors and stepped onto the sidewalk. “Its how our abilities grow more powerful here.”

“Wait. Oh my god.” Hitoshi gaped. “He’s the cat bus from Totoro!”

“Wh-what!?” Monabus beeped. “There’s another cat bus!?”

“It’s from a show, Morgana.” Akira chuckled. “But maybe that’s where this power originally came from?”

“Huh, maybe!”

“Wait, you’re a *sentient* cat bus, so can you drive yourself?” Hitoshi asked.

“No I can’t drive myself!!” Monabus shouted. “Why do you think Tobita is driving me!?”

At that moment, Tobita walked out with Kaito.

“Ah, I see you’ve finished loading up.” Tobita said with a smile. “Shall we be off, then?”

“Yeah.” Akira turned to look out into the city. “Yatagarasu said the buses will leave in a few minutes.”

Kaito crossed his arms, eyes falling to the ground.

“Hey, lighten up Kaito.” Akira patted him on the shoulder.

“‘Lighten up’, you say.” Kaito scoffed, but it had no anger in it. “As if that will help anything. You know how this looks.”

Hitoshi bit his lip as he stared at Akira.

“Yeah, it could easily be a trap from either side. Not to mention Giran probably withheld information.” Akira scratched the back of his head as he felt everyone’s eyes on him. “Listen, we’ll meet up back here if we get split up. If anything happens-”

“*Nothing* will happen, right?” Hitoshi’s hands balled into fists. “Nezu gave you his word... right?”

“Yeah, but still.” Akira shrugged. “We’re going to be prepared for anything.”

Tobita reached into his breast pocket for the Yaoyorozu watch. “Come now, we *will* be terribly late if we linger around.”

“Right.” Akira shifted his weight as Tobita hopped into the driver’s seat. He smiled at Hitoshi. “Keep up your routine while we’re gone, okay?”

“And make sure to keep practicing on your laptop!” Manami cried from inside the Monabus. “Remember what I taught you!”

“I know.” Hitoshi smirked, but it slowly fell as his eyes flicked back to Akira. “Be careful, okay?”

Akira winked. “Don’t worry about us.”

He turned on his heel and hopped in back with Shuichi and Stubbs. Akira waved at them one last time before he shut the door. The Monabus lurched with motion, and Kaito and Hitoshi watched as it drove down the street and turned a corner.

Hitoshi dragged out a sigh. "Doesn't he understand that we *always* worry?"

"That's just how he is." Kaito shook his head. "You want to come inside for some curry? I swear Akira left me with an entire month's supply. I hope it doesn't go bad."

"I'll help you make a dent in it." Hitoshi snorted. "You know, you could just come to the cafe now that you have that suppressant."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Kaito looked at the silver band on his wrist. "I'll think about it."

"You're always welcome."

Kaito smiled and they trailed inside to feast on curry, unknowing of the world shattering events lingering on the horizon.

Welp, there you have it. We'll be going straight to the Summer Camp after my break is over ;))

Also, if anybody happens to be confused by the 'weird dream with Nezu' that Akira had, then go ahead and read chapter 4 of the Thieves Den! It's a scene that crashed into my brain and wouldn't let go, and there are other extra scenes written by some of the lovelies in Discord! I might also be putting more scenes/scenarios on it eventually as well.

I hope you guys have a good September. See ya in October! <3

Edit: I've seen a lot of comments on this chapter guessing if the story either ends at Kamino or right after. No worries, it doesn't! There's at least one-third of the story left to go even after Kamino ends. The best way to split this story would be into 3 'acts', the first act being chapter 1 to Price, act 2 is Price to Kamino, then act 3 is Kamino until the end.

Meaning that this story isn't ending any time soon xD

Aria Of The Soul

Chapter 56: Aria Of The Soul

Hello there ;3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[FANART By aariaart](#)

A somber melody trilled through the room draped in soft velvet, accompanied by the constant echo of piano notes. Lonely chains swayed to and fro within the isolated cells as if disturbed by a ghost, the lowly rings of metal only adding to the desolate song.

Welcome to the Velvet Room.

Lavenza dearly wished she could hear her Master say those words. Their guest hadn't made an appearance since he was torn away from this world, his cell without a door remained vacant. Lonely. She held the Compendium close to her chest, hoping that the Trickster's other selves could soothe the emptiness within.

She opened the book to Arsene's page, then Seth's and Titania's. Pixie and Ishtar.

All of the Personas the Trickster brought to the final battle were painted over by some unknown force, like ink carelessly splotched on the pages. The blackness, which started at the center of the page, slowly fanned out over time. Now, they were nothing but pages of midnight.

Her chest tightened.

This ache in her heart came whenever she thought of the Trickster. What of the strange lump forming in her throat? Her eyes that burned and blurred her vision? As a Ruler Of Power, she could not get sick in the way humans could. Or perhaps...

Were these human emotions?

She wiped her eyes with a delicately gloved hand.

"Are you alright, Lavenza?"

"Y-yes." Lavenza turned to her Master. "I'm troubled that we have not been able to reach the Trickster. Something is amiss. Why hasn't he come here since Yaldabaoth banished him? Is he... unable to hear our calls?"

"The Velvet Room is a place between dream and reality, mind and matter." Igor's eyes fell to the empty cell. "We should have no trouble calling the Trickster here, and yet we've received nothing but silence. What an odd turn of events."

Lavenza's eyes fell in shame. "My sincerest apologies, Master."

"Hmm?" Igor turned his unblinking gaze on her. "Why are you apologizing, my dear?"

"My lack of strength has failed you, and it has ultimately failed the Trickster."

Igor intertwined his fingers. "This is no fault of yours, Lavenza. We have yet to recover our full power." He leaned forward with a sigh. "I suspect that Yaldabaoth's interference has made it impossible to summon the Trickster in our current state. The false god has bent the rules of the game out of fear for his own demise, but in truth he has only delayed the inevitable."

"Bent the rules..." Lavenza's golden eyes widened. "Master, if Yaldabaoth has twisted the rules of the game, then why can we not

do the same? Can we not even the score?"

Igor's grin widened by a fraction. "It is forbidden for me to directly interfere, but you are not bound by such chains. The Rulers Of Power are free to do as they wish."

Lavenza became overwhelmed by a surge of emotion. Fires of exhilaration flowed from her pounding heart until it thrummed loudly in her ears. A sudden longing made her stomach ache. Resolve to see her Trickster once again thrived within every part of her being. How peculiar that humans experience such a wide range of emotions every single day.

"I... Yaldabaoth's new powers prevent me from stepping into this world, so I cannot confront him directly. But how else would I reach the Trickster...?" Her grip on the Compendium tightened as her eyes turned towards the vacant cell. "Oh, what should I do?"

"The Trickster uses his bonds for a source of strength. Remember that he did not walk alone."

"Master?"

"All of the guests in this room did not shoulder their journey by themselves. The other Attendants and I always watched over them." Igor spoke as if he was only thinking aloud, oblivious to the bright light bulb in Lavenza's mind. "Ah, I do wonder how the other Attendants are doing."

"That's it!" Lavenza paced back and forth in front of her Master's desk, her long hair flowing behind her. "If we bring together the previous Rulers of Power, then it might break through whatever machinations Yaldabaoth set in place! We could find the Trickster with our *own* portal. Would my siblings answer such a plea for help? After all, they are busy with other duties, and Elizabeth has left the Velvet Room altogether to pursue her mission..."

“There is the chance that they will not heed your call.” Igor leaned back in his chair as he scanned the Velvet Room. “However, it is not only this world that will fall to Ruin should they refuse. Many realms lay on the brink. Yaldabaoth’s strength has only grown since his influence has seeped into those worlds.”

“Meaning they *have* to answer should they not wish for total annihilation of many worlds.”

“Correct.” Igor said, grinning. “As I said, I cannot meddle in such matters. That would outright break the rules, so everything lies in your capable hands.”

Lavenza closed her eyes and opened the Compendium, gathering whatever fragments of power laced within her small body. A tiny wind swirled around her, rapidly flipping the pages as her hair and long velvet dress fluttered with the breeze. Igor watched the Compendium glow faintly as the wind died, stopping the book midway.

Several butterflies emerged from the Sea kept within. Lavenza smiled as they fluttered off on crystal wings, leaving dim trails of sparkling light in their wake.

“Please, everyone.” She whispered as the butterflies disappeared into the unknown. “I need your power if we want to win this unjust game!”

And so, they would wait.

At least Belladonna’s timeless song made it bearable.

This is the opening chapter to Act 3 of DTESH! Act 1: Chapters 1-29
Act 2: 30-55 Act 3: 56 -???

UPDATE SCHEDULE for the next few chapters!!

Oct 9

Oct 16

Oct 30

Nov 6

Nov 20

Also important! The update schedule could always change! I'll be honest with you guys, I'm really glad I took a break over September. If I didn't, if I simply rushed these upcoming chapters and updated through September anyway, then I really would have crashed mentally and then this story would have to be put on hiatus anyway. Plus, these chapters wouldn't nearly be as polished as they are now.

I'll let you guys know if there are any changes to this current schedule, because I would like to take the time to perfect a chapter rather than publish a half arsed one because I didn't have enough time to properly polish it. Comments demanding more chapters also won't be tolerated :) Thanks for everyone's understanding and patience.

With that out of the way, buckle up everyone. Its about to get real! :D

Memories Of A Summer Day

Chapter 57: Memories Of A Summer Day

“It’s you.” Mandalay crossed her arms, scrutinizing him from head to toe.

“Were you expecting someone else?” Akira said with a playful tilt of his head. “Like a knight in shining armor? I’m afraid those are a dime a dozen these days.”

Hey guys! We reached some more awesome milestones for this story!! 300k hits, over 6k kudos, past 1250 bookmarks!? It still amazes me just how far this story has come, and I want to really thank you guys for sticking with me for so long! <3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Is this satisfactory, Shigaraki Tomura?”

Shigaraki peered into cases set on the bar. “Is this everything?”

“Yes.” Kurogiri said, nodding. “The final gift from Giran.”

“‘Gift’, huh?” Shigaraki scoffed. “That traitor tried to run away.”

“He will no longer be a problem.” Kurogiri said as he gestured to the equipment. “However, the quality of this gear is guaranteed, as he had promised before his... departure. I assured his contacts within the black market that they would continue to get business with us if everything goes well.”

“Whatever.” Shigaraki plopped on the bar stool and scratched at his neck. “As long as we show the world that that *infuriating* secret boss isn’t so indestructible after all, that U.A. is just a training ground for violence. The League’s name will be forced into the spotlight and many villains will come out of hiding.”

“Yes, Shigaraki Tomura. Shall I disperse the gear to everyone?”

“Fine by me, they should already be at the meeting location.”

“Right away.”

Kurogiri bowed his head, then he and the equipment disappeared into a black cloud.

“Ah, this will be so fun.” Shigaraki grinned as he was left alone in the dimly lit bar. “Joker, U.A.... your days are numbered.”

“Merp!”

“Merp!?”

“Merp.”

Akira gasped as he put a hand over his heart. “Merp...?”

Lady Stubbs nodded sagely. “Merp.”

“What in the world are you two talking about?” Manami looked at Akira sitting in the back seat with Lady Stubbs on his lap.

“I didn’t even think you understood cat!” Shuichi said from beside Akira. “Even I don’t know what they’re saying. Just how many versions of ‘merp’ are there!?”

Akira tapped his temple. “It’s a secret between a lady and a gentlemen.”

Shuichi squawked as he glanced at Lady Stubbs, who turned away with her nose in the air.

“Oh, the betrayal!!” Shuichi collapsed against the door. “How could you do this to me, Stubbs!?”

“Merp.”

“Hey, calm down back there!” Monabus shouted. “Tobita, are they distracting you?”

“Not at all.” Tobita glanced into the rear view mirror, smiling. “At least they’re having fun.”

Manami rolled her eyes as she stared at her laptop. “We’re almost there, anyway. We should pull off because the 1-A bus is slowing down.”

“We’ve been on the road for a good few hours.” Akira looked out the window to lush mountain scenery. “They’re probably just taking a break?”

“Maybe.” She said. “Stop here, there’s a good spot where they won’t see us.”

The pulled into a small overlook. A perfect view of rolling waves of greenery and lush mountains spread before them like a thick carpet. The word *solitude* described this stretch of land, for there wasn’t a so much as a building or any hint of civilization in sight. There was a lodge hidden somewhere within the miles of vibrant expanse, but nothing else.

Lady Stubbs jumped of Akira’s lap as he reached for a pair of binoculars in the back seat. Akira threw open the Monabus door and stepped out. He took a breath of fresh air before he walked to the edge of the overlook and crouched behind some loose foliage. He used the binoculars to look at another overlook just down the road, where Class 1-A poured out from their own bus.

Akira frowned when he spotted a black vehicle parked close by.

“See anything?” Shuichi crouched next to him.

“There’s a black vehicle.” Akira asked as he handed the binoculars over. “It’s too close to my liking.”

“I’m sure it’s fine! You don’t think... wait, some people are getting out! They have a little kid with them! It looks like Pixie Bob and Mandalay.”

“Do you see Ragdoll anywhere?”

“Negative!”

Akira snatched the binoculars back, snorting. “Okay, I know the Wild Wild Pussy Cats have a cat theme, but I still can’t believe their costumes have giant paws and literal tails on the roster.”

Panther’s costume had more panache and elegance, without ruffled skirts and ridiculous oversized paws.

Manami huffed. “We studied their files before we left. That included their quirks and costumes!”

“I know, but it’s a whole other ordeal seeing them in *person*. You would think those ruffled skirts get in the way of actual rescue work.... wait.” Akira’s stomach dropped at the sudden panic on 1-A’s faces.

The blue Pussy Cat, Pixie Bob, placed her hands on the ground. Tremors shook the mountain and clouds of dust spewed into the air, accompanied by the screams of 1-A as they were forced into the forest below.

“They’re crazy!” Shuichi gaped at the plume of dust. “They’re just kids!”

“Yatagarasu, check if they’re okay.”

"Leave it to me, Trickster." Yatagarasu materialized and soared over the cliff, the wind carried the students' groans and mutters. *"They're unharmed, if a bit dusty."*

"You have three hours!!" Mandalay, the red Pussy Cat, called from the top of the cliff. "Get to the facility on your own two feet! Prepare yourselves, because you'll have to make it through the Beast's Forest!!"

"Waaaah, what is this!?"

"We have to what!?"

"How is this fair!?"

"It's training." Akira chuckled as ominous rumbles echoed from the forest. "They'll be fine... I think."

Yatagarasu gracefully floated down to 1-A's bus. *"I do not see Ragdoll anywhere. Wherever she is, it isn't here."*

"Good." Akira said, smirking. *"We all know what to do when we see her. Can you listen in on Grampus and Mandalay?"*

Yatagarasu hopped to the edge of the bus, tilting his head to listen in.

"This is a crazy schedule, Eraserhead." Mandalay said, frowning. "Are you sure you want to do this to them?"

"Yes, this is essential training that they'd usually get in their second year. This whole trip is going to be insane no matter how you look at it. Besides, we all know what's at stake, and what's coming." Aizawa said, before his eyes trailed out to the lingering dust clouds. "With the world being so chaotic, they need to learn how to properly defend themselves. So much has changed in such a short time, and they need to keep up."

They ignored Pixie Bob's squeals of delight as more dust clouds exploded into the sky.

"I suppose you're right." Mandalay said. "But the hero classes aren't our only guests. When do we get to meet our... 'extra security'?"

Yatagarasu warbled.

Aizawa stared up at the bird with a sigh. "The coast is clear, you can come over."

Mandalay blinked. "Eraser, why are you talking to a bird?"

"Just wait." Aizawa crossed his arms and leaned against the bus. "They'll be here soon."

Aizawa didn't know how Joker and his crew would follow them. They didn't ask for a vehicle, and he half expected Joker to come sailing in on one of his dragons with that irritable grin plastered on his face. Instead, they heard the purr of an approaching engine and watched as a black van rolled to a stop behind the Pussy Cats' car. The door flew open and a familiar face hopped out.

Kurusu Akira donned simple jeans and a t-shirt. The kid's usual glasses were missing, showcasing his intense silvery eyes. A few other people got out, including a lizard and a cat that wasn't Mona. They waited by the van as Akira approached them by himself, tension lining their bodies. He wasn't bothered by any pillars of debris or Todoroki's massive glaciers jutting from the trees.

The raven soared to Akira's shoulder. Akira pet the soft feathers and smiled at the heroes.

"It's you." Mandalay crossed her arms, scrutinizing him from head to toe.

"Were you expecting someone else?" Akira said with a playful tilt of his head. "Like a knight in shining armor? I'm afraid those are a dime

a dozen these days.”

“No.” Mandalay smiled, but it was tense. “I’ve heard the rumors, but I’m still surprised that you’re so young, that’s all. I’m happy that you’re here. Nezu assured me that you two came to an agreement. We’re not going to take his word lightly.”

“Yeah.” Akira donned a smile of porcelain. “Happy to be here.”

“Who is he?” The kid spat. “Another stupid hero?”

Akira smirked. “I’m no hero, kid.”

The kid flinched back, eyes wide.

Mandalay sighed as she placed herself in between them. “Kota, do you remember what we told you? He’s our extra security from U.A. You can’t tell the students about them, okay? It’s our secret.”

The kid rolled his eyes. “Fine by me. I don’t want to talk to those losers anyway!”

Akira snorted. This kid reminded him so much of Shinya. He even wore a red hat, though it had golden horns sticking out of it instead of the words ‘Get Smoked’.

“Ohhh!” Pixie Bob jumped up and down, “Eraserhead, you have some real powerhouses in your class!! I can’t wait to see where they’ll be in three years!”

“They’re good kids with a lot of expectations placed on them.” Akira’s eyes narrowed. “You aren’t going easy on them, right?”

“Of course not!” Pixie Bob whirled around to him, grinning viciously. “Plus, this is good practice for my beasts, for when *it* goes down.”

Kota gave her a skewed look.

“Alright, we’ve spent enough time here.” Mandalay said as she glanced at Akira. “We should get to the lodge before 1-A beats us there. You’ll follow us down the mountain so we can park our vehicles.”

“They might get there by noon.” Pixie Bob licked her lips. “Or maybe not, since they’re moving pretty slow. Hey, at least they’re sticking together! Wait a sec, is that van modeled after a cat!?”

“It does have ears and a tail…” Mandalay chuckled. “The engine even sounds like a kitten’s purr.”

“Trust me, the meowtory engine is not to be trifled with.” Akira said.

“Meowtory engine!?” Pixie Bob cackled and held her stomach. “It’s purrfect!!”

“In any case, we should go. Kota,” Mandalay held a squishy paw down to the boy, “We’re leaving!”

“Whatever.” Kota growled as he trudged to the black car. “This is all pointless anyway.”

“Don’t be like that, Kota.” Pixie Bob said, then she glanced back at Akira. “Ragdoll and Tiger are at the lodge, best not to keep them waiting!”

Akira nodded to Yatagarasu, who vanished to ash. His team scrambled back into the Monabus and they followed the heroes down a long, winding road. The air was occasionally peppered by a shock wave from the battles within the forest, but it was an otherwise peaceful drive until they reached a large clearing. The lodge looked more like a traditional resort than anything. They pulled into a garage around the back and parked next to Aizawa’s bus.

A stiff moment of silence doused the Monabus’ cabin.

“Are you ready for this?” Manami asked.

“Yes.” Akira watched Aizawa exit the school bus, their eyes meeting through the glass. “Everyone stay on your toes.”

“At least we won’t have to worry about our vehicle being tampered with.” Tobita said with a tiny smirk.

“No kidding.” Akira stepped out, the others followed his lead.

Mandalay kept a safe distance as they unloaded their bags. “Your rooms will be on the opposite wing from the students. The classes shouldn’t suspect anything as long as we’re careful.”

“Noted.” Akira said as he threw a duffel bag over his shoulder.

“By the way, where’s Mona?” Aizawa raised a brow as the group exchanged humorous glances. “I figured he would be with you.”

“Oh, he’ll meet up with us later.” Akira shut the door as all of the luggage was taken out.

“Okay...” Aizawa grumbled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It *means* he’ll meet up with us later.” Akira’s grin stretched from ear to ear.

“Fine, let’s just get settled in.” Aizawa ran a hand down his face.

“Mandalay, Pixie Bob, can you show us around?”

“Right!” Pixie Bob dove towards a door. “Follow us!”

“Come on, Kota.” Mandalay held her hand down to the boy, but he sneered and shrugged her off.

The woman sighed as the rest of them trailed inside. The interior was like a traditional Japanese inn, complete with tatami mat in most of the rooms while the other floors were polished hardwood. The office space was modern, as was the cafeteria kitchen. Akira couldn’t wait to dig through everything.

“There you are!”

They turned to a smiling woman with emerald green hair and round yellow eyes. She donned a yellow version of the Cats’ hero costumes. Ragdoll stared oddly at Akira for a long moment. The initial wave of panic was washed away by his snickering Personas.

“Play time!” Alice called as she became his mask, before throwing it to Seth.

Seth cackled as he tossed the power to Arsene, who in turn gave it to Titania. Orpheus grumbled as he tossed the mask duty to the closest Persona. Ragdoll’s face skewed as Akira continued to change masks, the Personas laughing as if they were playing a game of hot potato.

Ragdoll’s quirk was dangerous. Too dangerous. Being able to sense *any* weaknesses could be detrimental, so they came up with this idea of overloading her quirk by rapidly switching between Personas. A tiny smirk bloomed on Akira’s face as Ragdoll shook her head, blinking as if to keep a headache away.

“Ragdoll!” Mandalay glanced between Akira and her companion.
“Where’s Tiger?”

“He’s... he’s waiting in the conference room. The bedrooms are this way.” She turned her back to Akira and led the group down a long hallway. “The hot springs are down this hall, but it connects to where the students will sleep. Be careful when you bathe.”

They rounded a corner and climbed the stairs to the next floor. Akira cataloged all possible routes that their opponents could sneak in or ways for his team to sneak out. Tobita and Shuichi did the same throughout the whole tour, while Manami kept her eyes on the Wild Pussy Cats. Lady Stubbs’ unblinking gaze watched Eraserhead, who lingered behind.

All in all, they moved as a team. Even now when there was no action, they had each other's backs. Was it wrong of him to feel proud? He didn't think so. Arsene hummed in approval, too.

Finally, they reached their quarters. It was quite spacious and enough room for all of them. Akira noted how this room was in a corner of the building, the windows open to a panoramic view of the mountain side and the clearing. He set down his bag and approached a window, letting the fresh breeze and the sound of cicadas wash over him. Sunlight streamed in and painted the floor with splotches of gold. A pleasant heat seeped into his skin, and Akira couldn't help his honest smile.

"We made sure that you'd be close to the tree line." Ragdoll slowly blinked. "That way you could sneak out and go on patrol without the students seeing you in the hallway."

Manami set down her bags. "Wow, this place isn't bad!"

"Don't you want a separate room?" Mandalay frowned at her. "This one is for the men-"

"And be separated from my boys?" Manami plopped down on her bags with an indignant huff. "I don't think so."

Aizawa's eye twitched. "If that's how you want to be, then fine."

"Wait, are you rooming with us?" Akira asked.

"No. My room is on the first floor, specifically close to my students." Aizawa rolled his eyes. "That way I can keep an eye on them and prevent them from getting in trouble."

"Speaking of which." Pixie Bob said, giggling. "We'll show you to your room, Eraserhead!"

"The conference room is right across from the main office." Mandalay nodded at Akira. "We'll let you get settled in before we

have the meeting. Sound good?"

"Yeah." Akira bowed. "Thank you for the hospitality."

Mandalay's eyes widened. Pixie Bob and Ragdoll exchanged glances.

What, were they expecting him to be rude or something?

"Think nothing of it!" Pixie Bob grinned from ear to ear, her tail flicking wildly. "See you in a bit, kittens!"

"Kittens? Kittens!?" Byakko grumbled as the heroes vacated the room. *"Shall I show them that I'm no mere kitten!?"*

"Easy, Byakko." Arsene said. *"They didn't mean it that way. Probably."*

Akira snorted as the others explored the room.

Shuichi threw open the closet. "Ooh, futon located!"

"Ah, and they have a set for making tea!" Tobita beamed into another closet. "Wonderful!"

"Boys." Manami shook her head as she rummaged through her bag for her laptop. "We have to stay on our toes. We can never be too careful with these heroes."

"That's a good idea. Getting too comfortable can be used against us." They smiled as Morgana gracefully jumped in through the window, shaking himself. "Boy, it feels good to be a cat again!"

"Oh, so you *are* a cat?" Akira shamelessly smirked.

"I-I mean, no!" Morgana arched his back. "I am NOT a cat!! How could you say that!?"

Their antics were silenced when a creak came from behind the door. Akira smirked as he put a finger to his lip, before throwing the door open. Kota stumbled back onto his behind.

“What are you up to?” Akira asked as he leaned on the door frame. “Did the grownups send you to spy on us?”

“No!” He snapped as he got on his feet. “Why the hell would I listen to them if they did!?”

Akira tilted his head. “Wow, you got quite a mouth on you.”

“Sh-shut up! I was curious because you said you weren’t a hero.”

“We’re *not* heroes.” Akira raised a brow. “Why do you care?”

“Who said I cared!?” Kota growled. “This whole camp is stupid! I don’t get why you’re even wasting your time, the grownups won’t tell me anything!”

Akira blinked at the tiny ball of rage glaring at him. There was something more than anger in those eyes. Sorrow and confusion nestled inside, and Akira would recognize that tiny glint of betrayal anywhere.

Akira knelt to Kota’s eye level, his tone soft. “You lost someone, didn’t you?”

“Wh-what!? You don’t know *anything* about me!”

Kota bolted down the hallway, the pounding of his feet faded into nothing as he raced downstairs.

“Oh my.” Tobita glanced down the hallway. “He’s quite young, but there’s a heavy burden on his shoulders.”

“Poor kid.” Shuichi grumbled.

“We shouldn’t let him distract us.” Morgana climbed on Akira’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s meet with the heroes.”

They trekked downstairs, much quieter than Kota, and faint voices emanated from the door across from the main office. Akira exchanged glances with everyone before he opened it. It was a smaller space tucked away from the main foot traffic, complete with cream colored walls, a round table, and enough chairs for all of them.

All eyes fell to the largest hero in the room.

The final member of the hero team, Tiger, was a six foot wall of muscle in a chestnut version of the Cats’ costume. Skirt, tail, bells, and cute paws included.

“Oh, you’re here!” Pixie Bob called, grinning as she looked to her team. “Guys, you know what time it is!”

Mandalay took the lead. “Lock on with these sparkling gazes!”

Ragdoll winked as she threw her paws outwards. “We’ve come to lend a paw to help!”

Tiger flexed behind them, his muscles bulging. “Coming out of nowhere....”

“Stingily cute and catlike!!” Pixie Bob said as she leaned against tiger, her gloves revealing deadly claws.

“Wild Wild Pussy Cats!!” They shouted in unison.

Akira blinked as the Cats stayed in their feline poses. Morgana cringed. The others stared at the Pussy Cats as the awkward silence stretched. Eventually, Shuichi leaned close and stage whispered to Akira.

“Uh... they aren’t expecting us to do something like that, right?”

Akira looked at Aizawa, who shrugged, and the atmosphere popped like a balloon when the Cats broke out in chuckles. The tension in Akira's team drained away with smiles. Still, despite the bubbly air, Akira picked up how the Pussy Cats' eyes were sharp, their bodies wound as if to leap into action at a moment's notice. There was another door behind the Cats, so that their backs weren't to the wall.

"It's a shame we don't have a flashy introduction like that." Akira said as he sauntered to the table. His team followed his lead. Tobita and Manami on his left, Shuichi and Stubbs on his right. "Our group is called the Phantom Thieves."

The Cats dropped their poses and approached the opposite side of the table.

Nobody sat down.

"Welcome, Phantom Thieves!" Their skin prickled at the intense aura Tiger exuded. "It will be a pleasure working with you!"

"Like wise." Akira said.

"Ohh, Mona is so cute!! When did he get here!?" Pixie Bob waved her paws. "His pictures on Spotlight don't do him justice!"

"Thanks." Akira pet Morgana as the not-cat glared at her. "There's something I want to clarify before we start."

"What is it?" Ragdoll asked, her face skewed from quirk overload.

"Look, we appreciate how you've been kind and hospitable, but it's obvious that you don't trust us." The Pussy Cats stiffened, Aizawa sighed. "We need to be transparent with one another if we're going to be protecting the students."

"Ooh, Nezu was right. He's as smart as a whip." Pixie Bob smirked at Akira. "I like him!"

“Yeah!” Ragdoll said with a tilted head. “Anyone else would have glanced over our suspicion. Well done.”

“I’m sorry.” Mandalay nodded. “We found this whole situation incredibly difficult to believe, but I’m willing to cast aside my doubts to apprehend these villains before any students get injured.”

“Nezu and I will vouch for Joker and his team.” Aizawa’s eyes trailed over to Akira. “We trust them to do this job.”

Akira firmly nodded as tension finally melted away from the heroes.

“Ooh, this is exciting, but no more distractions!” Pixie Bob smirked. “Tiger, show them the map!”

“This is the surrounding area of the lodge!” Tiger said as a holographic map, in an array of different colors, appeared over the table. “These two green areas are the lodge and where the students will train! The red is where Pixie Bob will increase security with her beasts.”

“Yep, yep!” Pixie Bob waved a paw. “I’ll create a specialized area for the students to train with their quirks. It’ll be enough space to keep them all in one area.”

Akira leaned closer. “Aside from those areas, the rest are blank.”

“That’s where you’ll come in.” Ragdoll’s eyes scanned over the group. “We’d like to hear your thoughts and adjust our plan accordingly.”

“Alright.” Akira clutched his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “My team will scout the outer perimeter while the students are busy training. Pixie Bob,” The woman perked up, “How long can your beasts last?”

“All day and night, kitten.” She purred.

"I would like them to work alongside my companions." Akira kept his head as Manami glared. "They could cover a bigger area if we organize them into teams with one set leader."

"Oh, do we get to see Cerberus!?" Pixie Bob gasped. "Wait, no, how about the white tiger!?"

"Byakko might be the best choice for this terrain."

"Your white tiger is *Byakko*?" Mandalay leveled him with shock and awe.

"Yep." Akira smirked as he turned to Ragdoll. "My raven can help keep track of everyone during the day whenever Byakko isn't needed."

Pixie Bob leaned forward, "Say, you're talking about Cerberus and Byakko, so does that raven of yours have a special name?"

"Yatagarasu."

"Yatagarasu..." Ragdoll poked her cheek.

"Like... like the messenger of Amaterasu?" Mandalay asked, her face slack. "*That* Yatagarasu?"

"The one and only." Akira let that fact simmer for a few moments, before glancing at his team. "As for everyone else..."

"My quirk will allow me to travel though the forest with ease." Tobita said with a pleasant smile. "It should be no trouble for me."

"I brought extra cameras." Manami put her hands on her hips. "I can set them up to cover any blind spots around the lodge."

"Lady Stubbs and I can help out during the day!" Shuichi said. "My quirk is perfect for this terrain!"

“And you can count me as a jack of all trades.” Akira waved his hand over the map. “I’ll fill in wherever I’m needed.”

Tiger nodded as he messed with some control panel that they couldn’t see. The unlit portions of the map gained a deep blue hue.

Aizawa scratched his stubble. “Limiting the students to one or two areas isn’t a bad idea, but we’ll need to keep a strict leash on them during their free time. The last thing we need is for them to figure out that Joker is here, or wonder into a place they have no business being.”

“Indeed! We’ll keep the students away from the blue areas, and have them eat outside, too.” Tiger said with a nod.

“I have a way for us to communicate.” Akira looked at Manami. “La Brava?”

She slid a small container across the table.

“What are these?” Aizawa asked.

“Communicators, one for each of the Pussy Cats, Eraserhead, and Vlad King.” Akira shook his head. “We have them too so that we can all stay in touch. We don’t have a definitive time frame for when the villains attack, so we should be prepared for anything. However, when the time comes you should let my team and I handle the villains. You heroes should focus on protecting the students as the next line of defence.”

“We know how powerful you are, Joker.” Mandalay said. “We’ll leave it to you, but don’t you dare underestimate us, okay? We can take care of ourselves when it comes down to it.”

Akira nodded.

“Okay, so we have a makings of a plan.” Ragdoll clapped her hands together. “But we still have some time to kill before the students get

here.”

“What do you propose?” Akira asked.

“Weeeeelll,” Pixie Bob fiddled with her visor. “The kiddos aren’t even halfway across the forest. My best guess is that they’ll arrive late afternoon, maybe early evening.”

“We planned to make dinner for the students once they arrive, we could use a helping hand in the kitchen.” Ragdoll smiled at Akira. “Are any of you good at making curry?”

Akira grinned.

“Kota, bring those vegetables in here please!” Ragdoll called.

Kota set the box at the edge of the kitchen before he turned tail. Akira stepped around Caterpillar Aizawa to grab the box, he knew Aizawa was only pretending to be asleep. Something about his presence relaxed Akira, perhaps it was that same sort of comfort that Sojiro offered near the end of his stay in Tokyo. The others were off preparing, otherwise he’d be alone with Ragdoll.

The hero never spent too long looking at him. His Personas took pride as they continued their little game.

“I hope you don’t mind Kota.” Ragdoll said as Akira set the box on the counter. “I apologize if his behaviour is.... abrasive.”

“I don’t mind. He’s grieving, after all.”

“... Yes.” Akira ignored Ragdoll’s falling expression when he passed her the sacks of potatoes. “How did you know?”

Akira shrugged as he picked up a knife and twirled it around his fingers. “I know how he feels.”

Ragdoll waited, but he offered nothing else.

They busied themselves by chopping vegetables in silence. Brewing curry was second nature to him and it kept his hands busy, the *clang* of pots and the bubbles of boiling water allowed everything else to fade into obscurity. Akira stared into the concoction. He dipped a spoon into the sauce and tasted it.

“This isn’t bad, but its pretty bland.” He looked over his shoulder to Ragdoll. “Do you have any other ingredients to spice it up?”

“No. This lodge isn’t used often, so we thought it best to keep to simpler ingredients.” Ragdoll stirred the pot next to his. “Unless you had something in mind?”

“Something to intensify the flavors a bit...” Akira snapped his fingers. “Coffee!”

Aizawa’s eyes opened a fraction.

“Coffee?” Ragdoll opened a cabinet. “Well, I suppose we have some you could use.”

“No need. I brought my own.” Akira smirked as Alice burst into reality with a childish giggle. “You know where it is?”

She beamed when Ragdoll dropped the bag of coffee grounds onto the counter with a *splat* . Alice had *no* weaknesses, after all. Aizawa had both eyes wide open.

“Of course, big brother! I’ll be right back!”

Alice raced from the kitchen, her polished shoes drumming against the flooring. She hummed a familiar Velvety tune as she skipped up the stairs and reached her big brother’s room.

“Yeah, that place is perfect!” Manami chuckled from her laptop. “Aaaand, it’s online! Gentle, can you go to the next area while Spinner finishes up there? Oh, hi Alice!”

“Hiya, big sister Manami! Big brother wants me to get his coffee!”

Manami smiled. "His things are over there."

"Thanks!" Alice opened one of Akira's bag, and the immediate aroma of coffee wafted over her nose. With a proud smirk, she snatched it. "Later, big sis!"

Alice, excited for any praise from the Trickster, rushed back downstairs. She veered into a stop when she nearly crashed into a body smaller than her. The boy went white as he stumbled away.

"Who the hell are you!?"

"I'm Alice!" She tilted her head, her pale hair spilling over her shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Kota." He blinked rapidly. "What are you doing? How did you even get here?"

"I'm with my big brother!"

"Big... brother?"

"Yep!" Alice swayed her hips. "The boy you yelled at earlier."

"Oh, him." Kota's expression soured.

"He lost the ones he loved, too."

Kota's head snapped back. "Wh-what?"

"Yep. All of his friends, his family, his.... *everything* . All gone in a flash." Alice walked past him, but stopped to stare back into Kota's wide eyes. "I think you should give him a chance. He used to not like heroes either."

Kota remained speechless as the strange girl left him behind, and it wasn't much longer before heavenly aromas drifted from the kitchen.

"How's Midoriya?" Joker whispered over the comm.

"His pride took a hit, but he's fine" Morgana huddled on a branch overlooking the clearing. "I'm surprised that Kota would punch him... there."

Joker chuckled. *"That kid is ballsy in every sense of the word."*

Morgana shook his head. Class 1-A devoured curry like starving wolves at a fresh kill. He hoped he didn't have to heal anybody should they choke or something.

"Doesn't this.... taste familiar?" Ashido said between mountainous spoonfuls. "It's... so good!"

"You don't think it kinda tastes like Kurusu's curry?" Kaminari scooped another mound of curry onto his plate.

Nearby, Bakugo froze. He peered down at his plate as if he could combust it with just a glance.

"What!? I mean, maybe?" Kirishima said. "It tastes slightly different though!"

"But they are similar!" Midoriya, recovered from Kota's devastating blow, had curry sauce staining his lips. "It has the same smell from the cafe!"

Todoroki suddenly choked.

Iida flinched and patted Todoroki's back. "Are you okay!? Were you eating too fast!?"

"I'm fine." Todoroki put his spoon down and scanned the treeline.

"Dude, you've been acting weird since we left U.A.!" Kaminari jabbed his spoon towards Todoroki. "What's wrong?"

Todoroki looked to the Pussy Cats', who scrambled to get the final servings of curry to the famished teenagers. Aizawa leaned against the wall beside the front door to the lodge, his hand to his ear as if he had a communicator or something. The other Pussy Cats weren't reacting to him though, so who was he talking to?

"I don't know." Todoroki glared down at his plate. "I just get the feeling that the heroes are keeping something from us."

Kaminari chuckled. "I think you're just tired! We worked our asses off today!"

Todoroki rolled his eyes.

"Alright, kittens!" Pixie Bob shouted. "You will bathe and go straight to bed after you're done eating! You'll be up at five-thirty tomorrow for some hardcore training!"

A collective groan swept through the clearing.

"We have some ground rules before anybody moves." Mandalay put her hands on her hips, her expression unusually stiff. "You are forbidden from leaving your rooms once we call lights out. The second floor is off limits to everybody."

"Yep, yep!" Pixie Bob winked. "Our rooms are up there and we don't want anybody snooping through our stuff!"

"Also, if we suddenly summon you back to the lodge during any part of your stay, you *will* come back immediately. No questions asked. Am I understood?"

Todoroki's gut twisted as his classmates agreed. Aizawa stared at something in the trees, and Todoroki witnessed a dark shape retreating into the leaves before he could make it out. He hesitantly followed his sluggish classmates into the lodge, but a certain pair of red eyes drilled into the back of his head.

He lingered behind as they split off into the male and female baths, ignoring the shenanigans and excitement as he hovered in front of a locker.

“What do you want, Bakugo?” Todoroki asked when they were alone in the locker room.

“You know something.”

“About?”

“Don’t give me that!” Bakugo’s voice echoed, but the others didn’t seem to hear it. “You *know* something, don’t you? I’ve noticed it too. Why else would the heroes be acting this way? Why would the curry taste like that bastard’s back at the cafe!?”

A cold realization trickled through Todoroki, but he kept his stoic mask.

That curry *did* taste like Kurusu’s. Did the recipe just happen to be similar? The Pussy Cats didn’t introduce any other staff members. If Kurusu *was* here, then did the heroes know that he was Joker?

But why would they want Joker here?

“I saw that hobo talking to someone, too.” Bakugo narrowed his eyes. “There has to be someone else here.”

“Why don’t you go ask?”

A vein in Bakugo’s forehead bulged. “You think he’d really answer!?”

“I guess not.” The conversation stilted as Todoroki fidgeted with his hands. “Look, we can speculate later, but we’re going to miss our turn in the onsen if we keep standing around.”

“*Fine* .” Bakugo hissed as he stomped back to his locker. “But this conversation isn’t over.”

The thoughts kept swirling in Todoroki's mind after he stepped into the hot onsen, past the *incident* with Mineta, and haunted him as he lay in the futon, the rest of their classmates snoring away. Bakugo's eyes swept over him occasionally, but it wasn't a bother as sleep finally took him.

"It'll be so hard you'll feel like dying, but try not to actually die." Joker deepened his voice, his feral grin matching Aizawa's. He dropped his facade and glanced to the tree on his right. "Really, Eraserhead? You didn't terrify them enough yesterday?"

"Keep it up and you might be able to scare away kittens with a smile like that." Aizawa droned.

"Hey, my grin *has* terrified villains, thank you very much."

Aizawa stared at him oddly, but shook his head. "Like I told Mandalay, they need all of the training they can get. They've already experienced situations that real Pros would have trouble handling. They need to be ready for what the world is going to throw at them."

Joker's expression sobered. He stared into the clearing, where Pixie Bob molded small mountains and caves, and a vast clearing where all manner of quirks were being honed under the heroes' watchful eyes.

"You're right." Joker said as he stood on the branch, hand stabilizing himself on the trunk.

"*Eraser,*" Pixie Bob's voice trickled through the comms. "*Vlad King arrived with the 1-B kids, so you better get down here!*"

"I'm on my way." Aizawa was about to hop down from the tree.

"Wait." Joker tossed him a small thermos. "The same coffee from our little rendezvous on the rooftops. I have a feeling you'll need it."

“Thanks.”

“Oooh, coffee!?” Pixie Bob shouted, *“You better have enough for us!”*

“Nope,” Aizawa said as he clutched the thermos to his chest. “Get your own.”

Joker snickered as Aizawa dropped and expertly rolled into his landing. He watched as Aizawa calmly walked out into the clearing to greet the other class, while Joker turned on his heel. It was about time he went to his area to patrol, anyway.

Hours whittled away as he explored deeper into the forest.

Afternoon sunlight filtered through the branches and splashed the ground with speckles of gold. The mountain air was free and clean from the contaminated stench of a busy metropolis. He would be hard pressed to say that he missed his small town surrounded by mountains. Joker hopped to the next branch, careful that he didn’t slip on the moss blanketing the tree. Another hour or two of exploration made him rather bored.

He tapped into his comm. “Everyone, status report.”

“Mona, reporting in! Mercurius and I scouted the western edge of the forest. All clear.”

“The cameras haven’t picked up any strange activity around the lodge.” La Brava said. *“All clear.”*

“All clear in the northern glades! We’re working hard, Joker!”

“Merp!”

“I see nobody from the tops of these cliffs.” Gentle Criminal chuckled. *“It is quite a fun challenge using my quirk to maneuver in such an unknown terrain.”*

“Keep up the good work, everyone. Byakko hasn’t seen anything out of the ordinary, either.”

Joker paused when the bushes rustled below. He smirked as he crouched down under the shade of leaves.

“I have a Peppermint in sight.” He whispered below the breeze. Joker switched over to the channel they shared with the heroes. “Hey, why don’t you come pick up your student? Todoroki shouldn’t be wandering around here.”

“*On it!*” Tiger called.

“*Lunch was almost over, anyway. Wait, Bakugo is following him.*” Ragdoll said. “*What are they doing all the way out there?*”

Todoroki crossed through brush with a purpose. The vigilante’s colorful footsteps followed silently through the trees. It wasn’t long until they reached a small clearing peppered by vibrant wildflowers flowing with the breeze. Todoroki knelt by a white one as Joker stepped to the next branch.

Snap .

Todoroki jumped and stared into the canopy as Joker froze. Todoroki’s eyes narrowed, but he couldn’t see much from the sunlight draping the clearing. He opened his mouth to speak when the bushes behind him parted.

“Young man, you shouldn’t be out here.” Tiger put a firm hand on his shoulder. “Lunch is over and you should return to your training!”

“... Right.” Todoroki gently shrugged off Tiger’s hand. “Sorry.”

Todoroki glanced towards the upper branches one last time before Tiger urged him on. Joker breathed a sigh of relief when they disappeared back into the forest.

“Eraser, a question.” Joker balanced precariously on the next branch, his tailcoat weaving elegantly with the wind.

“What?” The man droned.

“Why didn’t both classes arrive simultaneously since their buses left at the same time?”

Aizawa sighed. *“Vlad King wanted to have a camping day with his students. They will stay the day after Class 1-A leaves for additional training, that is, if this were a normal training camp.”*

“Don’t you think that was dangerous?”

“I told him it was illogical, but he didn’t listen.”

“I can hear you.” Vlad King grumbled. *“You just gave me one of these communicators, Eraser.”*

“Oooh, you guys got busted.” Pixie Bob chuckled. *“Joker, my turn to ask a question!”*

“Go ahead.”

“How is it that Byakko got my beasts mobilized so quickly? They respect him like a leader, and are prowling the forest like a united pack!”

“What do you mean they respect him? Aren’t your beasts made of earth?”

“Ah, well.... Earth Flow allows me to freely manipulate the earth, but it also allows me to sense how the earth ‘feels’. To me, the earth is not just a dead thing that I have control over, it has life to it that not many people know about.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Pixie Bob. My comrades also have a life and mind of their own.” Joker leaned against the bark, listening to the birds sing and myriad of insects chatter, his

eyes were drawn to a line of ants marching on the trunk. “Byakko is the King Of Beasts, so that warrants some respect.”

“All of your friends have a will of their own? Doesn’t that get noisy?” Ragdoll asked.

“Sometimes. Like right now we’re keeping Arsene on a tight leash.”

“Why?” Ragdoll asked.

“We’re Gentleman Thieves,” Joker’s smirk turned dangerous. “And he made a vow to punt Mineta for what he tried to pull on the girls while they were bathing last night. Kota is okay, right? That fall didn’t hurt him?”

“Yes, Midoriya caught him.” Mandalay muttered. *“He’s fine.”*

“I already reprimanded Mineta for his behavior.” Aizawa said. *“He’ll go through more training as punishment.”*

“Bah, such indecency needs to be severely reproached! Additional training simply won’t do!” Arsene howled. *“You will allow me to punt that wretched runt, right Trickster?”*

Joker laughed. *“Yes, in due time.”*

Arsene nodded, satisfied, and they resumed their patrol.

The next day was peaceful, all things considered, as Joker thumbed through a list of Metaverse gear he gave to his teammates the night before. Spinner and Gentle Criminal wore the same armor as Joker underneath their clothes, but he didn’t let them know that it was armor from *Satan*. La Brava got the only female armor that Joker had with him. It wasn’t the strongest, but it would do.

Mona allowed Spinner to use his scimitar, granted that he treated it with respect. There were more than enough Life Stones to pass

around. A few buffing items too. Everyone received a Smoke Bomb for good measure, among a few other things in case they needed a quick escape. He reached into his pocket for a Balm of Life and one of the two remaining Somas.

"You have not given anybody revival items." Ishtar asked. *"Why?"*

"We still haven't told them how Mona and I can revive the dead." Joker frowned as he rolled the items between his palms. *"It's one thing healing grave injuries or an entire hospital, but bringing the dead back to life? That's the kind of attention we don't want."*

"And the Soma?" Shiva asked.

"They're our best healing item." Joker held the glittering gold liquid up into the light. *"Emergencies use only."*

"Ah, it seems Bakugo has some decent knife skills." Yatagarasu interrupted as he watched 1-A make curry in the clearing. *"But... oh dear."*

"Kirishima, no! You don't put those spices together!" Alice tugged on her hair. *"Oh no, now its going to taste bitter!"*

"This is blasphemous." Arsene put a clawed hand over his heart. *"Todoroki started the flames at the right temperature, but Kaminari added too much fuel. It'll be burned at this rate."*

Joker pocketed the items and as he sat at the edge of a tall cliff overlooking the forest. "It's too bad we can't throw in a cooking lesson." He sighed. "I should've gave them tips at the cafe."

"There's nothing we can do about it now." Ishtar shook her head. *"Although it's adorable how they are trying to copy your technique and utterly failing."*

"Yeah." Joker frowned as he looked skywards, where twin stars pierced through the purple dusk.

Another cluster of six diamonds shone on the horizon. They looked so close to one another from here, but the reality was that they were separated by light years worth of cold, empty space. The mere thought weighed on his heart.

“Do you think everyone is holding up?”

“You aren’t talking about Mona and the others, are you.” Arsene stated.

Arsene’s answer came in the sudden suffocating weight in Joker’s chest.

“Damnit.” Joker scrubbed at his watery eyes. “I was fine two seconds ago!”

“Yatagarasu, switch with me.”

“Yes, Lady Ishtar.”

Delicate arms wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him close. Ishtar’s long hair brushed against his face as she tucked his head into the crook of her neck.

“It’s natural that you’re still grieving. There’s no strict time limit for such things. Your friends meant the entire world to you.” She whispered in his ear, her fingers threading through his hair. “But we will always be here to support you.”

“I know. We have Mona and everyone else now too.” He pulled back and wiped the stray tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize.” Ishtar’s smile was as sweet as a ripening peach. “How about we do something to get your mind off of it?”

Joker blinked. “Like what?”

“Well,” She tilted her head and twirled a bit of hair between her fingers. “How about you focus on my bond? We haven’t had time for such training recently, and I have a feeling that Titania loves lording the fact that you mastered hers quite a while ago.”

“Alright.” Joker scratched the back of his neck, then closed his eyes to concentrate inwards. Ishtar’s bond stood out immediately. “I can feel it.”

Ishtar’s eyes sparked with joy. “Fantastic!”

Chains of snow white lilies woven together with ivy, with bursts of vibrant colors from poppy and achillia flowers. The blooms were locked in a cycle of life and rebirth, of love and war.

The flowers repeated their cycle deep within his psyche, their scent wafting over him like a heady perfume. He allowed the aromas to surround him in love and warmth, and yet there was a spicy scent within, almost like cinnamon. The flowers drew him in close, the scents grew stronger until it bathed his mindscape in it. There was a *click* deep inside of him, and his costume faded away.

“Well done.” Ishtar ruffled his hair. “You’re getting better at mastering our bonds. It may not be long before you’re able to attempt Kohryu’s once more.”

“Thanks?” He looked down at his gloveless hands. “But I honestly don’t understand how this power works. With Cerberus, I had to walk into the middle of that fire tornado. With you, I just had to let those flowers’ scent overcome me. We didn’t have to do things like this back home.”

“Perhaps it’s part of the mystery of being in a new world.” Ishtar looked up at the cluster of stars. “By accepting our bond, you also accept a deeper part of yourself. Something within you stirs with each bond you’ve mastered. Can you not feel it?”

“I do, like puzzle pieces falling into place.” Ishtar tilted her head as her Trickster rubbed his chest. “But then there’s Arsene’s bond. I don’t know what happened before. No other bond had such a bad effect on me.”

“He is different from everyone else.”

Akira frowned. If he concentrated he could hear the chains rattle. A shiver coursed through him. An inkling of immense power flared deep within, but the chains kept it sealed, tamed... *trapped* . Truly, no other bond harbored this sense of unease.

“I am your true other self.” Arsene shook his head. *“Think of what we were about to accomplish before Yaldabaoth banished us. Were we not about to shatter the chains of fate that bound us?”*

“I-”

A rustle came from the path leading down into the forest.

Ishtar vanished as Akira rushed into the cave nestled within the cliff wall, his costume reappearing in a shroud of ash. Joker’s hand reached down to unsheathe his dagger, only to breathe a sigh of relief as Kota emerged, face cherry red and brows knotted together.

Joker bit his lip as Kota sniffled and sat in the same spot where he and Ishtar were moments ago. The kid jumped as heavier footsteps came from the path. Joker tensed as Midoriya came out from the bushes holding a plate of curry.

“Oh, there you are!”

“Go away!!” Kota scrambled to his feet, hands curled into fists. “This is *my* secret spot and you’re not allowed!”

Midoriya blinked rapidly. “I... I know why you’re so angry, Kota. You’re the son of the Water Hose duo, aren’t you? The heroes who

passed away when fighting a villain? I've noticed that you don't like quirks either."

"S-so what!?" Kota shouted. "What's it to you!?"

Midoriya stared down into the curry, frowning. "Nothing, it's just... you remind me of a friend. He pushed everybody away when he was hurting and in the end it only hurt those around him. He didn't trust anybody. Didn't... didn't let anybody in until it was too late. You're like that too, aren't you?" Midoriya shook his head. "You're not alone, Kota! Your cousin, Mandalay, really wants to help you. There are different ways to think about these situations, but it'll only keep hurting you more if you keep rejecting your quirk and your family, just like my friend."

"Shut up, SHUT UP!!" Kota put his hands over his ears. "What is it with you heroes!? Why do you always have to stick your noses where they don't belong, huh!? That's how people like you die! Just leave me the hell alone!!"

Midoriya flinched. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset." He set down the plate of curry. "I'll just leave this here, okay? Please eat it if you're hungry."

Midoriya turned away and vanished down the path. Joker held his breath as Kota glared at the offering. Kota scuffed his shoe in the dirt, but he eventually snatched up the plate and planted himself back at the edge of the cliff.

"What should I do?"

"You understand how he feels." Arsene said.

"I know, but we saw how he reacted to Midoriya." Joker grimaced as Kota shuddered and tears dripped down his face. *"For now, I think he just needs some space."*

"Very well." Arsene sighed. "Why don't we call it a night? The hero team promised to take over so that we can rest."

Kota was none the wiser about his eavesdropper receding into the shadows.

"Why can't we attack noooow?" Toga whined.

"Be patient." Dabi said coolly as they stood atop a tall cliff at the edge of the Pussy Cats' base. "Twice isn't done scattering those orbs, remember?"

"Meat... fresh meat..."

Muscular scowled at Moonfish's insane ramblings. "Ugh, this is stupid! Why can't we go down there and kill them already!?"

Dabi glanced back at Muscular, "Remember who's down there, morons. It's not just the students or the heroes, but *Joker* too. Do I need to remind everyone how he shrugged off every hero he's encountered? Do you really want to mess with *him* before everything is ready?" His cerulean eyes scanned everybody as they lowered their gazes. "That's what I thought. Let the Nomu and our copies distract Joker and the heroes, while we target the students."

Toga giggled as she clutched the vial hanging from her neck. She and Dabi exchanged significant glances before Kurogiri appeared behind them.

"Everything is almost in place." Kurogiri said.

"Just one more night." Dabi smirked as the wind swayed his torn jacket. "Then we can have some fun."

Shuichi burst from the pool of steaming hot water with a dramatic gasp.

“Can you believe we have this place all to ourselves!?” He shouted, his voice echoing.

Tobita relaxed against a rock with a content sigh. “Indeed. This water feels good after such a long day.”

“It’s too bad Morgana and Lady Stubbs aren’t here.” Akira waved his hand, splashing water droplets everywhere. “They’re really missing out.”

“Eh, they’re cats. Plus, they’re not the only ones. We’ll have to tell Manami when we get back to the room.” Tobita said. “She hasn’t taken any time for herself to just... relax.”

“It’s understandable though.” Shuichi lazily swum laps around the giant onsen. “We’re under a lot of pressure here!”

“Still, we have to pace ourselves if we want this mission to be successful.”

“I’m glad you finally see that.” Tobita gave Akira a knowing look. “After all, you have been working the hardest among all of us.”

Akira sank chin deep into the water. “I’m the Leader, isn’t that natural?”

“Yeah, but we’re a team!” Shuichi splashed water at Akira. “Right!?”

“I know.” Akira smirked as Shuichi sent another small cascade. “Hey, knock it off!”

Tobita chuckled as the two of them kept splashing one another, their laughter melding into the steamy onsen.

“Ah, and the stars are lovely tonight as well.” Tobita said, the other two paused to glance at the sky. “I’ve never seen so many stars before.”

“You’re right.” Akira smiled as he leaned back against a rock. “I’ve been having a lot of nostalgia since we got here.”

“... Nostalgia?” Shuichi sank back into the water and exchanged a glance with Tobita.

“Yeah...” Akira trailed off, his eyes misting over. “I used to stargaze a lot when I lived in my hometown. Stargazing took my mind off everything, whether I was just having a bad day or wanted to get away for a day or two. It was in the mountains, so it you didn’t have to go too far from town. I haven’t really seen them like this since I was booted to Tokyo.”

Shuichi and Tobita stiffened.

“I... I didn’t know the stars held such a powerful meaning for you.” Tobita said.

“Yeah, man.” Shuichi’s eyes were wide. “That’s kinda cool. Looking at them now, I agree with you. They make you realize how small we are, you know?”

Akira chuckled. “Here we are, getting philosophical in the onsen.”

“Hey, even I can be smart sometimes too, you know!” Shuichi shouted.

Tobita frowned when a ruckus came from the locker room. “Wait, do you hear that?”

Akira and Shuichi froze at the sound of voices. Lots of them.

“Shuichi!” Akira whispered. “I thought you said the classes already bathed!”

“I did!” He held up his hands. “I made sure of it!”

“But which class was it?” Tobita’s eyes widened. “You waited until *both* classes had their turn, right?”

Shuichi flinched. “Uh....”

The noise grew louder as students filed into the locker room, now only separated from them by a thin shoji door.

“They can’t see us!” Akira hissed as he scanned for an exit. “We can’t go out the front.”

“Ah, I believe that should be our escape.” Tobita looked at the giant wall splitting the onsen in two. “It will have to do.”

“I’m so sorry you guys.” Shuichi muttered as they exited the bath wearing nothing but their towels. “It must’ve skipped my mind.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Akira placed his hands on his hips, craning his neck up to stare at the wall. “Tobita, do you think you can...?”

“Leave it to me!”

Tobita snatched Akira’s wrist and they jumped. Akira shivered as the air chilled the water droplets clinging to his skin, but they made it to the top with no trouble.

“Hey, what about me!?”

Akira grinned down at Shuichi. “You can climb walls, can’t you?”

The lizard squawked. He skittered up the side in record time as the 1-B boys threw open the doors and trickled inside. The thieves huddled down as the students’ voices echoed across the onsen accompanied by splashes of water. More voices and giggles came from the girl’s side, but like true gentleman, they wouldn’t dare peek. They were as silent as ghosts when they followed the wall, which led to a door back inside.

“That was close.” Akira muttered as he shook water droplets from his hair. “Too close.”

“We have a new problem.” Shuichi said as he looked down on himself. “We don’t have our clothes!”

“Oh dear.” Tobita smoothed down his facial hair. “We cannot return to our room like this. Manami and Morgana would have a field day.”

“I have *no* idea what you’re talking about.” Joker leaned against the wall in full costume, his face split with a devious smirk. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Akira!!” Shuichi clutched his vibrant pink hair. “First Lady Stubbs, now you!? The betrayal cuts so deep!!”

“No need to be dramatic.” Joker winked. “What kind of thief would I be if I let my friends hanging like this? Stay here, I’ll be right back. If the students haven’t noticed our lockers yet, then they need serious training in situational awareness.”

Later, Manami scoffed as the boys shuffled into the room, unable to look her in the eye.

“What took you so long!?”

“Yeah, I was about to go looking for you!” Morgana rushed to Akira’s side and rubbed against his ankles. “Did somebody spot you!?”

“We just lost track of time in the onsen.” Akira said, unabashed. “It’s fine. We’re *fine* .”

“Yep, that’s what it was!!” Shuichi nodded vigorously. “We encountered no problems whatsoever!”

“Indeed!” Tobita traipsed over to the closet and threw it open. “Well, it has been a long day. We need our rest!”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Akira pulled out his futon and laid it out. “Good night!”

“Er, good night?” Manami and Morgana exchanged long glances.

They shrugged it off and decided to call it a night.

Akira yawned as he walked through the first floor of the lodge, a plate of fresh cinnamon rolls in his grasp. They were Ayumu’s own recipe.

He turned a corner and smiled. “There you are.”

Kota jumped out of his skin and whirled to Akira.

“What the hell do *you* want?”

“Nothing.” Akira shrugged, then stared down at the plate. “I was wondering if you wanted any? They’re homemade! Still warm from the oven, too.”

Kota rolled his eyes. “Like I’d want anything from you. I don’t even know who you are!”

“Is that so?” Akira tilted his head and blinked like a lazy cat. “Well, I’m not a hero or a villain. Hell, I don’t even technically have a quirk. ”

“You... you don’t have a quirk?” Kota’s expression softened.

“Nope. Do you still have a reason to not trust me?”

Kota scrutinized him, but he visibly relaxed. “What’s your name? The heroes are still being stingy when it comes to you.”

“Akira.” Akira knelt down and looked him in the eye. “Is it okay if I call you Kota?”

“Y-yeah, I guess.” Kota ducked his head to hide beneath the rim of his hat. “You’re different from everyone else.”

“How so?”

“You... you’re not trying to be a *hero*. ” Kota bunched up his shirt with tight fists. “You haven’t lectured me on how I shouldn’t be angry, or that I should be *proud* that people die for nothing! How is sacrificing yourself for the ‘greater good’ something to be proud of!? They just leave everyone else behind!”

Akira’s stomach withered at his words, but this wasn’t about him.

Kota flinched as Akira laid a hand on his head. “You really loved them, huh?”

“Yeah.” Kota’s lips wobbled. “B-but I don’t want to talk about it!”

“Alright.” Akira nodded as he let his hand drop. “Then I won’t ask.”

Kota’s head snapped up, his watery eyes wide. “Really?”

“Really. I wouldn’t want you to share something you don’t want to.” Akira looked down at the plate, then held it out with a kind smile. “Do you want these? They’ll get cold if nobody eats them.”

Kota stared at the plate. Slowly, he took it from Akira’s hands, looking every which way to avoid Akira’s eyes. His cheeks gained a slight red hue.

“Thanks, mister. Er, Akira.”

“Let me know how they taste.” Akira winked. “I can make more if you’re still hungry.”

“I will.”

Kota rushed down the hallway with the goods intact.

“You can come out now.” Akira stood with a sigh. “I know you’ve been following me this whole time.”

Mandalay rounded the corner behind him, looking abashed. The hero bowed.

“Thank you.” She stood fully, with guilt and sadness written in her expression. “How did you do that? I’ve been trying to get Kota to open up to us since his parents passed away, but he always runs away or gets angry with me.”

“That might be your first problem.”

“What?”

“You need to respect his boundaries.” Akira shoved his hands in his pockets and leveled her with an intense glare. “Although he’s young, he shouldn’t be treated like a little kid that doesn’t know any better. He’s been through too much to be pitied by the ones taking care of him.”

Mandalay felt the hairs on the back of her neck raised as Akira’s eyes flashed molten gold.

“I... Sorry.” Akira chuckled as his eyes cooled to silver. “Do you remember how I said my companions have wills and emotions of their own? A few of them are quite protective of kids, and sometimes that leaks through.”

“It’s alright.” Mandalay frowned as Akira began walking away. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Upstairs to take a nap while I have the chance.” Akira rubbed his eyes. “Today is the third day. We need all the rest we can get before showtime.”

“Right...”

Mandalay let him go, but his words would stick with her for years to come.

“This is a bad idea.” Joker muttered as he perched on the branch draped in absolute darkness.

“The heroes were adamant.” Mona said, his nose wrinkling. “Still, why is this familiar? People who don’t listen to reason, going off on their own ideas...?”

Joker sulked as Mona chuckled dryly.

Still, a rock sank in Joker’s stomach. There was something on the breeze that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. It was that same sort of feeling he experienced the night before taking the Treasure in a Palace, a sense of unease mixed with the thrill of excitement.

“At least they have a plan in place.” Mona griped. “The tiny patch of forest is the most heavily guarded, and its right outside the lodge. Even if the villains attack, it won’t be easy to get through.”

“I guess...” Joker shook his head. “But even an army of stone beasts will be no match against certain quirks. We’ll have to stay on our toes.”

“Agreed.” Mona’s eyes sharpened. “For now, we’ll keep an eye out.”

Joker nodded as his Personas’ anticipation crawled under his skin.

“Noooo!” Ashido cried from the cocoon wrapping around her. “I want to have fun too, sensei!!”

“This is torture!” Sero cried.

“This totally isn’t manly!!” Kirishima shouted.

“I guess this is what we get for failing....” Sato sagged within his sensei’s grip.

“Oh, if only you weren’t pathetic like the rest of your class!” Monoma cackled.

“Hey, you failed your exam too!” Kaminari snapped.

Monoma flinched. “Well, that’s just because-”

“Enough.” Aizawa tightened his grip on the capture weapon. “Take this as a lesson to do better next time.”

“Yes, sensei.” Ashido accepted her fate as they were dragged back into the lodge.

Mandalay clapped her hands to get the rest of the students’ attention.

“Alright everyone, since you’ve been training so hard we’ve decided to let you have some fun with a scavenger hunt!” She smiled as excited whispers broke out. “I’ll be splitting class A and B into teams, and you will venture into the forest to recover Beasts to bring back to the lodge. Each Beast will be one point. However!” She held up a finger and smirked. “Whoever finds a Wild Wild Pussy Cat and brings them back safe will be get 50 points! Ragdoll will be on the Class A side, Pixie Bob is on the other. Tiger will be going back and forth between them. The game ends once all Cats are back safe. Whoever has the most points wins! Any questions?”

Iida’s hand flew up first. “You say that we’ll be split into teams, but how will it be fair if Class A is lacking in numbers?”

A Class B student snickered. “Well, you should’ve thought about that before so many in your class failed!”

“Tokage!” The red-haired Class Representative smacked her classmate on the arm, before smiling at her rivals. “I’m sorry. She didn’t mean it.”

“Alright, enough.” Mandalay said. “You are right. Therefore, both teams will be split into four teams of five, with one member per team being a Beast on the 1-A side. Class 1-B will have only one beast to make up for the loss.” She put her paw to her headset. “Did you hear me, Pixie Bob?”

“Loud and clear!!”

The earth molded like clay behind Mandalay. These Beasts took the form of stone wolves as tall as a man. Mandalay formed the teams with ballots and each beast split off into the respective groups.

“Oh, one last thing, kittens!” Mandalay smiled as she scanned the students. “There will be no sneaking into the other territory to sabotage! Anybody who breaks the rules will be disqualified by Ragdoll. Now, let the game start!!”

“Alright everyone, let’s go!!”

Class 1-B ventured into the dark forest as a united group, while some teams of class 1-A split off alone.

“This is stupid.” Bakugo glared at his team of Midoriya, Todoroki, and Koda. The stone wolf wagged its tail.

“C’mon, Kachaan!” Midoriya attempted a smile. “It could be fun!”

“W-we should go.” Koda whispered, his eyes darting away from Bakugo. “We’ll be the last team in if we don’t hurry.”

“Unless you *want* the other class to win, Bakugo.” Todoroki said.

“Whatever. Let’s just kick 1-B’s ass!”

“We won’t be doing that.” Todoroki said coolly. “We’re just on a scavenger hunt, remember?”

“You know what I mean, IcyHot!!”

Midoriya sighed.

Their team stepped into the shrub. Koda shrunk in on himself as the sounds of the night echoed all around them. Crickets, snapping twigs, the rustle of leaves made a shiver go down Koda’s spine. He

unconsciously cowered beside the stone wolf as his three other teammates walked a few paces ahead.

"Team B has brought back two beasts! Team A - 0, Team B - 2!" Mandalay broadcast with her quirk.

"Already!?" Midoriya cried. "We just started!"

"It's because we're moving too damn slow!" Bakugo trudged through some brush. "It'd be a lot quicker if I were on my own!"

"I doubt they'll let the teams split up." Todoroki glanced through the trees. "We could be disqualified."

"B-besides, we should stick together!" Koda waved his hands. "W-we might run into the King Of Beasts!"

"Huh!?" Bakugo glared at Koda. "What bullshit are you spouting, Rock Face!?"

"I-it-s' not..." Koda sighed as he stared at the ground. "S-something is in this forest. While I was p-practicing with my quirk, a lot of the birds told me about the King Of Beast's arrival. I-it's been working alongside the Stone Beasts to patrol around the forest!"

"The... the King Of Beasts?" Midoriya's eyes widened. "Are you sure it's not another one of Pixie Bob's creations?"

"N-No!" Koda shook his head. "The birds say that the King is alive. He arrived the same day as us. The birds s-speak of other strange things too, b-but they're too scared to share much!"

"That doesn't make any sense!" Bakugo scoffed. "What, do we have a stalker or something?"

"Ignore him." Todoroki looked at Koda as Bakugo snarled like a dog. "Did they tell you what kind of beast it was? Like, a wolf or something?"

“Y-yes...” Koda swallowed. “They said.... they said it was a white tiger!”

Midoriya flinched back. “A white tiger...?”

“Who cares what it is?” Bakugo’s face lit up as his palms crackled. “I hope we encounter it, because then I’ll be able to kick its ass and show it who’s the real king!”

“Team A - 6 points, Team B - 10 points!!” They ignored Mandalay’s voice.

“Wait.” Todoroki said. “If this ‘King’ is working with Pixie Bob’s Beasts, then they know about it. Were they going to hide it from us this whole time? They’ve been trying to keep us out of certain parts of the forest and the lodge, too.”

“You have a point...” Koda whispered.

“A white tiger.”

“Yes, a white tiger!” Bakugo rolled his eyes. “What’s gotten into you, Deku!?”

“Nothing!” Midoriya paced back and forth. “But.... if this is true then...”

“Then... what?” Todoroki’s stomach sank as Midoriya looked him in the eye.

“Then it matches either Baihu or Byakko, which *is* the King Of Beasts.”

“Yeah, we figured that out already, dumbass!”

“N-no! If it’s really a white tiger then....” Midoriya took a shaky breath. “Then it might be one of *Joker’s* companions.”

“Team A - 11 points! Team B - 17 points!!”

“Huh!?” More pops exploded from Bakugo’s palms.

“The curry...” Todoroki turned unnaturally pale as he looked at Bakugo.

“That-” Bakugo bristled, his face turning red as rage boiled over.

“That *asshole* !! He’s been lying this whole time!? I knew something was off! I’m going to kill him!! This whole *freaking* time he was-!?”

“K-kacchan, calm down!” Midoriya said as Bakugo grasped Todoroki’s shirt.

“How long have you known, Icyhot!?”

“A few weeks, if that.” Todoroki bat Bakugo’s hand away.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me!?”

“Why would I tell *you* ?” Todoroki scoffed. “You’d probably march in there and attack him on the spot.”

“Guys!” Midoriya shouted.

“What do you want, Deku!? Can’t you see IcyHot and I are having an important conversation!?”

“Does something smell off to you? Like... smoke?” Midoriya asked.

“L-look!” Koda pointed towards the direction they came, which gained an unnatural blue glow. “What’s that?”

Sudden heat smothered them as azure flames devoured the brush with deafening crackles. An unnatural fog lazily drifted through the trees.

“Something is wrong.” Koda said, backpedaling.

Then, they got the message that chilled them to the bone.

“Everyone!!” Mandalay shouted. “All teams return to the lodge as quickly as possible! Pixie Bob Beast’s will escort you back, but if you’re confronted by villains then I give you permission to defend yourself with your quirks! Phantom Thieves and heroes, to your stations!”

Dabi smirked as blazing blue flames erupted from his fingertips, the united footsteps of several hulking Nomu marched past him, their blank eyes twinkling with the growing cerulean pyre.

“Now... it begins.”

See you all next week :)

Last Surprise

Chapter 58: Last Surprise

Hello! This chapter was one of the most difficult to work on. With All Of The Things happening everywhere and All At Once, I hope I got the balance right without having another 15k+ monster of a chapter or having to splurge every single character's point of view.

I'm so very tired xD

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[Fanart by aariaart!](#)

“Ugh, I’m sooo tired.” Ashido whined as she lay her head down on the desk.

“No dozing off.” Aizawa tapped on the board and glared, his eyes glowing red. “You failed your exams, so this information is more important than ever.”

“Monoma, this is for your sake, too.” Vlad King said as he crossed his arms.

“Yes, sir...”

A familiar buzz prickled their minds. The students sat up ramrod straight while a certain seriousness overcame the heroes.

“Ooh Mandalay’s quirk always makes me jump!” Ashido said, shivering.

“Right? Same here.” Sero said.

"It only goes one way though," Kaminari leaned back on his chair, "So really it's more annoying than anything-"

"Quiet!" Aizawa snapped.

"All teams return to the lodge!" Mandalay shouted. "Pixie Bob Beast's will escort you back, but if you're confronted by villains then I give you permission to defend yourself with your quirks! Phantom Thieves and heroes, to your battle stations!"

"Wha- villains!?" Kirishima said, standing.

"Wait..." Monoma's eyes widened. *"Phantom Thieves ?"*

"Vlad, take care of the students!" Aizawa bolted towards the door. "I'm going to the front!"

"Er... wait, sensei!" Kaminari felt a bead of sweat on his forehead as Aizawa left. He gaped at Vlad King. "What's happening? Is this some sort of training?"

"Sensei..." Monoma stood from his desk, his expression unusually stiff. "Please tell us what's going on. You're acting differently. You've been hiding something from us, haven't you?"

"N-now that you mention it..." Kaminari mumbled. "Todoroki said the same thing."

Vlad King sighed. "I *heavily* objected to this mission, but Nezu wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Mission?" Ashido swallowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that, as heroes, you have to take on assignments that you don't always agree with." Vlad King said, scowling out the door. "Unfortunately, this is one of those times."

"Our friends are in trouble!" Kirishima shouted. "We can't just sit here and do nothing!"

“Kirishima!” The red head jerked back as Vlad King sighed. “I know how you feel, but orders are orders. This is the safest place for you right now. It would be irresponsible for me to allow you into the battlefield, you’re only first years without a license. Stay put, that’s an order.”

The students exchanged glances, before Kirishima slowly sank into his chair, hands tightly folded on the desk.

They could only imagine what horrors lingered outside.

Dabi’s eyes roamed over the lodge. Familiar heat kissed his skin as blue flames sizzled around his fingers.

“I’m afraid that’s as far as you’ll go!”

Dabi stopped as a man dropped down in front of him. “You’re-”

“Gentle Criminal!” He said as he did a full showman’s bow. “I cannot allow you to go any further.”

“I already know who you are. No need for the fancy introduction.” Dabi smirked. “I was going to say that you’re expendable.”

Gentle Criminal blinked. “What?”

The clearing became drowned by unbearable heat and light as bright flames exploded from Dabi’s skin.

Gentle threw up a barrier, the fiery blast colliding in a hail of cerulean and flowing azures. The sheer beauty was lost to him as sweat broke out upon his body, his throat burning from the super heated air around him.

The flames stopped as fast as they came.

Dabi had no time to think as a silvery capture weapon coiled around him and wrenched his body towards a fuming Aizawa, whose eyes

gleamed like red hot coals.

Gentle Criminal recovered as the hero slammed Dabi to the ground, his knee digging into Dabi's back.

"Do you really think you'd get past us so easily?" Aizawa growled. "We already know your plans, so do yourself a favor and surrender."

"Oh, you've figured us out, have you?" Dabi's laugh came out strangled as Aizawa tightened his capture weapon. "But here's a real head scratcher for you. Are you sure that *you're* the one who wove the spider's web, or are you the trapped fly about to be devoured? You flies deluded yourselves into being the spider."

"... What? Stop talking in riddles." Aizawa scowled. "Explain, unless you want your arm broken."

Dabi grunted, but he held his tongue.

Gentle Criminal's stomach squirmed as Dabi's arm *snapped*.

Aizawa swore as the villain melted into sludge. "His quirk...?" Aizawa glared at the muck clinging to his hands and weapon. "No, the flame was his quirk."

"A quirk of another villain, perhaps." Gentle Criminal offered a handkerchief. "We figured Giran would keep information from us. Joker was right to prepare so heavily."

"... Thanks." Aizawa took the offering and wiped down his hands. "How about we switch roles? I'll head into the forest to help my students."

"Yes," Gentle Criminal stared into the blazing forest and wondered what demons lay in the deepened shadows. "I believe my quirk would be more suitable for keeping the villains at bay while the students return here."

They glanced at the blackened earth. A small patch of earth was untouched. If Gentle didn't throw up his barrier at the last moment... he shook his head. Now was not the time to count his lucky stars just yet.

With a nod, hero and vigilante split up.

~ A few minutes earlier...

They jumped as a piercing scream echoed from ahead.

"Villains!?" Midoriya shouted.

"Todoroki, wait!" Koda snatched Todoroki's wrist. "You heard what Mandalay said! We have to go back!"

"You heard that scream!" Todoroki wrenched his wrist away. "We have to help our classmates!"

"Kota, please come back! I'm sorry, but I don't know where you go sometimes, just please return safe!"

"Kota..." Midoriya whipped around, his quirk sparking to life.

Bakugo cackled, a devious smirk splitting his face in half. "Like hell I'll run with my tail between my legs! I'll lead the way, IcyHot!"

"W-wait..." Koda tried stopped his friends. "We can't disobey the heroes!"

"Koda, can you return to the lodge by yourself?" Todoroki asked, tensing as if he were ready to run. "It's not that far away."

"What!? Well, yeah, but-"

"Then go back and stop slowing us down!" Bakugo called before leapt into the darkness.

Todoroki cursed, but followed after him.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t leave Kota behind!” Midoriya’s pupils were pinpricks. “He’s just a little boy!”

“I-it’s okay. You can save him!” Koda nodded. “G-go!”

What else could he say? His classmates wouldn’t listen to reason. Midoriya threw him a grateful glance as he shot off in another direction. Koda looked to the stone wolf.

“We should go, Mr. wolf!... Mr. wolf?”

Koda placed a hand on the unmoving statue, but it crumbled into a pile of dirt.

“Mr. Wolf!?” Koda shivered.

He gathered what little courage he had and turned towards where he *thought* was the direction of the lodge, but the foliage made it hard to see the path. Perhaps if he got some of the birds to help him-

He whirled around at the *snap* of a twig.

“H-hello?”

The bushes parted. All the blood drained from his face.

A ferocious Nomu towered over him. It’s beady, dead eyes stared straight through Koda’s soul. An inhuman screech gurgled from its lips as it raised a hand adorned with gleaming, curved talons. The bright blue of the encroaching flames highlighted their razor sharp edge.

Koda scrunched his eyes shut as the Nomu’s talons fell like the reaper’s scythe.

"I *told* them this was a bad idea!" Joker rushed through the tree branches with Mona on his shoulder. He scoffed as he turned on the comms. "Status report!"

"Encountered a Nomu- ahg!" Spinner shouted as clattering metal overcame the comms. *"I'll be able to handle it, though! I won't let this one get the better of me!"*

"Merp!!"

"La B-Brava, reporting in! I'm picking up multiple readings scattered around in the forest. Pixie Bob and Ragdoll are unresponsive!"

"Eraserhead and I encountered a villain outside the lodge!" Gentle Criminal said. *"The scoundrel was just a fake, and Eraserhead rushed into the forest! I'm staying at the lodge to protect any students that make it back."*

"Good idea. Mandalay can you support him?"

"Yes, I'm heading there now! Tiger, where are you?"

"On the 1-B side evacuating students! Some students are unconscious because of this gas."

Mona gasped. "Wait, I sense something over there! A student and... a Nomu!?"

Panic struck Joker like a viper. Cu Chulainn's entrance blended with the wild blue flames around them. Joker dropped to the ground and sprinted towards the Nomu, clawed hand ready to claim its first victim.

Joker burst from the bushes and tackled the student as the claws came down. Lancing pain arched down his back, splatters of crimson peppered nearby foliage. The student's shriek was drowned out by the raw howl of rage from Cu Chulainn as he hurled his spear.

It flew through the air with a deadly whistle. They would never get over the horrible squelching noise or the image of the spear tip bulging out from the Nomu's chest. The monster's inhuman yowl went silent as it melted into sludge, the spear clattering onto the ground along with a wet slap.

"Joker, are you okay!?" Mona cried.

Cu Chulainn rushed to his Trickster, nose wrinkling at the blood trailing down his back. A trill of bloodlust coursed through his veins. Cu Chulainn *craved* more. Arsene's warning growl wiped the bloodlust away before he could lose himself in it.

"Y-you guys are overreacting. It's not as bad as it looks thanks to Cu Chulainn's defence." Joker, with a deathly pale face, reached into his pocket and broke a Bead. Cu Chulainn held back a sigh of relief as the Trickster's wounds closed. "See? All better!"

"You idiot!!" Mona shouted as he swiped Joker's face. "You could've.... you could've.... Aaargh!"

"Y-you...." They stared at Koda, who was rooted to the spot, mouth gaping. "Y-you s-saved me...."

"No thanks needed." Joker smiled as he stood and brushed dirt off of his pants, before holding out his hand. "Long time, no see, Rocky. Are you hurt? Do you feel woozy from the gas?"

"N-no..." Koda took his hand.

"Good. Come on, you'll be safe at the lodge."

"W-wait!" Koda shifted on his feet. "Y-you're working alongside the heroes, aren't you?"

"Yes." Joker sighed as Koda's eyes grew wide. "Look, I don't have time to explain. We need to move."

“O-okay, but what about the flames!? They’re spreading fast! A-and the weird mist, too...”

“Easy.” Joker smiled when Seth cackled. “I’ll summon the god of thunderstorms. The forecast didn’t predict any rain, but they’re always wrong anyway.”

Cu Chulainn faded into ash. The flames painted Seth’s black body with vibrant cerulean. Koda gasped as Seth took to the sky, thick smoke and remnants of purple mist streaming from mighty wing beats that bent the trees.

“Come on!”

Joker snatched Koda’s wrist as Seth’s trumpeting calls echoed throughout the mountainside like a whale song from the deep. Thunderheads gathered. Icy trickles plopped on Koda’s face as they ran. Their little dash through the forest couldn’t have been longer than a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

“This is your stop, Rocky.” Joker let go of Koda’s wrist. “Stay safe, alright?”

“What about you?”

Joker winked. “I still have a job to do.”

Koda reached out, but Joker was already retreated into the shadows.

“Seth, can you check that cliff where Kota was?”

“I sense the Chariot with the boy!” Seth hovered directly above.
“And... oh? Unimaginable power courses through the Chariot. He has the power to protect the boy.”

Joker breathed a sigh of relief. *“Good. He’ll be safe with Midoriya.”*

“Joker!” Aizawa emerged from the brush, breathing heavily as he stopped in front of them.

“Eraser! What are you doing here?”

“I found Asui and Uraraka in the forest and got them back to the lodge.” Aizawa said. “Thanks for saving Koda.”

“No problem. Actually, this is perfect timing. We should split up to cover more ground.” Joker said. “Mona, go with Eraserhead.”

“W-wait!” Mona startled. “Wh-what are you saying!? What’s your plan?”

“I’ll locate the flame user.” Joker and Mona shared a long look. “You *aren’t* immune to fire and you can help Eraser find the one who’s responsible for this mist. The rain keeps the mist and fire at bay, but more students will get hurt if the sources aren’t taken care of.”

“Fine!” Mona said as he hopped down. “Just be careful, okay!?”

“I’m always careful!” Joker winked before he dove headfirst into the brush.

Mona’s ears drooped as he stared into the darkness.

“It’s normal to be worried.” Aizawa said softly.

“Who said I was worried!?” Mona scoffed as he scrambled onto Aizawa’s shoulder. “Let’s just go!”

“... Right.” Aizawa kept quiet as Mona gave him directions. Several minutes of racing over ferns and ducking under sharp twigs gave him doubts. “Where’s the villain controlling the mist? We’re just wandering through the forest.”

“Keep going in this direction! They’re not much farther.”

“How can you tell?”

“Just trust me!” Mona griped. “We’re almost at the center of the fog!”

"If it weren't for the rain-" Aizawa adjusted his capture weapon turned mask, "Then it would have spread a lot farther."

"Yeah." Mona's expression turned grave. "Let's split up. I'll go around back and take them by surprise. I'll keep fresh air around you to stave off the gas, but don't get too cocky, okay?"

"Shouldn't I be saying that to you?"

Mona scoffed and leapt into the trees.

Aizawa stepped through the brush with wisps of purple fog clinging to his feet. The likeness to Midnight's quirk made him uneasy, but he pushed through to the clearing Mona specified. His eyes widened as the villain aimed a revolver right at him.

Not a villain. Just a *kid*, a boy wearing a middle school uniform. The oxygen tanks strapped to his back were nearly as big as he was. Tubes connected the oxygen to the green gas mask decorated with piercing red eyes.

"Stay back!" The boy yelled. "Or I'll shoot!"

"What's your name, kid?"

"I'm not a kid."

"Okay." A flash of déjà vu hounded Aizawa as he took one step forward. "How old are you?"

"None of your business." Aizawa's ears rang as the gun went off, the bullet piercing the ground in front of Aizawa's feet. "I said stay back."

"Why are you out here?" Aizawa asked as he looked up from the smoking hole in the ground. "Did the villains threaten you?"

"No, I joined them by myself." He stepped forward, the boy's smirk oozing from that terrifying mask. "But you know what, *hero* ? I've had

enough talk.” He raised the gun. “I’ve always wondered what it felt like to kill somebody.”

The crack of the gun sounded before Aizawa could move. They were blinded by a flash of blue flame as a mythical being rose up in front of Aizawa. A splash of multicolored ichor spewed from the bullet wound in its shoulder.

A giant yellow boxing glove appeared behind the boy, its merciless punch broke the gas mask. He gasped as the revolver fumbled with the gun. The mythical being waved his staff with a flourish, the buffeting winds dragging the purple mist.

The boy fell to his knees as the purple tornado consumed him, hands scrambling in vain to block the holes in his mask. It only took a few seconds for him to collapse forward, unconscious. Aizawa watched as the mythical being flapped his wings, the refreshing winds eradicating the last of the gas.

Mona dropped from the treetops. “Mercurius, are you okay!?”

“I am fine, Magician.” He said, putting a hand on the wound to stem the colorful bleeding.

“No you’re not, so don’t pull a Joker!” Mona shook his head. “Here, just let me take care of it.”

A flicker of white light illuminated the clearing and Mercurius’ wound closed.

“Your powers are just like Joker’s?” Aizawa asked as Mercurius rolled his shoulder.

“It’s... a bit more complicated than that.” Mona avoided Aizawa’s eyes. “But yeah, somewhat.”

“... I see.” Aizawa turned to Mercurius with a bowed head. “You took that bullet for me when you didn’t have to. Thank you.”

Mercurius snorted. “Think nothing of it, human.”

Aizawa studied the fleet-footed god. Mercurius could easily be mistaken for a hero on the job, what with the navy blue jumpsuit and hood, with golden accessories around his shoulders and on his gloves. The staff swirled with gold and silver, with a wing motif at the top. Speaking of wings, the vibrant blue and white wings *might* be a match against Hawks, but even Hawks couldn’t control wind with just a flutter of feathers.

“So, what’s going to happen to him?” Mona said as he went to the boy’s side, drawing Aizawa out of his thoughts. “Is he going to be thrown in prison, too?”

Aizawa’s stomach churned. “In normal circumstances, he would be labeled as a villain and sent to Tartarus.”

“B-but he’s so young!” Mona cried.

“I know.” Aizawa knelt next to the boy. “Maybe there’s something we can do for him. Nezu would jump at the opportunity to help a child, and Ryukyu wanted to open a center for people like him. He’s needs serious psychiatric help, but there might be hope for him yet.”

Mona scrutinized him as Aizawa scooped the boy in his arms.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Aizawa asked.

“Nothing. It’s just...” Mona shook his head. “You’ve changed since that time we met on the rooftops before the raid.”

“... Thanks?”

“We’ve been here too long.” Mona turned away, his tail flicking. “Joker, what’s your status?”

Aizawa’s brow furrowed as Mona’s eyes went wide.

“... Joker?”

Aizawa's comm picked up nothing but static. "It looks like they jammed our communications."

"Wh-what!? But... but La Brava's network has been flawless until now! How could they...?"

"We'll find out when we return this boy to the lodge. Come on."

"Wait."

"What?"

Mona exchanged a long glance with Mercurius. The former nodded as Mercurius returned to his other self.

"Something just isn't right." Mona, despite Aizawa's protest, leapt up into the branches. "I'm going to find Joker!"

Aizawa swore as he was left with the young criminal in his arms.

He'd find Joker and his crazy feline later, but for now he soldiered on with ominous gurgles of Nomu echoing within the shadows.

Seth soared through skies stained with smoke.

"Nomu infest the forest like ants!" He shouted to the Trickster.

"Take out as many as you can while we search for the oldest Todoroki." Seth heard the faint sound of gunshots from the Trickster's direction. *"But focus on protecting any students in immediate danger first!"*

"Got it." Seth licked his lips, eager for the taste of battle.

One such disturbance exploded from the cliff face on the other side of the forest. The cliff where that small human called his 'secret hideout'. Seth sensed the Chariot's power thrum through the air. Perhaps he should drop by and watch the battle-

When much more familiar explosions popped from the ground.

His Tower.

Cackling as he spotted his first plaything, he dove, the wind whistling ominously under his wings.

~A few minutes before... ~

“Stay behind me, IcyHot!” Bakugo shouted.

“Can you forget who’s in the lead?” Todoroki snapped. “This is serious!”

“I know this is serious, dumbass! Just follow my-”

Crunch.

Bakugo froze and looked at his feet, where half of a headset cracked under his boots.

“Hey, isn’t that Ragdoll’s?” Todoroki asked as Bakugo picked it up, their eyes wide.

“Yeah. But this is...” Bakugo scowled as crimson stains overwhelmed the bright yellow, with more pools around their feet.

Bakugo suddenly whipped his arm out, an explosion ringing in Todoroki’s ears Bakugo knocked them both to the side. They scrambled to their feet, with Bakugo falling into a battle stance, the broken headset dropping from his grasp.

Todoroki stomped his right foot and shot out a glacier as long, jagged knives weaved through the air at blinding speed. They heard the *thunks* as the knives impaled it.

“What the hell?” Bakugo growled.

“Ahh.... I was so close.... I want to see more beautiful flesh... the last one screamed so beautifully....” A deranged voice trickled in their ears, slowly rising above the ice. “Give me... your flesh!!”

Bakugo and Todoroki paled as a villain, bound in restraints tightened over a *body bag*, hovered over them. His whole body was covered, the only opening was his gaping mouth. The restraints pulled his lips back into a frightening leer. Those previous knives were the villain’s *teeth*, which he used to impale the ground and hover over them with ivory spires.

The insane villain sensed them, his elongating teeth grated together like claws down a chalk board. Todoroki threw up another glacier, before he and Bakugo’s footsteps pounded down the dark path.

“What the hell is wrong with this freak!?” Bakugo spat.

“I don’t know. Just run!”

The maniac chased them in fervent desperation, his mutterings of ‘flesh, beautiful flesh!’ assaulting their ears. The villain’s teeth impaled trees and ripped apart the earth, Todoroki barely had time to throw up another glacier before the spikes could gut them like fish.

The villain turned towards the sky when a whistling noise came from overhead.

“... Flesh?”

The black dot in the sky descended with frightening speed, and it collided with the villain with the force of a lightning strike, a thunderous landing followed by the dancing light show overhead. Thunder rolled over them as they gaped at the smoking crater in the ground.

“Something’s coming!” Todoroki said as a vast body moved within the smoke.

A flash of yellow eyes pinned them to the spot as Seth's head parted the billowing dust. The dragon cackled as it climbed out, wings squelching on the wet earth.

"That never gets old!" Seth shook his head and then peered down on them. "My Tower! And... the Hanged Man?"

"You!!" Bakugo stomped over to Seth.

Todoroki reached out, but Bakugo harshly shrugged him off.

"You have some explaining to do, you dumb lizard!!"

"Me?" Seth licked his lips as he lowered his head to be eye level to Bakugo.

"Yeah, you! Tell that *asshole* Joker to get over here so we can give him a piece of our minds!"

"Oh? And ruin the fun I'm having?"

"FI-flesh...." The villain tried pulling himself free of the crater.

Seth rolled his golden eyes as his tail struck like a whip. The guttural *crack* sent the villain careening into the forest, where his body crumpled into a tree. He fell like a pathetic lump. Seth snorted when the villain didn't have the audacity to get up again.

"Well, the fun I was having." Seth muttered. "I wished he put up more of a fight! No matter, I'll have more fun as soon as I get you two to safety. The Trickster's orders."

"*What ?*" Todoroki asked.

"'Safety'? 'Trickster's orders'!?" Bakugo ran a hand down his face as he hollowly laughed. "Are you freaking kidding me!? We didn't need your help!"

Todoroki held up a hand. "Bakugo-"

“You hear me!?” Bakugo threw an explosion in Seth’s face.
“Everything Joker did, everything he’s ever said, was nothing but bullshit!! Was he enjoying himself when he paraded around as a weak, quirkless barista!? Does he love staring down on me!? Tell him that if I ever see him again, that I’ll kill him myself!” He punctuated every sentence with another explosion. “If you want to play hero, then piss off and go rescue the extras in the other class! I don’t need that lying jerkwad’s help! I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF!!”

He finalized his rant with one more blast, panting heavily as stray sparks fell into mud and the sweet smell of caramel stung their noses. The smoke faded away. Seth wasn’t even *singed*.

“Well said!” Seth cackled. “I knew I’ve always liked you, Bakugo! If anyone held the Tower Arcana, then I am glad it is one as tenacious as you!”

Bakugo stiffened. Pain thrummed through his joints, but he only felt the gnarled confusion as Seth stared at him in *pride*. The dragon raised a wingspan greater than any of the trees towering over them.

“Very well, my magnificent Tower!” Seth bellowed. “Then I shall take my leave to save the weaker ‘extras’! I wish you a good bloodletting!”

“Bakugo!” Todoroki shielded his face from the buffeting wind as Seth took off. “What did you do!? You scared off our one chance to get help!”

“We’ll do this on our own! We don’t need that lying son of a bitch!” Bakugo turned on his heels, shoulder checking Todoroki as he walked down the path. “Are you coming or not, IcyHot!?”

Todoroki glanced between the sky and Bakugo, before pinching the bridge of his nose and following.

Bakugo’s anger just doomed him to a worse fate.

“Merp!”

“I know!” Spinner grimaced as more Nomu emerged from the blackness.

Joker’s equipment was on another level.

He didn’t think those wooden sticks would do anything, but the light that surrounded him after he broke them fueled his body with power and speed. He tossed bombs of ice and lightning and strange psychic energy to keep the Nomu’s numbers down.

Mona’s gem encrusted scimitar *sang* in his hands. The whistling slices through the air crescendoed over gurgling Nomu, the silver and gold blade slicing through their flesh like a hot knife through butter. *Splatters* of sludge painted the ground, and squelching footsteps heralded the endless wave of Nomu marching ever closer.

It filled him with a primal sense of dread, but at the same time, pride.

If these Nomu were focused on him, then it gave the students a bigger chance at escaping their clutches.

“Merp!!”

“Ahg!”

That Nomu’s punch should have sent him flying farther or broke his bones into dust. Perhaps both. But he stood, almost unharmed save for some soreness, the weightless armor under his costume muted most of the damage.

“Heh, this stuff really is something else! I’m going to have to thank Joker when all of this is over!” Spinner grinned as he pointed his blade at the hulking beasts before him. “Is that all you got!? Bring it on, you spineless chumps!”

During the thriving heat of battle, some small part of him wondered: What would have happened if he chose to follow Stain instead of

Joker?

Would he even be here? Or would he have thrown himself in with the League, perhaps *aiding* in this attack? The mere thought made him shudder, but he had no time to think on it as more monsters flooded around him.

He chuckled.

This wasn't like that Wolf Nomu. He would make sure that these kids would be able to go home at the end of the night!

He released another battle cry and charged at them with the singing blade, the sound of Lady Stubbs' own hissing cries trilling in his ears.

"Grow, grow!!" Komori Kinoko backpedaled as several dozen mushroom sprouted on the Nomu's bodies and the surrounding ground, but they weren't slowing down. "Kendo!"

Kendo's giant hands sliced through the Nomu. It turned to sludge and splattered onto the ground with a sickening splash, but other Nomu easily took its place.

"Look out!!"

Kendo jumped back as Tsuburaba's air barrier blocked a Nomu's strike.

"Thanks, Tsuburaba!" Kendo said as she took a stance. She was smiling, but her heart pounded as the flames silhouetted the hulking bodies trudging through the forest. "How's Awase!?"

"I-I'm fine..."

"You're *not* fine, dude!" Tsuburaba looked to the classmate he carried on his back, his headband stained with red.

Kendo scowled as another Nomu approached, its eerily dead eyes piercing through them.

“You guys go!” She commanded as she shifted her stance. “I’ll distract them!”

“No!” Komori frantically shook her head. “I’m not leaving without you!”

“Same, Class Rep.” Tsuburaba smirked.

“But there’s too many-”

“Here they come!” Kinoko said.

Kendo stood in front of her friends with a fierce scowl. That fear died when a gigantic body crashed onto the Nomu like a crack of thunder, the shock wave throwing Kendo and her friends onto the ground.

Kendo rolled through the fall and enlarged her hands to shield her classmates, but what she witnessed made her jaw drop. The gigantic dragon’s tail swipes leveled the trees and Nomu alike. His head whipped like a battering ram and his wings sent merciless gusts of wind.

Nomu after Nomu turned to slush. All the while the dragon *laughed* as goopy carnage splattered everywhere.

“Th-that’s-” Tsuburaba pointed a shaky finger. “Isn’t that...?”

“L-Look out!” Kinoko screamed as another form loomed over them.

A stream of crimson flame whooshed over their heads. The Nomu screeched and thrashed in pain, but even the sludge was reduced to ash. They looked back over to the dragon, who closed its smoking jaws with a *snap* .

The once towering trees were reduced to splinters for several hundred feet all around them. Piles of sludge were the only evidence

of the Nomu. Great claw marks gouged the earth, destroying the ferns and wild flowers.

“Stay back!!” Kendo screamed as the dragon crept towards them, the smaller wings on its neck flaring. “Stay back I said!”

“Wait!”

Relief crashed into them as Tiger crossed through the destruction.

“Hmph, I did your job for you, *hero* .” The dragon’s bone deep voice rumbled. “Twice!”

“And I’m grateful that you protected them.” Tiger stood between Kendo and Seth, her hands shrinking to their normal size. “Most of 1-B is in the clearing.”

“Wh-what about 1-A?” Kinoko asked.

“A few students are still MIA, but-”

“Joker is battling the Nomu around 1-A’s area.” The dragon stated. “They should be safe from the Nomu’s grasp.”

“J-Joker...?” Kendo’s eyes widened. “He’s *here* ?”

The dragon snorted. “Get these children to safety before more Nomu appear!”

“Wait!” Tiger bowed his head. “I have a favor to ask you.”

Seth narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I must search for my teammates! Pixie Bob and Ragdoll haven’t responded. Can you take these students to the lodge in my stead?”

“You want him to do what!?” Tsuburaba shouted.

Seth bit back his retort when a sudden sense of longing trickled from the Trickster. Ah, it was the word Tiger used. Teammates. Seth curled his lip. He had an inkling that Tiger used that word on purpose.

“Fine.” Seth’s eyes flicked to the students as he lowered his neck. “Hop on before I change my mind.”

“But there’s no saddle?” Kendo said. “We’ll just fall to our deaths!”

“I-I... can help.” Awase chuckled as he stared at Seth in awe. “My quirk will... make sure w-we don’t fall off.”

“Awase....” Kinoko glanced between her classmate and the dragon.

“Just don’t push yourself, okay?” Kendo swallowed down her pride as Tsuburaba helped Awase.

“Got... it!”

Seth curbed his rage as the 1-B student *fused* their bodies to his skin like some sick, half botched execution from the Velvet Room. He was fine with the Trickster riding on him, he had deserved that right. Maybe even the Tower and the Hanged Man, too. But this? These... *extras* as his Tower called them? They weren’t worthy, and never would be.

The child nodded when it was done.

Seth leapt into the air without warning. He took great pleasure in their screams of terror as the ground was ripped out from underneath, the flora below becoming nothing more than a blur.

The clamors of 1-A’s quirks echoed on the other side of the forest, and he felt the Trickster’s satisfaction as he dual wielded Nataraja and the Tyrant Pistol, the head shots turning a wave of Nomu to sludge.

Then, Seth saw him.

A flicker of cerulean fire sparkling within the same colored eyes. Such eyes stared blankly at Seth as he zoomed overhead.

“Trickster! I have located the elder Todoroki sibling!”

“I’m making my way there now!”

Explosive power came from the cliff overlooking the forest.

“What’s happening over there!?” One of the whelps shouted.

“Trickster-”

“I felt it, too.”

“Hmm, I thought the Chariot could handle this battle on his own. I’ll make my way there after I get these children to safety.”

“Wait!” Cerberus shouted. *“I want to go!”*

“Why?”

“If the Trickster has me active, then Todoroki’s flames will heal instead of deflect! I want to see my green child!”

“Cerberus....”

“Alright.” The Trickster swung through the trees with a acrobatic flip.

“Seth, switch out with Cerberus after you’re done!”

“Understood.”

Seth burst into the clearing with the fury of the storm at his back, his landing shaking the lodge like the rolls of thunder overhead. He lowered his head as students swarmed him, apprehensive. Relief crept into 1-B as the last of their classmates unmounted.

“About half of 1-A is missing, Trickster. The whole of 1-B is in the clearing, now. Some have minor wounds or are unconscious from

the gas, but no deaths thus far.”

Seth ignored their annoying clamors as he studied the edge of the forest.

Gentle Criminal leapt around with grace, his stretchy barriers preventing Nomu from getting inside. Mandalay and Vlad King worked in tandem to beat back any trespassers, a sizable amount of sludge staining their boots.

“... Good.” Joker said. “Switch out with Cerberus.”

“Dude.” Kirishima took a tentative step towards Seth. “You’re-”

Seth snorted, not deigning to hear their words as he returned to his other self.

Joker never knew what to expect with this mystery Todoroki.

Red or white hair, perhaps a mix of both like Peppermint’s. What he did *not* expect was the pitch black hair and cerulean eyes simmering with hatred. Purple scars marred his jawline and under his eyes, the patchwork skin held together by thick surgical staples. More scar tissue matted his collar bone and down into his clothes.

Joker’s vision was snuffed out by a blast of flame. He smirked as he walked through them untouched thanks to Cerberus.

The older Todoroki’s eyes widened as Joker continued walking, flames crackling in a magnificent dance. An otherworldly glow painted Joker as he stared Todoroki in the eye.

“Not bad. Your flames are hotter than Endeavor’s.”

“Don’t ever compare me to Endeavor.” Todoroki scowled as the flames died within his fingers.

“Why?” Joker tilted his head. “After all, you are-”

“You don’t know shit about me.”

“Are you sure?” Joker tapped his chin. “I wonder how your family would react if they knew you were alive, *Todoroki Touya* ?”

The brilliant blue splashed Touya’s face in harsh contrast as terror morphed into rage, and again twisted into a sickening ear-to-ear grin. The staples pulling at his skin created a ghastly expression.

“Oh, so you have me figured out, huh?” Touya’s manic chuckle sent chills down Joker’s spine. “You *really* think you know me? Don’t give me that crap, Joker!”

That expression, that same level of hopelessness, it reminded him of-

Joker flinched as Touya sent another wave of azure flames. Hissing rain turned to tendrils of steam. Nearby trees were ignited without mercy, being reduced to nothing more than withering black husks. The way the flames flickered made Touya look nothing short of insane, his eyes piercing Joker with intense hatred.

“Do you think I care about any of them!?” Dabi shouted over the roar of flame. “The only thing I care about is seeing Endeavor *squirm* .”

Joker paled. “Why do you want revenge against your father?”

“Why? *Why!?* ” Touya’s arms steamed as he cooked his own flesh. “I was the first. His ‘masterpiece’! But my body couldn’t handle the heat of my quirk, so I was abandoned and tossed to the side like trash. He made my life a living hell, but when *Shoto* was born-”

“Your brother is in this forest! Your *family!* ” Joker took a step forward, kicking up a small cloud of ash. “What about Fuyumi and Natsuo? Your mother trapped in a mental ward? Do you know how happy they would be reunited with you!?”

“I don’t care.” Touya smirked. “Actually, I would be *ecstatic* to see how Endeavor reacts if the rest of his children turned to ash under my flames.”

“That’s bullshit. Do you know what happens when he crumbles and there’s nothing left for you!?” Joker snarled, hot rage pounding through his veins. Touya narrowed his eyes as Joker waved his arm. “You’ll become an empty husk! It accomplishes nothing! You are so consumed by revenge that you don’t see the bigger picture!”

Touya tensed as Joker held out his hand.

“I would give up *everything* to see my family again, and I know yours would be the same! *They* are people who’ll support you through anything. You don’t have to go through this alone, Ake-” Joker shook his head. “Touya! It’s not too late to change things, but you have to be the one who reaches out first! Take my hand. I can heal your scars and we can- ”

“Shut up!” Touya knocked Joker’s hand away, frantically laughing. “Who the hell do you think you are? What right do you have to offer me anything when I already vowed to take revenge!? I- ” Touya’s shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. A frightening grin reappeared on his face as his eyes pierced through Joker. “You know what? This conversation is pointless.”

Heat waves distorted the area as the temperature skyrocketed. Joker jumped back when a wild torrent of white hot flames erupted from Dabi’s body. The fiery pillar rose so high in the sky that it pierced the heavens. Dabi’s arms collapsed into sludge, the rest of his body crumbling after. This was just a copy. *A fake.*

But that didn’t stop Joker’s panic.

“*Stop!!* ” Joker screamed. “At this rate, you’ll-”

“Have fun with all of the Nomu, Joker!!”

Dabi sent him one last manic leer before a cataclysmic explosion threw Joker back.

Joker's body crashed into something, and there was a sharp pain in his head before everything went black.

He didn't even hear Morgana's screams.

~Ten minutes earlier...

Cerberus's paws scattered clumps of dirt as he pounded up the mountain trail.

His ears picked up his green child *screaming* . He jumped onto the cliff with the fires of hell flowing through his veins, releasing a mighty roar.

"A-another villain!?" Kota scrambled back from Cerberus.

Midoriya, shirtless and covered in blood, had both of his arms marred with deep purple bruising. A massive villain lay behind him, unconscious and beaten to a pulp.

"Kota, th-that's not a villain..." Midoriya's eyes went wide as Cerberus approached, his tail wagging.

"My green child!" Midoriya sputtered as Cerberus pressed his nose against Midoriya's forehead. "Are you okay!?"

"I-I'm okay..." Midoriya staggered back, nearly tripping on his own feet. "But... but if *you're* here, then that means Joker really is..."

"Joker!?" Kota's expression became pinched. "But... wait, that means *he* was...."

"We have no time for chatter!" Cerberus shook his mane. "I will get you both to safety!"

“No!” Midoriya shook his head.

Cerberus tilted his head. “No? But you are hurt!”

“I still have something I need to do, Cerberus!” Midoriya said. “Can you get Kota back to the lodge?”

“What!?” Kota glared at him. “What about you!?”

“I-I can’t leave my friends behind! They’re still out there, aren’t they?” Midoriya looked at Muscular. “He said that anybody was a target! They’re after Kacchan, too!”

“All of 1-B is safe at the lodge! But...” Cerberus’ ears flattened. “Lots of 1-A still in forest! I...” He sensed his Chariot’s determination and will power, despite his grave injuries. He *would* go no matter what Cerberus tried. “Alright, I will take this tiny human to safety!”

“Kota,” Midoriya knelt down with a weak smile. “Mandalay is waiting for you, remember?”

Kota sniffled, but he nodded with watery eyes. Cerberus ignored the pit in his gut as he lay down and allowed the child to clamber up on his back, his tiny hands grasping white fur.

“You better come back too, okay!?” Kota shouted.

“I will! Promise!”

Cerberus trotted alongside Midoriya as they went down the mountain path, but they split off as soon as they reached the forest. Kota buried his face in Cerberus’ mane, his trembling hands pulling tightly on the fur.

Several gasps broke out as he emerged from the bushes, his bright eyes scanning the clearing. No other Nomu or villain were attacking for the moment, so the heroes were regrouping. He passed by Gentle Criminal, who nodded at him, and bounded towards Mandalay.

“I brought your child!” Cerberus announced as he lay down to reveal his passenger.

“Kota!!” Mandalay rushed to his side and hugged him tightly. “I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“I-I’m fine!” Kota tried to brush her off, but he eventually melted in her arms when the tears came. “I’m *fine* . Y-you don’t need to cry!”

A white pillar of flame erased the dark of the night, casting everything in light and deep shadow.

“Master!” Cerberus felt the moment that the Trickster was tossed.

Cerberus turned to cinders as the Trickster knew nothing but blackness.

Joker coughed and opened his eyes to a pitch black sky. He peeled himself from the shattered tree that broke his fall and studied his surroundings. There was a massive crater where the fake Touya sacrificed himself, any tree in the surrounding several hundred feet were reduced to *nothing* . Grass, trees, flowers, all of it burnt to the ground.

“Hello? What’s everyone’s status?” Joker frowned. “... Hello?”

He took the comm out of his ear. The bit of metal and plastic was melted beyond repair. It was probably due to Cerberus that it didn’t destroy his inner ear. He cursed under his breath and tossed it aside.

“Yatagarasu.” The bird immediately materialized at his side, ruffling his feathers. “Scan the forest and give me an update.”

Yatagarasu shuffled his feathers. “Perhaps you should regroup with the others-”

“*Yatagarasu* .” The bird flinched. “Please.”

“....Very well.”

The raven took off into the sky as Joker wiped the layers of ash from his costume, his body sore. The silence around him was... deafening. No animals or even a gust of wind stirred. It was *too* still. The acrid smoke coated his mouth and throat, and it would take ages to wash it out of his hair.

“Trickster!” Panic coursed through Yatagarasu as he hovered over the clearing. *“The Magician is-”*

A pang of fear coursed through Joker when he lay eyes on a blackened shape in the distance. His vision tunneled as he rushed over to where Mercurius was curled around Mona, his clothes blackened and stained by dull ichor.

“Mercurius! Are you...” Joker swallowed as Yatagarasu switched with Ishtar, who hovered over the pair. “Is Mona...?”

“H-he is... safe...” Mercurius rasped. “I-I tried-”

“Shhh, don’t speak.” Ishtar whispered. “Hold still.”

The soothing light of a Salvation did little for their appearance. The burns smoothed over and Mercurius visibly slumped in relief. Mona, however, didn’t stir even as the patches of burnt skin healed.

“Mona? Mona!”

“He’ll be alright.” Mercurius clutched his other self to his chest. “His body needs time to regain strength. Our bond nearly broke when I protected him from those white flames.”

“Like with what happened to Kohryu?” Joker uttered in horror.

“... Yes.”

“He... he almost...” Joker’s gloves creaked as he knotted his hands into tight fists, unbearable heat flooded his chest and his throat

tightened. “They almost killed him.”

“Trickster...” Ishtar reached out, but Joker brushed her off.

“Mercurius, get Mona to safety. That’s an order.”

Mercurius gravely nodded. With a shuffle of his wings and a gentle breeze, he was gone.

“Yatagarasu, what else did you see?”

“I... there are Nomu-”

“More of them?” Joker swore. “How many are left?”

“The numbers from before were nothing compared to this. They were swarming the lodge. I couldn’t see if Gentle Criminal’s barriers are holding up, but at this rate...”

‘Have fun with all of the Nomu, Joker!’

Is that what Touya’s signal was!?

He needed a plan... anything to get the Nomu away...

Gentle Criminal and La Brava were at the lodge, but most of Joker’s skills were too catastrophic for such a small area, and potentially harming the students was out of the question. He didn’t know where Spinner was. Mona was too hurt.

He reached into his pocket for a Limelight, a Metaverse item that would make any and all enemies target whoever used it. A bubble of laughter escaped him.

“Seth.”

“Trickster, this plan is too dangerous! Don’t let your anger control you!” Arsene’s words fell on deaf ears.

Ishtar disappeared and Seth's claws crunched over blackened ground.

Joker looked up at him with fury in his eyes. "Can you do it?"

Seth cackled. "That's not even a question! Hop on, Trickster!"

"Seth!!" Arsene howled.

Joker, with the Limelight in hand, jumped onto Seth's neck. A cloud of ash scattered as Seth took to the sky, soaring into the heavens like a freshly shot arrow. Seth breathed in deep, filling his lungs just as they reached the thunder clouds.

Lightning danced in bright spiderwebs behind them, fracturing the dark clouds like glass. Then, Seth opened his jaws and released his song with the beat of thunder. The bone deep cry traveled for miles within the surrounding mountains, reaching the ears of everyone in range.

Joker stood upon Seth's neck, painted in bright whites and purples from the light show above. The Limelight was used, and Seth saw the change in the forest below as all Nomu came after the Trickster. Joker smirked as the flood of unnatural monstrosities prowled through the destroyed forest in an undulating wave.

"Let's go."

Seth plummeted from the sky, pulling up as the first Nomu leapt within range. A tail swipe splattered it into sludge. Seth howled with laughter when they soared over the trees with the army of Nomu at their heels, until they reached the furthest depths of the forest.

"Land there!"

Seth dropped into a clearing and Joker hopped down onto green grass. The Nomu Hoard snapped trees and frightened hundreds of

birds from their nests. Seth faded, and Joker smirked as he switched masks in quick succession.

Ishtar for Heat Riser.

Titania for Concentrate.

He pulled Black Frost into reality, the evil sprite eagerly bouncing on his heels.

“Are you ready?” Joker asked as nearby trees collapsed, and the vibration of a hundred footsteps rumbled through the earth.

“Ready when you are, ho!”

Joker waved his arm as he saw the whites of the Nomu’s eyes.
“Now!!”

“Heeee hooo!!!!”

Glacial shards erupted across the forest. Joker smirked as the Nomu were encased in ice, the first Nomu’s clawed hands extended towards him.

Black Frost vanished with a snap of his fingers, and Cu Chulainn stood tall, his cape waved gently with the breeze. Their bodies lit up with a Charge. Joker took a moment to admire the mystical beauty of an entire forest and a horde of monsters locked within crystalline ice. Joker tapped the closest Nomu’s extended claws, and it gave off a pleasant *ding* .

“Do it.”

Cu Chulainn grinned. “With pleasure!”

The Persona released a battle cry as he twirled his spear and stabbed it into the ground. The earth rumbled and split under Cu Chulainn's empowered Gigantomachia, tearing the mountainside apart in a merciless swath of destruction. The clouds of dust parted.

Joker whistled as he and Cu Chulainn stood at the precipice of a great crater several hundred feet wide. Trees jutted out of broken earth like toothpicks, and there was not a single Nomu in sight. An eerie silence plagued the mountains. No birds or wildlife stirred within the broken earth, just a deadened wind singing a funerary timbre for all that was lost in one fell swoop.

A nearby *crack* could easily be mistaken for crumbling foliage.

“That takes care of that.” Joker frowned at the heart rending destruction before him. “Good work.”

Cu Chulainn, in lieu of the Trickster’s sorrow, disappeared with a bow of his head. Joker’s vision swirled and he put his hands on his knees, panting. Gigantomachia took a good chunk of health with it. He hasn’t used such a taxing physical skill in this world yet, perhaps the toll was heavier than it was in the Metaverse.

He gently swore under his breath as he swayed. Joker reached into his pocket and snapped a Life Bead, his dizziness and exhaustion easing.

“Great, now we just have to regroup with the others-”

“Handy little item you used there.”

Joker whirled around to see Mr. Compress approaching, the last wisps of dust wafting from his jacket.

“How did you...?”

“Joker.” The man jovially tipped his hat, but there was an undertone of urgency in his voice. “Listen to me-”

“Why should I listen to you?” Joker smirked as whipped out Nataraja. “Last time I checked we were on opposite sides.”

“Yes, well... times do change.” Mr. Compress ran a finger under the rim of his hat. “I’ve come to offer you a way out of the danger that

awaits you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The League is not being led by Shigaraki, not really. The man who hired me to break into the Yaoyorozu estate is an individual who far exceeds that man-child in every possible way. He’s a figure who makes the worst villains tremble by just hearing his name.”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “Would that name happen to be All For One?”

Mr. Compress stiffened. “Yes.”

“He’s the one who’s behind everything?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Joker shook his head. “Why is he doing all of this?”

“I don’t pretend to understand all of the plans that man has concocted, but I do know that part of this attack was for *you* .”

Joker’s stomach sank. “Me?”

“Yes. Everything he’s done was to test you like some lab rat, to see what makes you tick so he could use it against you. The fires, our encounter at the Yaoyorozu manor, among others.” Mr. Compress took a step forward. “Don’t you understand? He’s done all of this because he’ll do anything to get you under his thumb!”

“So what do you propose, then?” Joker’s laugh was hollow. “Tell me your ‘great plan’ to escape this legendary bogey man of the underground.”

“My quirk.” Mr. Compress looked down at his hand. “I could tell them that you escaped me, that way I could whisk you to safety after-”

“Don’t make me laugh. Me, trust *you* ?” Joker shook his head. “How do you expect me to follow along when you could be lying? I’m not making that mistake again. You make a shoddy replacement for Giran.”

“Joker, hear me out.” Mr. Compress sighed. “My first encounter with you has... changed something within me. I can’t explain it. I’ve finally met someone else who has suffered the wrongs of this society and sought to change it through gentleman thievery!” Joker stiffened when Mr. Compress reached into his jacket and pulled out an old book. “You see this? This is the *original* copy of Arsene Lupin, Gentleman Burglar.”

“So what?”

“Witnessing Arsene Lupin, the *true* Gentleman Burglar, in all of his glory was a wake up call.” Mr. Compress held the book to his chest. “I *know* what path I must take, and it’s the same one you walk.”

Joker lowered his gun. “You’re telling the truth?”

“I have no reason to lie. I-”

A purple cloud expanded behind Mr. Compress.

Panic flashed through Joker’s eyes, but his shout came too late. Mr. Compress gasped as a wicked knife impaled through his shoulder, the book dropping from his grasp. Crimson seeped into his coat at an alarming rate.

“Did you really think we wouldn’t notice?” Toga giggled as she ripped her knife out and kicked Mr. Compress in the back. He tumbled over, grasping his shoulder. “Your copy did a good job at faking it, but you know how Twice can’t keep a secret from me. Ah well, I got to cover you in pretty red, so what do I care?”

Joker snarled as he pulled the trigger. Toga laughed as she danced around the whizzing bullets.

“C’mon, Joker!” Toga’s giggles ignited fire in Joker’s blood. “Don’t play hard to get, unless you want Bakugo’s blood on your hands?”

That fire turned into ice. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh.” Toga blushed as she grinned at a groaning Compress. “He didn’t tell you, huh? How Compress used his copy to kidnap Bakugo? He was going to throw someone *e/se* under the bus in order to save you, Joker!”

“Sh... shut it...” Mr. Compress could barely lift his head from a puddle of his own blood.

“What about Bakugo?” Joker growled as he aimed at Toga. “You better not-”

“If you don’t want to hurt Bakugo, then don’t get too trigger happy, Aki-chan! It doesn’t suit you.”

Joker lost all color in his face. “What did you just say?”

“Do you not like my nickname?” Toga sauntered closer, her finger trailing down her bloody knife. “Kurusu-kun is too formal and not cute at all!”

Joker’s mouth went dry as he stood like a deer in the headlights. His Personas’ frantic whispers were lost to him as Toga retrieved a small vial of blood, which she popped open and allowed the crimson bead to drip on her tongue.

Toga began to change.

“Well, Akira? How do I look?”

It looked like Risumi, *sounded like* Risumi, but the twisted smirk upon the loving woman’s face was alien to him. The frantic giggles and the way she clutched that knife made Joker feel sick.

“Do you not like it, sweetheart?” Not-Risumi asked in a sickly sweet voice, her silent footsteps approaching. “Should we fetch Hitoshi to make you feel better? Ayumu? Or maybe Haru-san? She’s such a sweet old lady, she’d do anything to-”

“What do you want?” Joker snapped as tears stung his eyes.

“What do I want?”

Not-Risumi hummed as she stepped up to him, Nataraja dropped from his grasp as the fake entwined her fingers in his own. Then, she led him into a dance. It was in a sick mockery from those weeks ago, the roles reversed. *He* was the puppet helplessly locked into the flowing movements, their only audience was a man bleeding out and a sentient mist cloud that watched in disinterest. No stars or brilliant moonlight shown down upon them, only darkness and the despair running rampant in Joker’s heart.

Risumi’s scent, mixed with a coppery undertone, washed over him. It took every part of him to not show his revulsion.

“I want nothing more than to love, live, and die the way I want, to *become* the people that I love so dearly.” Not-Risumi’s skin melted away like hot wax, revealing Toga’s sharp grin. “Haven’t you ever loved someone so much that you wanted to become them, Akira?”

“I thought I stole your heart on our last dance?” Joker asked in a shaky voice, “Does that not count?”

“I love you, a-and I love Midoriya too!” Toga huddled herself to his chest, close enough to hear his erratic heartbeat. “You were one of the first people that didn’t look at me like I was a monster. I’ll never forget our first dance. It was so romantic!”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming.”

“But this isn’t about what I want, Aki-chan.” Toga pulled back, her smile fading as well as the light in her eyes. “I still value my own life

over everything else. If I go against the League now, then I'll end up sharing Giran's fate. All For One doesn't *let* people walk away."

She took advantage of Joker's dismal shock, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning closer to him.

Kurogiri cleared his throat. "Toga, enough messing around. Sensei is waiting."

"Don't you know not to interrupt a girl's first kiss, Kurogiri?" Toga clutched onto Joker. "I don't want to let him go just yet! At least let me kiss him?"

"Toga." Kurogiri warned.

"Fiiine." Toga winked at Joker before stepping back. "So, what's your answer, Aki-chan? Come with us peacefully, otherwise it won't just be Bakugo who gets the axe."

"I will go with you, but-" Joker pointed at Compress. "You let him go and leave everyone else unharmed."

"Bakugo will remain under our care, your good behaviour might spare him any pain." Kurogiri said. "But I can promise that those residing in the Blue Lotus and the rest of the hero students will be left alone under those same conditions."

"And Mr. Compress?"

Kurogiri's yellow eyes turned towards the bleeding man. "I don't think Compress is too long for this world. Such a shame that we have to leave him."

"Joker... no..." Mr. Compress reached out as Joker stopped in front of him. A tiny *thunk* landed right beside his hand, Joker masking the noise by scuffing his boot. Toga and Kurogiri were oblivious to the Bead in Mr. Compress's reach. "Please! You don't have to-"

“Sorry.” Joker whispered as he turned away. “But it would be better to walk alone.”

Kurogiri expanded his body as Joker approached.

Mr. Compress could only watch on as Joker willingly walked through the portal.

Toga never gave him a second glance as she skipped into a different portal, before Kurogiri faded into nothing.

~15 minutes earlier

Inhuman screeches wailed in Gentle Criminal’s ears as raking claws and teeth pushed his barriers to the limit, his breath leaving in rasping gasps as sweat made his clothes stick to his body. He couldn’t tell one Nomu from another from the endless, undulating wave. The nasty eyes and brains and snapping mouths bled together into one horrific body. He bounced to the next glaring hole in their defence like a speeding bullet, elastic air preventing the swarm from stepping a foot inside, which slowly grew smaller and smaller like a tightening noose.

“There’s too many!” Vlad King howled as he raised spires of hardened blood. “Mandalay, get the children into the lodge! Now!!”

“You heard him!” Mandalay waved her arm in an arc. “All students inside the lodge!”

“Mandalay!” Iida called. “Let us help! We can-”

“No!” Vlad Kind panted as another crimson tower rose over them, but he picked up the crackling noises as Nomu tried to punch through.

“Listen to Mandalay! That’s an order!”

“We’ll all die if we do that!” Ashido called.

“We’ll die if we stay out here!” Monoma, wide eyed and frantic, shouted.

That’s when the first of Gentle Criminal’s barrier *snapped* . Writhing pain coursed through him, but the fire in his heart fueled his breaking body, leaping over the screaming students to stand valiantly in front of the wretched monster. Dead eyes pinned him to the spot as he threw up his hands, the Nomu and its brethren reciprocating the act.

Gentle Criminal gasped as the claws came down into his quirk, his own death lingering between a thin layer of air. The Nomu pressed down with all of its strength, his creaking joints forced to kneel into the dirt.

“Gentle!” La Brava rushed to his side, panting.

“My dear, get to safety!” Gentle Criminal yelled. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold them back!”

“No!” Her pigtails bounced as he shook her head. “I’ll help buy us some time!”

She grasped his pant leg and activated her quirk.

Power shot through him with the force of a lightning strike, striking every fiber of his being like a red hot hammer. Wild energy flowed out of them as their bodies burst with pink light, the students’ cries meshing with the gurgles and animalistic yowls.

Gentle Criminal released a hair raising battle cry. *He* was the only bulwark between these students and certain death. Pain wracked his body as he pushed his quirk to the limits, fusing all of the individual barriers into one bubble encompassing the whole clearing.

“You can do it!” La Brava’s words fueled him to push on *just a bit longer* .

Warm wetness trickled down his nose. Despite the bone crushing pressure squeezing his body, despite the flabbergasted heroes and students staring at him as if he were their last hope of survival, *despite screaming until his voice gave out*, he stood against the swarm.

Then, a forbidden song from the deep echoed through the mountains, vibrating their bones and filling their bodies with the innate sense of fear. Their eyes were drawn to a form hovering above the forest, his vast body painted by lightning and heralded by thunder.

Another regal form stood valiantly on the god's head, coat tails flaring. An unknown force pulled on their souls and refused to let them look away, Nomu included.

One by one, the roiling waves of Nomu retreated into the forest.

One by one, the students fell to their knees as their imminent death knell went silent.

Gentle Criminal's barrier faltered as the last Nomu vanished into the tree line. He collapsed into La Brava.

"Gentle!" Her warm hands caressed his face. "Hey, stay with me!"

"I-I'm fine, my dear." Gentle Criminal looked up, stray hair sticking to his sweaty forehead. "The students...?"

"E-everyone's okay." La Brava hugged him close and he wrapped his arms around her. "They're okay!"

"That's... good..."

"Hey, no!" La Brava shook him, "Don't fall asleep, you have to stay awake! Gentle!!"

Gentle Criminal drifted in and out of consciousness, not knowing how much time passed when the world turned black and hazy gray,

but far away noises and voices trickled into his ears.

The fall of an entire mountain shaking the earth to its core, the screams of sirens and pounding footsteps came within the next wave of consciousness.

"Hey, what are you doing!?" La Brava screamed as several callous hands ripped them apart, the cuffs slapping on his wrist stung like ice.

"They protected the students!" Aizawa roared. *"They're with us-"*

"Orders from the top." A cold voice resonated. *"All villains are to be arrested and processed. No exceptions."*

"You can't just-!"

"Aizawa, let me handle this." Tsukauchi said. *"I'll see if I can-"*

The voices cut off when his body was thrown in a police vehicle, the slamming doors eliminating any noise from the outside world.

Joker stepped from the burning forest and plunged into a black void. No sound or scent reached him within this drop of space. He was about to activate Third Eye, when a voice rang out.

"Welcome to my stage, Joker ."

Joker shielded his eyes as beams of light flooded the arena one by one, the curtains of blinding white becoming focused on a singular man hovering ominously in the air.

He wore a basic suit without a tie, but the black skull-like mask shielding his entire head had all manner of tubes and wires jutting out from it, leaving nothing but a grotesque image burned into the minds of whoever laid eyes on it. The masked man's grin prickled across Joker's skin, and just then, a forbidden bond was forged, one

of a handful that would never be in his original deck. Joker's breath was stolen from him as the bonds hovered within his psyche.

Councilor.

Faith.

Hope.

Apostle.

But this man held the worst of the lot. It was voracious and evil, one filled with the promise of a grisly demise. Joker shuddered as if he were a rabbit facing a mad, starving beast that would never be satiated.

This bond was...

H U N G E R

NEXT TIME on 'Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?'!!

"Would you die for me?"

Confrontation

Chapter 59: Confrontation

“Would you die for me?”

Welp, this is it guys, your last warning. I promised that I would not hold back any punches and I plan to keep that promise in every sense of the word.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[FANART by mew-trainer-rose](#)

A swirling torrent of souls swam around the arena like a maelstrom. Reds, blues, and greens. Violet and cerulean. A flicker of amber surfaced before it was devoured by the raging storm. The Sea of trapped spirits flowed around the man in the skull mask, the pinnacle of agony to which these poor souls were ensnared.

“Hmm, what’s with that face?” The hovering man held his arms out, the pose like a god staring down an ant. For a moment, his visage blurred with the False Igor’s. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“You must be All For One.” Joker said as Third Eye faded, masking the terror in his heart with a buttery smirk. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“My, my. Your manners do not disappoint, my boy.” A chuckle, deep and resonant, reverberated from All For One’s mask. “I’ve been

watching your progress for quite some time and have been eager to meet you, young man.”

This was it.

The man who pulled the strings behind every conceivable curtain in this world for more than two centuries. A voice who rallied armies, the hand that leveled cities to smoking craters. One who *reaped the souls* out of people.

“Oh?” Joker raised a brow. “To what do I owe the honor? Clearly, you went through a lot of trouble.”

All For One nodded cordially. “I want to make a deal with you.”

“A... deal?”

“I shall grant you the opportunity to make a deal with me. Should you wish it, I shall return the world to its prior state- one rampant with distorted masses.”

“You forcefully dragged him into the Metaverse and imposed an ordeal he did not deserve!” Lavenza had shouted at the false Igor. “Yet you still intend on toying with him!?”

“The Phantom Thieves will be praised and gain fame. The world will escape ruin as well.” The false Igor’s smile widened as his soulless eyes peered into Joker. “... What say you?”

“The terms of this deal are simple.” All For One’s invisible grin slithered across Joker’s skin. “Bend your knee and serve me, and I’ll aid you in finding a way home, Kurusu Akira.”

A chill broke over Joker’s body. The man chuckled at the silence plunging the arena in despair.

“Yes. I know who you *claim* to be.” All For One tilted his head. “But I do wonder if its the same name you used back in your own world?”

"How... how did he...?" Arsene whispered, aghast, and for the first time.... terrified.

"Kurusu Akira, you do want the Blue Lotus to remain in one piece, right? For the Shinsous' heads to remain upon their shoulders? And what of Bakugo? His blood will be on your hands if-"

Joker whipped out the Tyrant Pistol and fired a single shot, the noise ringing in his ears as the bullet whizzed by All For One's head. The gun let out a ribbon of steam, the barrel trembling in Joker's hand.

"Do us all a favor." Joker's voice, while strained, reached the edges of this false stage. "Skip the villain monologuing and get to the point."

"I applaud your valor." A heaviness weighed in the air, as if demon's claws strangled Joker and he swore all of those souls were *screaming* from the void. "But I don't like being interrupted. There will be dire consequences if you do so again. I have laid out my terms of the deal, boy. What is your answer?"

Joker lowered his gun. His shoulders dropped as he lowered his head, his raven black hair shielding his eyes. All For One waited as the boy seemed to think it over, but-

Joker *laughed* .

It began as a bubble escaping his lips. Joker ran a hand down his face as he devolved into a gasping fit, grasping his cramping stomach.

"Trickster, get a hold of yourself!" Arsene shouted.

Arsene's words brought him back to his senses. A final chuckle escaped him as he bared all of his teeth at All For One.

"You know-" Joker spat. "The God Of Control offered me an attractive deal once."

"What happened with Yaldabaoth?"

“Simple.” Joker ignored that cursed name uttered from All For One’s lips, “He promised me that he would set the world right again, except it wouldn’t ever be right. It would be full of distortion. He tried to tempt me into keeping my powers. But you know what? I’ll say the same thing to you that I said to him.” His eyes burst with liquid gold. *“I refuse .”*

“You...” The hairs on the back of Joker’s neck raised as All For One’s body sparked with black lightning. “What a Fool.”

“You have no idea.” Joker aimed his gun at All For One as his Personas howled their battle cries.

“Finally!” Seth cackled. *“An opponent worthy of my might!”*

Blue flames and black lightning danced across the stage as Seth emerged from the mindscape. Seth beat his wings and sapphire stars blew on the wind whipping at Joker’s coattails. Seth’s earth shaking cries called forth streams of amber lightning around his body.

Joker smirked as Seth charged, but his mirth dissipated as All For One raised his hand, the black lightning crackling around his arm.

A jolt of panic shot through Joker. *“Seth, fall back! Something isn’t right!”*

Time slowed as All For One’s fingers shot out red and black tendrils. A shower of ichor sprayed the air as those tendrils skewered through Seth’s flesh like wet paper. A fleeting moment of surprise flowed back to Joker.

“Y-you...” Ichor spurted from Seth's wounds as he struggled, flames burning bright in the back of his throat. “Y-you think th-this will g-get the better of me!? I am Seth! I AM-”

All For One twisted his hand, the knives digging deeper into Seth’s body. An airy whine and cold smoke escaped from Seth's throat,

before his twitching body went limp over All For One's tendrils, his wings hanging lifelessly like funerary veils.

"Seth...?" Joker reached towards Seth as black dripped from both of their eyes. "Seth!!"

"Interesting." All For one hummed. "Seth can repel fire, is completely immune to physical and wind damage, but... what are these last two? Light and dark? It seems Seth has a glaring weakness to light, but I didn't even need that. What a shame."

All For One ripped out the tendrils and Seth's body plummeted to the ground with a dull *thud* .

Joker's ear's rang as the golden sands of Seth's bond blew away in a dry wind, the Persona's body crumpling to ash and cinder. A crack rippled through the mindscape as hot agony flooded Joker's chest. He bowled over as his costume flickered in and out of existence, pools of black raining from his eyes and mouth. The pungent taste muted his other Personas' screams of terror as he collapsed.

"Oh, look at that. I *did* bring you to your knees." All For One watched Joker wretch another pitch black glob. "I didn't think it would be that easy to kill him. Pierce has been an invaluable quirk in my arsenal for ages. Being able to penetrate *any* defence is quite useful. Paired with springlike limbs, and several strength and speed quirks, well, you saw the result yourself-"

The man's voice ebbed away as if Joker were deep underwater. The remaining shards of his mind and body faded as he collapsed face first into the stained dirt. His vision blackened and he was consumed by a void, his last breath leaving his lips in a strangled rasp.

That darkness was expunged by a maddening scream.

Fire flooded Joker's veins as he was forced to breathe, the pain in his chest dulling with renewed heartbeats. That scream of sorrow

ripped the remaining Personas from the brink of death, all except for Seth. Joker's body screamed in agony as it hung before the void.

Orpheus... Endure...

A new, overwhelming power bled into the mindscape, summoned by Orpheus' painful wails.

"Orpheus, no!" Kohryu screamed. *"Contain yourself! That power is not for the Trickster!!"*

The power subsided, but Orpheus collapsed onto the edge of the mindscape, grasping his head.

"How intriguing. To think the health of your companions impacted your own on such a deep level!" All For One clapped his hands. "Your heart stopped. You *died*, and yet you've been revived without my interference. Your power continues to surprise me, young man! I wonder... if Seth was only a small portion of your power, then what does the *source* feel like?"

Joker screamed as All For One speared him through his hands and shoulders. The Personas' howling voices raged on as white hot anguish consumed them. The fragments of his soul were torn at the seams and the edges of the mindscape crumbled into stardust.

Another sensation flooded Joker, the chattering and scraping of a flood of insects skittered under his skin, trampling all over his mindscape in a writhing infestation. Their world ending hunger gnawed on his bonds and the bare fractals keeping his soul together.

"Trickster!!" Arsene's voice became shrouded within the noise.

His Personas' wails were getting farther and farther from his grasp...

He had no more strength to fight -

"Stop!!!"

A small form materialized in front of Joker.

"A-Alice...?" Joker rasped as she skipped away.

"Please, stop hurting my big brother." Alice wiped tears from her eyes as she stopped under the villain. "Please!!"

The hunger eating away at Joker paused.

"What will you give me if I stop hurting him?"

"I-I'll..." Alice sniffled as she got on her hands and knees. "I'll become your Persona!"

"... Persona?"

"Yes, that is what we're called. I am thou, thou art I." Alice stood and curtsied. "It is a sacred bond that binds us to our users. If you leave my Big Brother alone, then I'll become your Persona!"

"But you're just a little girl."

"Yes," Alice smirked. "But I am the embodiment of Death. I am one of the most powerful Personas that Joker has in his stock. Don't you want control over the power of Death? I know you can sense it."

Joker gasped as the tendrils were ripped out of his body, crimson and black bleeding together underneath him.

"Can you do something for me before I become your Persona?" Alice sniffled as All For One floated down to the ground to put his hand upon her head. "It's really easy, I promise!"

"What?"

Alice's hair wriggled like thrashing serpents, her body glowing purple and black. Her too wide eyes bored into All For One as the aura of death flooded the underground arena. All For One tore his hand

away as she stood up, her voice whisper soft, yet loud enough for any angels and devils on earth to hear.

“Would you die for me?”

High pitched squealing echoed as several forms materialized.

Joker would recognize those giant teddy bears strapped with TNT anywhere, their bloody *BANGS* and sparkling pink auras chasing after All For One like hounds from hell. All For One leapt into the air, but Alice glowered at him with eyes that belonged to no child, pointing her pale finger at him as the last teddy bear exploded.

“Just *die* .”

The pungent smell of ozone drowned the underground arena before a cataclysmic explosion, the brilliant light eradicating anything it touched. Alice giggled as the light faded and All For One was nowhere to be seen. Her smile fell as she whirled around and rushed to her Trickster’s side.

“Big brother!” She gently shook his shoulder and he hissed in pain.
“Hang in there!”

Alice reached into Joker’s pockets for a Soma. She popped the cork open and held it to Joker’s lips, where he drank it greedily. The holes in his hands and shoulders closed, but nothing could heal the damage that has been done to his soul, evident by another bead of black leaking from Joker’s mouth.

“It’s okay.” Alice whispered as she helped him sit up. “You’re going to be okay!”

“B-but... Seth...”

They looked at the grave site of the God of Chaos and Storms, a mere pile of smoldering ash.

"Seth is... His bond is no more. All ties with him have... ceased. He's gone, Trickster. We cannot stay here." Arsene said. "Kohryu, can you get the Trickster out of here? You'd be the only one-"

"What an impressive display." Alice and Joker jumped when All For One's shadow draped over them. "So, you will not bow, and your power is more trouble than its worth. Sentient creatures are always a pain to control, especially when they prefer their original hosts."

Joker forced himself on shaky legs, Alice holding him up. "I doubt you'd let us go."

"No, but there is one final way for you to be useful. My last deal for you." All For One snapped his fingers. Implosions of gray goop appeared throughout the arena and dropped several dozen Nomu into the fray. "Fight with all of your might against my Nomu. Battle until your last breath. Let the world witness their beloved vigilante's demise."

"Or... what?"

"If you try to break free from my stage or become a rogue actor, then I'll level the Blue Lotus and deliver the Shinsous' lifeless bodies here."

Hitoshi. Risumi. Ayumu.

Their bloody corpses flashed in his mind.

"How many deaths will it take, Joker? You came back once, but no man is truly immortal. I know from personal experience." All For One laughed. "Many look up to you as a hero of the people. I wonder how many will riot as they witness your final moments. Don't worry, we'll put your body to good use in the next generation of Nomu. After all-" All For One tossed three tiny little pieces of plastic into the air, which landed in front of Joker. "The doctor would love to see you again."

Joker stared at the broken pieces of La Brava's hairpin tracker, swallowing thickly.

"I'll also have to personally thank La Brava for her virus. It will be useful in making your death a spectacle for all to see." Joker's stomach plummeted when blinking red lights appeared in the walls and ceiling. Cameras. "What was it you said in that video, my boy? Oh, that's right."

All For One did a showman's bow as Kurogiri's portal opened behind him.

"It's showtime!"

On cue, the small army of Nomu turned towards Joker with bloodthirsty growls. Joker picked up the Tyrant Pistol and grit his teeth. His knees shook, but he would rather die on his feet than on his back.

"Big brother..."

"It's okay." He wiped the stains from his mouth, his red glove stained with smudges of black. "Everything will be alright."

"... *Trickster?*" Arsene whispered.

"All For One made a mistake." Joker said. *"He won't know how our power works until its too late."*

"The masses..." Kohryu flicked his whiskers. *"I feel them. It's just a trickle now, but it will soon swell into a tsunami!"*

"If it's a show he wants, then it's a show we'll give them!" Ishtar seethed as Joker reloaded the Tyrant Pistol. *"If he thinks we'll roll over, he has another thing coming!"*

"Let us at the Nomu." Titania's voice went feral. *"I'll give everyone a beautiful view of my power! Do not underestimate the Queen of the Fae!"*

"I as well." Cu Chulainn twirled his spear.

"Let at them." Pixie chortled. *"LET ME AT THEM!"*

"I have not felt the call of Destruction yet, " Shiva said as he danced in place. *"But I shall make an exception this time!"*

"Vengeance for Seth!" Cerberus howled.

"I'll tear out their throats!" Byakko snarled.

"We are at your back, Trickster." Arsene flared his magnificent wings. *"Shall we give All For One the performance he desires before we turn the tables!?"*

Joker grinned at the cameras. "It's showtime!"

That was *his* catchphrase, thank you very much.

Hitoshi groaned as he smooshed the pillow in his face. Maybe it'd knock him out so he could get some sleep. Unfortunately, it didn't happen. With a groan, he threw the pillow at the end of his bed and sat up.

He hasn't slept well since Akira left.

A sinking rock in his gut told him that things would go south. Maybe he should just get up and start his morning routine to get his mind off of things. He rubbed the non-sleep from his eyes as his other hand reached for his phone on the nightstand. The phone lit up with *dozens* of messages from his Herocord chat and other news notifications.

"Wh-what the... !?"

'BREAKING: Infamous Vigilante, U.A. Student, and Heroes Missing in Summer Camp Disaster!!'

'Media Hound U.A. Campus- School Remains Silent.'

'Gentle Criminal and La Brava Arrested! Believed To Be Part Of Joker's Team!'

"N-no." Hitoshi rushed to his computer. "No no no *no*..."

His fingers shook as he clicked on the live stream.

Hitoshi stared in horror as he watched his *best friend* back flipping to avoid a Nomu's punch, Arsene appearing in a brilliant curtain of flame that painted his iridescent wings with a rainbow of colors. A pool of dark energy oozed at their feet and the Nomu were blown back with a wave of Joker's hand. Joker stared up at a camera with a devilish smirk.

Hitoshi shivered.

Joker was.... something was *wrong* . He grinned and knocked back the Nomu with ease, but his eyes.... *his eyes* . They were glowing, but the color was muted as if something beyond Hitoshi's comprehension had died within them. His grin didn't reach those hollow eyes and his usual fluid movements were jerky and desperate.

"Shit!" Hitoshi pounded his fist on the desk.

"You have to stay calm." Akira's voice replayed in his mind.
"Panicking only worsens the situation."

"I know...." Hitoshi took a deep breath to calm himself. *"I know ."*

Hitoshi looked at the stream counter. A few thousand watched the battle.

"Human cognition is a powerful thing." Akira had said. *"Its how our abilities grow more powerful here."*

Japan had *millions* of people.

If he could hack this domain and spread it to every corner of Japan, then it might give his friend a fighting chance! He cracked his knuckles and lunged at his keyboard, but he froze. His eyes were drawn to the black fox mask hanging on his wall, the golden crescent moon on the forehead seemed to call out for him. His eyes flicked back and forth between the mask and the computer screen, a sharp grin pulling at his lips.

“Screw it, just this once.”

Hitoshi snatched the mask and put it on. It felt... oddly natural in the way it fit his face. With the mask secure, he got to work. His screen flowed with the rows upon rows of code that Manami hounded into him the past few weeks. There must be something, *anything*, that her code could do to crack this. He slammed the enter key and the virus plunged into Japan’s vast network.

Hitoshi waited.

He didn’t know whether an eternity passed or if it were just a handful of minutes before the *ping* rang across his room.

Hitoshi stared at the dot in Kamino. Another window opened, flooding his screen with lines of code.

“I... I found it? But... wait... She showed me this virus. It’s the one from the Yaoyorozu manor. She *did* say there was strange coding from there. Holy shit.” Realization hit like an ice cold wave. “They were being set up from the start.” Hitoshi’s hands curled into fists as heat slithered around his heart. “You picked a fight with the wrong group.”

The mishmash of code had traces of La Brava’s viruses, but it was copied line for line and woven into an entirely different program. One he wasn’t familiar with. The other code was sloppy. Amateur work. A sick sort of delight welled within Hitoshi when he created a backdoor to the domain.

“But even *if* I get this right... no, I can’t do it alone.” Hitoshi tapped his fingers on his desk. “If there was someone who could spread it even further...”

Hitoshi opened one of his drawers and snatched a list of contacts Akira slipped him before they left, his eyes trailing down to a certain name.

T-san.

“Okay, let’s do this.”

He unlocked his encrypted phone and stared down at T-san’s number, the plan blooming into a full blown mission.

Step 1: Get as many people watching as possible, tip the heroes about Kamino.

Step 2: Hack into the police network to see if he could find out where La Brava and the others were located.

Step 3: Pray to Shiva, Kohryu, and any other gods in Joker’s stock that they’d all make it out of this ordeal alive.

Step 4: *If* everyone was able to make it through, then avoid Kaito’s wrath and make sure that *he* didn’t end up killing Joker himself.

“Hang in there, everyone.” Hitoshi muttered as he opened a new text message. “It won’t be much longer...”

“Taneo, would you sit down already!”

“How can you expect me to stay calm, Mitsuo!?” Taneo pulled at his hair. “Joker’s *missing*! Nobody knows where he is and people are going crazy-”

“I get that,” Her face hardened as she grasped his arm. “We’re all concerned about him, but flying into a rage doesn’t solve anything!”

Besides, you're scaring Yuma and Minato."

Taneo turned to his co-workers, who huddled down in their desks and tried to hide behind their computers.

"... Sorry."

Mitsuo dragged him to his desk. "Sit down and take a breather, then we can figure out what to do. Okay?"

"Fine." He dropped into his chair.

The next twenty minutes were stifled in silence. The turn of a page, the creak of their chairs, even the light *tap tap* of their keyboards became magnified to obscene levels. His phone vibrated, making Yuma jump. He picked up his phone, his heart leaping into his throat.

[???

Greetings, T-san.

I know this sounds insane, but I'm one of Joker's allies and he desperately needs our help. His very survival depends on how well we pull this off. We need as many people watching this live stream as possible.

The popularity of your blog, and my hacking skills, could go toe-in-toe in getting Joker what he needs.

Please, there's nobody else we can count on.

Taneo's chair flew back and he bolted from his chair.

"Taneo!?" Mitsuo jumped as he shoved his phone in her face. "What is this!?"

"How many favors can you call in with the media? You wanted something that would surpass our live interview with Joker, right? Here's our chance!"

“I...” Mitsuo bit her lip as she watched Joker fight, her eyes turning up to see the frantic light in Taneo’s. She took a deep breath and rose from her chair. “I’ll make a few calls.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Yuma shrunk back. “You two have those scary looks in your eyes again.”

“Simple.” Mitsuo smiled darkly. “We’re going to aid one troublesome vigilante, and it’ll outclass that interview we did months ago.”

Haru-san beamed as she watered her beloved plants, the warm morning sun streaming in through her windows. The news played in the background as she checked on each of her little darlings. The newscaster’s voice was erased by a blanket of static.

She tutted as she wobbled over to it. “Darn thing, you can’t fix these new TV’s like you used to...”

The static cleared. A horrible image came onto the screen. She gasped as the water keg dropped from her hands, splashing a tiny tsunami all over the floor.

“Oh... you poor boy...” She ran her fingers down the screen as Joker flitted across it, vanquishing ugly beasts with a cascade of ice, but the monsters stitched themselves back together. “What’s going on? What are they...?”

She sank to her knees, not caring that her dress soaked in the water. Haru-san put her hands together and prayed for his safety, unknowing of how her prayers reached the young boy she adored.

“Kid...” Midnight placed her phone face down and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Damn it.”

“I know, Midnight.” Nezu, who sat at the head of the table, said. His fur was frazzled and unkempt.

“Should we really be sitting here doing nothin’?” Snipe asked as he leaned forward. “What about the media? I can still hear them poundin’ on our doors from here. This is a disaster!”

“I’m sorry.” Toshinori slumped forward, hands grasping his hair. “I should’ve gone with.”

“No, this is my fault.” Nezu said. “I believed that Joker’s immense powers would be enough to protect everyone. From what we gathered from the students, there was a vast army of Nomu there. He saved them.”

“Nezu...” Midnight murmured. “But that doesn’t explain why Joker vanished during the attack, or why... why this live stream is... it’s horrible!”

“My theory is that the villains cornered him somehow.” Nezu shook his head. “Perhaps he sacrificed himself to ensure their safety.”

“He collapsed an entire mountain *and* a huge chunk of the forest!” Mic threw his hands up in the air. “My heart nearly stopped when that helicopter flew over the destruction!!”

“How can you talk about Joker when Bakugo still got kidnapped!?” Snipe exclaimed.

‘I am here! I am here!’

Toshinori flinched as he silenced his phone.

“Apologies, but I must take this.” He said as he rose from his chair and left the room. Toshinori answered and held it to his ear.

“Tsukauchi, do you have anything?”

“Good news, Toshinori!” Tsukauchi said, “We’ve located one of the League’s hideouts. A friend from a task force in Kamino located a bar where they think Bakugo is being held.”

"That's fantastic!" Toshinori said as he held a hand over his heart. "Do you think Joker is being held in the same location?"

"I... we don't know. Given the size difference of the bar and the underground area where Joker is being -" Tsukauchi cleared his throat. *"We don't have a location yet."*

"I see..."

"If we launch a rescue for Bakugo, then there might be clues as to where- Sansa? What's wrong?" Shuffling noises and other voices came through the line, and Tsukauchi gasped. *"An anonymous tip!? This location... but we have La Brava in custody? How could that code-"*

Toshinori's heart beat faster as the muffled voices continued.

"Toshinori, we might have Joker's location!" Tsukauchi shouted. *"We just need some time to investigate further, but if this other location is legit..."*

"Then we can rescue both of them! Wonderful job, Tsukauchi!"

"We can't rest on our laurels. We have work to do."

"You're right!" One For All pulsed under Toshinori's skin. "Keep me updated, alright?"

"Yeah, I'll gather heroes together and call you as soon as a meeting is set up!"

With that, the detective hung up.

"Young Bakugo... Joker..." Toshinori clutched his phone over his heart. "We're coming!"

"Momma...." Mei's lip wobbled as she tore her eyes from the screen. "Joker's gonna make it, right?"

Ichinose frowned. Their workshop remained explosion free for *two days* . Normally, she would rejoice at not having to clean up after her daughter, but the lack of Mei's cackles and bright smiles unsettled her. This live stream, paired with the mysterious T-san's efforts to spread it across Japan, was almost too much for her to bear.

"I don't know." Ichinose shook her head, her thick braids bounced, "Why don't we turn this off and get our minds off of it? I don't think-"

"No! Joker's the reason why we can clear our names, right!? I'm not giving up!" Mei curled her hands into fists. "You know what!? I'll make babies a-and I'll rescue him myself!"

"Mei, that's not- you can't! You have to leave this for the heroes!"

"I have to try!"

Ichinose reached out to Mei as she scrambled into the workshop, the familiar sound of clanking and hammering echoing through the shop. She ran a hand through her thick braids and glared at the television, where Joker summoned a surge of holy light under the Nomu's feet. The camera angle changed before she could see which mythical being was responsible.

"You know, Whistler," The little teapot stared at her from the counter. "He better make it, otherwise all hell will break loose."

"Kacchan!!"

"Midoriya, there's too many!!" Todoroki shouted as a hundred Nomu descended upon them.

"Deku, run!" Bakugo shouted, his voice hoarse from where Dabi grasped his throat. "Save yourself!"

"KACCAN!!"

Dark Shadow's arms wrapped around Midoriya and Todoroki as a swarm of Nomu separated them from the villains holding Bakugo. The quirk had reeled them back as Bakugo disappeared into that portal.

He remembers crying out for his childhood friend until his voice went hoarse, but it was all a hazy blur from there.

Midoriya's eyes snapped open.

A chill broke out over him as he broke out in a cold sweat. He blinked several times, staring up at a white ceiling, the iconic smell of industrial strength cleaner invaded his nose. He sat up as best he could with his arms bound in thick casts. Warm sunlight streamed in from the large window on his right, and his stomach churned as he looked to the left. A plate of sliced apples and a note from his mother sat on the table next to him.

'When you wake up, eat this and call me.'

There was a knock on the door before it opened, and Kaminari stuck his head in.

"Midoriya! You're awake!" Kaminari leaned back out into the hallway. "Everyone, he's up!"

Midoriya's heart soared as his classmates flooded into the room. Well, most of them. That elation withered as the last few shambled in, looking entirely broken. He'd never seen Kirishima and Ashido look so distraught before, even after Akira's incident.

"How long have I been out? What's happened since... since...."

Todoroki stepped up when the others avoided his eyes.

"You've been out for over a day. They've been keeping our class under observation for now, but aside from a few unconscious from

the gas, nobody else has been seriously injured. Well, except for you.”

“W-wait... Bakugo... he still got kidnapped?”

Todoroki’s expression pinched. “Yes.”

“He’s not the only one.” Ashido whispered.

“What...?” Midoriya whispered in horror.

Iida cleared his throat. “You wouldn’t know, but aside from Bakugo... they.... the villains...”

“I think it’s better for us to show him rather than explain.” Tokoyami approached Midoriya’s bed and offered him his phone, which was open to a live stream. “This went live an hour after the attack.”

Midoriya’s jaw dropped as he watched Joker battle a swarm of Nomu in some underground arena. The vigilante’s movements were slow and the cameras zoomed in on his face, revealing the darkness beneath his eyes.

“What’s going on? Do the heroes know anything?”

“No.” Ojiro crossed his arms and glared at the floor. “The teachers won’t tell us anything!”

“That’s the other thing bothering me.” Iida adjusted his glasses. “The heroes had to know that Joker was at the camp. But why keep it a secret?”

“H-he was there!” Koda fidgeted with his hands. “Joker saved me from a Nomu! A-and he confirmed that he was working with the teachers.”

“Seth and Cerberus came to the lodge.” Kirishima said. “It was *wicked* to see them in person!”

“Some virus has been running rampant around the country!” Ashido said. “Like big screens in Tokyo and Hiroshima glitched out and have been playing the live stream ever since! T-san’s blog exploded, too!”

“The media has been up in arms about the whole camp.” Todoroki said. “I don’t think people will take this for much longer.”

“What do you mean, Todoroki?” Midoriya asked, wide eyed.

“We all can see how exhausted Joker is. We don’t know if the heroes have any clue where Bakugo is, either.”

“I don’t like this.”

“I know, Kiri.” Ashido patted her friend’s shoulder.

“No, I mean...” Kirishima gripped his hair and groaned. “I don’t like this! *Any* of this! First, our teachers lie to us. Why didn’t they trust us enough to tell us what was going on!? What are we supposed to do now that our friends are in danger!?”

“I’m sure they had their reasons.” Iida adjusted his glasses. “We have to trust them to handle the situation-”

“Screw that!” In a bout of rare anger, Kirishima scowled. He glanced at Midoriya with fire in his eyes as he held out his hand. “You know how I feel, right? We were forced to stand aside and do nothing when Akira was kidnapped, a-and I couldn’t do anything to help anyone from the lodge! And now, with Bakugo, a-and Joker too....” He shook his head. “I’m not gonna stand around and do nothing when the people I care about suffer!”

“I-I... it’s my fault.” Midoriya’s vision blurred. His classmates stiffened as the waterworks ran down his cheeks. “M-my quirk... Aizawa-sensei warned me about becoming useless, but it was all I could do to save Kota! I sent Cerberus away to make sure that he was safe, but because of that... Bakugo... he...”

“We can still save them!” Kirishima curled his hands into fists. “We can still reach out, can’t we!?”

“Now, hold on!” Iida chopped his hand. “What are you suggesting!? You’re not saying that we act against the law and use our quirks to rescue them?”

“But where would we even start?” Todoroki asked as he locked eyes with Kirishima.

Iida jumped and stared at his other classmate. “Todoroki!”

“What?” Todoroki blinked. “I agree with Kirishima. I think our teachers should have been honest with us from the start. Who says we can’t start our own investigation?”

“We can’t!” Asui poked her cheek. “It’s as Iida says, we could be expelled or go to prison for breaking the law. It’s not our place as students, kero.”

“I know!” Kirishima’s voice broke. “I *know* that! But we couldn’t do anything while we were stuck at the lodge, watching the forest burn, watching Gentle Criminal keep us safe from that Nomu Hoard, a-and them seeing them *arrested* for it!? Wondering if our friends were dead or...” He shook his head. “We sat in the sidelines when Aniki was in trouble. No more! If I don’t do anything *now*, if I turn my back on them again when they need us most, then what kind of man am I, huh!? I wouldn’t be a hero or a man anymore!”

Ashido blinked rapidly. “Kiri...”

“Dude, we’re in a hospital.” Kaminari said. “Calm down!”

“I...” Yaoyorozu glared at the floor. “I cannot stand by and let this happen either. My parents might see Joker as an enemy, but he has saved me and several other people from grim fates. I simply can’t sit still when Bakugo is in danger.”

“Yaoyorozu...” Kirishima smiled and turned back to Midoriya. “So, what do you say?”

“I... I-I...” Midoriya looked down at his arms. “I can’t sit around either.”

“Yaoyorozu! Midoriya!” Iida shouted, aghast.

“Kirishima’s right.” Midoriya glanced at Iida with a frown, his brows furrowed. “Can we really wait around like we did with Akira?” Todoroki suppressed a flinch, “We might not know where to start, but we should be able to come up with *something* if we put all of our heads together!”

“Iida, you should know this better than anyone when I say that sometimes we must take things into our own hands.” Todoroki said, “Am I right?”

Iida sputtered. He opened and closed his mouth so many times, but eventually grit his teeth and glared at the floor. The tension in the room skyrocketed as their Class Representative remained silent, stewing away in a whirlwind of jagged emotions. Then, their little bubble was popped with a knock on the door.

A doctor stepped inside, his eyes scanning the crowd of students.

“Apologies for interrupting, but I’m here to do Midoriya’s exam.”

“Alright...” Kirishima nodded. “We’ll find out what we can and go from there! Right?”

Midoriya nodded, and the doctor sighed when the flood of students vacated the room, and they were alone.

“You sustained heavy damage to your arms, Midoriya.” He said after the casts were removed. “Recovery Girl was in quite a tizzy after she came and healed you a couple of times. I got special permission to take a look at your files and...”

“... And?”

“I’m going to be frank with you. The human body has natural restraints so that our quirks don’t go past 100%. But you’re a special case. If you push your body past it’s natural limits two or three more times, then I guarantee that you’ll lose the use of your arms.”

Midoriya looked at his arms. His flesh was mottled with new scars, the largest was a missing patch of skin from his right shoulder down to his elbow.

The doctor discharged him after a few basic tests, and he was free to his own devices. He picked up his bag as the evening sun painted his room in golden light. His thoughts drew him away from the hospital’s white hallways as he made his way out.

Kacchan... Joker...

He watched Joker’s death match. News outlets grew frantic the longer Joker fought, and the current viewers of the stream shot into the tens of thousands, not counting the people watching the screens in bigger cities. Joker’s Spotlight account flooded with heroes’ support.

Midoriya’s stomach churned.

Joker had chugged something from a small thermos about an hour ago, and that seemed to stave off some exhaustion, but....

How much longer would it be before he fell?

What is Joker’s limit? Has he reached past 100%, or was it yet to be seen?

His movements were sloppy, and one Nomu had knocked his dagger from his slackening grip. His face was pale and plastered with sweat, which was highlighted by the ever growing number of mythical beings summoned in dazzling flames.

Arsene. Byakko. Cerberus. Shiva. Titania. A small Pixie. A terrifying little girl.

The list kept growing, and although Joker looked as if he was getting physically weaker, the mythical creatures' attacks grew *stronger* . Some of the cameras glitched out as Cerberus howled, and many Nomu were swallowed within a vast pool of bubbling lava. Joker chuckled as the lava quickly cooled, but the Nomu clawed themselves free-

"Midoriya!"

He looked up to see Kirishima and Todoroki hovering at the hospital gate. Yaoyorozu was here too, hugging herself.

"Oh, I'm outside already?" Midoriya said.

"I might be able to get something from my father," Todoroki said. "He's been acting strange and he might know something."

"Really!?" Kirishima grinned. "But... do you really think it'll be that easy?"

"Probably not."

"Do we have a choice?" Yaoyorozu asked. "Maybe we can-"

"There you are!" They turned to see Iida marching out of the hospital, his eyes laced with fury. "You're still going through with it?"

"Yes." Todoroki said, "We're going, no matter what."

"You...." Iida grit his teeth together as his shoulders trembled. "Why? Why does it have to be you guys of all people!? You guys who went after me when I.... when we received amnesty for what we did! Why are you making that exact same mistake!? We're still minors and U.A. is in a bad position as it is!"

"It's not like that!" Midoriya said. "We don't think that this is okay, but-"

Yaoyorozu gasped as Iida threw a punch, and Midoriya fell to the ground. His phone clattered to the pavement.

"You don't think I'm frustrated too!?" Iida shouted. "As class Rep, it's only natural to be worried! I don't want anyone else to get hurt like my brother did! We can't just rely on Joker's miracle powers like we did before! How can you be so reckless!?"

"Enough!" Yaoyorozu stepped in between them, her eyes hardening.

"Momo...." Todoroki said.

Kirishima helped Midoriya to his feet, the pair speechless.

"Iida. Midoriya." She turned to stare at the other two. "Shoto. Kirishima. Arguing solves nothing. How are we going to stage a rescue if we waste time and fight like this? Iida, we both know that they will find a way to Bakugo, no matter what. Why don't we tag along and make sure they stay out of trouble?"

Iida furrowed his brow.

"That's right." Todoroki said. "We're not going to attack the villains head on. We'll use our quirks for rescue only."

"Yeah!" Kirishima pumped his fist. "Covert action!"

"I trust everyone here, Iida." She said, smiling. "But if anything happens, then we'll put a stop to it."

"I... I suppose I'll have to tag along and make sure you don't do anything reckless."

"Iida!" Midoriya beamed at him.

"Let's go!!" Iida marched towards the gate.

“Wait, Midoriya!” Kirishima picked up the phone. “I think you want this back?”

“R-right!” Midoriya took it, wincing at the singular crack in the bottom of the screen. “Thank-”

He froze in his tracks.

“Midoriya?” Todoroki asked as he watched his friend’s face lose color.

“Dude, what’s wrong?” Kirishima said.

Midoriya showed them the screen.

[???

Greetings, Deku.

I know that which you seek, but do you have the strength within you to rescue them?

You were going anyways, right?

“Th-that’s-!?” Kirishima gasped as the others drank in the message. “How did they-”

[???

Deku’s microphone picks up everything, Kirishima.

Now, give your answer.

We don’t have time to mess around.

“But how can we trust you?” Iida glared at the phone’s camera. “You could just be leading us into a trap!”

[???

Don’t insult me, Ingenium Junior.

Joker is my closest friend, and I would do anything to see him rescued.

Midoriya, hands shaking, typed back.

[Deku]

Yes, tell us where they are!

[???

Very well, but know that you are not the only one that this knowledge is shared with.

Tread lightly.

They sent over files and a map of... Kamino?

[???

The live stream signal is coming from this location.

Be careful, Deku.

“Kamino?” Iida clutched his chin. “We can get there by train, but we should hurry. The last one will leave soon!”

“Let’s go!” Kirishima said.

“Wait.” They paused and looked at Yaoyorozu. “There’s one thing I want to make clear. If we do this, a-and something happens... if it comes down to the wire and we have to make a choice between Bakugo and Joker, then we *have* to choose Bakugo.”

Midoriya and Iida exchanged glances.

“But...” Kirishima opened and closed his mouth, but he had no words.

“She’s right.” Todoroki said. “I think that’s what Joker would want, too.”

“Y-you’re right.” Midoriya took a deep breath and looked his friends’ in the eye. “I know Joker would be upset if Bakugo wasn’t taken to a safe place first.”

“Right.” Iida adjusted his glasses. “Now, come on! We don’t have time to waste!”

The group boarded the last train going to Kamino, unknowing that they were about to witness legendary devastation that would be marked down in history.

“Hitoshi hasn’t come out of his room.” Risumi said as she paced in front of the TV, where Joker fought tooth and nail.

“I know.” Ayumu, his hands clenching together with bone white knuckles, scowled. “H-he’ll... come out when he’s ready.”

“What do we do?” Risumi looked to him, desperate. “We can’t just sit here and do nothing!”

“I don’t know.” He swallowed thickly. “There.... there might be nothing we can do.”

Risumi teared up as they turned back towards the TV. Joker had summoned a massive serpent with a human head and several waving arms. It breathed out a cloud of Stagnant Air, but the following spell didn’t affect the Nomu. They witnessed the flash of fear and frustration upon Joker’s face before he wiped it away with a grin.

But they all saw it.

He was getting exhausted. His dagger, lost to the unknown. The ammo in his gun had run dry. Terrifying black tears dripped down Joker’s face.

“The only thing we can do is cheer him on.” Risumi sank beside her husband, wincing as Joker took another blow. “I... he better make it through.”

“He will.” Ayumu took her hand and held it tight. “I know he will.”

They exchanged a long glance before turning their gaze before the battle, oblivious that their hope, and the growing hope of thousands, awakened something in Joker.

Screams echoed within the mindscape as lightning blasted the Trickster and Cu Chulainn was thrown back into the mindscape.

“Cu Chulainn!” Arsene knelt by the warrior’s side and helped him up.

“How do they know our weaknesses every time!?” Titania cried.

“That vile man in the black mask....” Shiva, his expression dark, said bitterly. “He almost stole us away. We saw the Sea Of Souls he’s hoarded, so it’s not impossible for him to take quirks. He may have stolen Ragdoll’s quirk. The Nomu might have something similar.”

“Take this.” Vasuki hissed as he cast Makarakarn. “It should help.”

“But you can’t keep casting it, Vasuki!” Ishtar said, “Our SP won’t hold up, and the Trickster doesn’t have many recovery items left.”

Orpheus’ throat tightened.

The Trickster... no...

An unknown energy simmered in his heart ever since he pulled the Trickster back from the brink. He couldn’t use his true strength, lest the Trickster’s soul be torn apart, but a *new* power rose within him, waiting to be unleashed. His hands shuddered as he grasped the beautiful lyre on his back.

“Then we must stick to those without weaknesses.” Arsene growled. “But it’ll greatly limit the number of our attacks. Trickster, are you alright?”

“Y-yes...” The white lie was plain on his tongue.

“I’ll go next.” Ishtar’s fury laced the mindscape as her hands crackled with a Wild Thunder spell. “I’ll show them the true power of lightning!”

“Take this with you, darling.” Titania lay a hand on Ishtar’s shoulder and Concentrate’s blue aura glowed upon them.

Ishtar was powerful, but Orpheus’ fires of rage consumed his soul. His wild cry startled the others as he allowed himself to be consumed by blue flames.

“Orpheus!?” Arsene called too late. “*ORPHEUS!*”

A flash of an image appeared in his mind, tucked away between the space of reality and the mindscape. His Wild Card smiling at him. The longing within Orpheus skyrocketed as the image faded. He entered reality birthed in a blue pyre, his cries echoing within the vast underground prison.

He swung his lyre, the satisfying *crunch* of a Nomu's skull trembled through to his hands. He plucked a sting, manifesting a miniature sun over his head. The blazing ball of fire spewed a laser over the ground, summoning walls of flame wherever it touched. The Concentrated Inferno blinded the cameras.

"Orpheus?"

The Persona turned to his Trickster, who knelt on the ground, eyes impossibly wide. His hair fell limp over his pale face. Traces of black smudged his features. His tattered mask held the same cracks like his broken soul, and his costume was scuffed from battle.

He plucked another string, the lovely tune casting a soothing Cadenza.

"No, my new name is Orpheus Picaro. I am thou, thou art I." He held a hand out to Joker, now donning a vibrant black and red color scheme. "I apologize for making you wait so long, Trickster."

Joker smirked, his teeth stained with crimson and black, as he took his Persona's hand. Joker staggered, but Orpheus Picaro steadied him.

"It's almost time." Orpheus Picaro said as the fire walls died down. "We just need to hold on a little bit longer."

Joker knew it, too. The steady thrum of power lingered just under the surface, but it wasn't enough. They needed just a bit *more* .

"Right." Joker waved an arm. "Let's do this, Orpheus Picaro!"

They stood together in the face of the regenerating Nomu, the sound of chains rattling within the mindscape.

Tsuragamae looked to the strongest raid party in recent history. One side of the room, where eight of the top ten heroes stood in a line

like soldiers. The ones from Joker's group were hardened and energized, ready to attack at a moment's notice. Other heroes were peppered in there, such as the former Ingenium, Nighteye, Gran Torino, and Tiger.

Tsukauchi stood at the center, with police armed with riot gear on the other side of the room.

"You all know what's at stake." Tsuragamae's voice commanded everyone's attention. "The raid parties will be split as thus: All Might, Endeavor, Hawks, Tsukauchi and half of the police force will strike the bar and secure Bakugo. The rest of you will investigate the warehouse, except for Nezu, Eraserhead, and Vlad King. Iida Tensei and his sidekicks will help the police in securing these areas."

"What will Nezu be doing during the raids?" Hawks asked.

"Simple!" Nezu chirped. "We will call for a news conference. I will say that we are working to locate Bakugo and Joker, and we may be able to find them soon."

"They're going to *slaughter* you." Hawks stared at Nezu. "Japan has imploded since the Summer Camp incident, and it's only been getting worse since with that... live stream."

"I know." Nezu frowned. "But it will be a perfect distraction and give the villains a false sense of security."

"I have one question." Edgeshot crossed his arms, his eyes scanning over a particular group of heroes. "I sense your tension. I know that we are all ready for action, but there's something off putting about you in particular."

Gran Torino snorted. "I agree, you're awfully tense for being in the top ten. Have you whipper snappers never been in a raid this large before?"

"It's not that." Gang Orca growled.

“How do we know that this information is reliable? I trust Tsukauchi’s team to locate Bakugo, but this other location is suspect.” Endeavor growled. “Is it tied to T-san and the live stream?”

Tsuragamae’s eyes fell to Joker’s hero group. He locked eyes with Ryukyu and nodded.

Ryukyu squared her shoulders. “We figured out that it was La Brava and Joker that reported the locations of those smuggling rings. But La Brava is in custody and we know the current situation with Joker. We can only guess that it was another in his team that-”

“Wait a second.” Gran Torino’s eyes went wide. “*Joker* was your inside man? *He* was responsible for tracking down those illegal rings!? You could lose your hero license if you work with criminals.”

Gang Orca growled, but Gran Torino didn’t back down.

“Please keep an open mind before anyone judges these heroes.” Eraserhead leaned forward, the bags under his eyes visible to all. “Because they put aside their bias, those criminals were taken down and several dozen people can go home to their families. I ask you all to do the same.”

“Yeah.” Gang Orca uttered, his eyes alight with fire. “This young man has risked his neck more times than most would even dare.”

Miruko cackled as she cracked her knuckles. “Anyone who has a *problem* will meet my fists!”

“It’s still illegal.” Edgeshot said coolly. “But... I don’t doubt Joker’s heroic spirit.”

“Damn straight, ninja boy!” Miruko shouted.

“Enough, this is not the time or place, and we have work to do. This meeting is adjourned.” Chief Tsuragamae rose from his chair. “The assigned groups will gather and wait until I give the signal to attack.”

Most of the heroes and police vacated the room, but a few lingered behind with All Might. “These kids...” Aizawa cursed under his breath and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Don’t worry, Aizawa!” All Might boomed. “We’ll rescue them!”

“Then shouldn’t you be saving your time for *that* ?”

Steam wafted from All Might’s body, and he shrank down to skeletal form.

“Are you sure you even want to be part of this raid? With your strict time limit...”

“No. I *must* .” Toshinori’s eyes blazed cerulean. “I have failed Joker once already, and now he and our young student need us! I won’t fail, time limit be damned.”

“Bah!” Gran Torino snapped. “All of this chaos has gotten to your head, Toshinori! But... I’m beginning to understand how Joker has wormed his way through your hearts.”

“There you have it.” Nezu turned towards the door. “Come, we’re scheduled for several sleepless nights, and our date with destiny won’t wait!”

“Fantastic.” Aizawa said dryly.

Aizawa didn’t say it, but Nezu knew he was worried just as much as he was.

Tsukauchi watched the disaster of a press conference from his phone. Footsteps and hushed whispers were all around him, but his focus was on Principal Nezu, Eraserhead, and Vlad King bowing to the flashing camera lights.

They sat down and a man sauntered to the front. Tall. Wavy black hair. Mismatched pupils. A smirk that spelled trouble for anybody on the other end of his questions. Tsukauchi recognized him. This was the same man who stared him down at Musutafu General, and he was present during the press conference after the Yaoyorozu's were exposed.

This man spoke with a purpose, more so than the other irate reporters. Almost as if he had a personal stake in this.

"Tsukauchi." Sansa approached, his fur standing on end.
"Tsuragamae gave the green light."

The detective nodded as he tucked away his phone and adjusted the bullet proof armor over his chest. He looked up at the plain building housing the bar, a small army of armed officers and heroes surrounding him.

"Commence the attack!"

"Oooh, the live stream is spreading so fast!" Toga swung her legs from the bar. "And look! The League's name is all over the news!!"

"Our name is *finally* carved into history. The idea of seeing Joker die on live television is just the icing on the cake." Shigaraki peered towards Bakugo, who seethed in silence. "Have you thought about my offer? Oh, right. You're probably uncomfortable in that. Dabi, release him."

Dabi blinked. "I'm not sure that's smart."

"We're here to recruit him," Shigaraki growled, "That's kind of hard to do if we don't treat him like an equal."

"... Fine, but I'm saying 'I told you so' if he explodes."

Shigaraki snickers. "I'll just have Kurogiri put him to sleep. You know to be on your best behaviour, don't you, Bakugo?"

Bakugo's heart pounded as Dabi undid the restraints. The giant metal piece over his hands fell to the ground with a *thunk*. Bakugo leapt to his feet, an explosion blinding Dabi.

"You brat!" Dabi shouted as blue flames lit up the bar.

"Dabi, no!" Kurogiri shouted.

The flames died as Dabi backpedaled, his blue eyes piercing through Bakugo, who backed himself against the wall.

"I've listened to you drag on and on for ages!" Bakugo snarled like a feral dog. "I say to hell with you! Do you really think I'd join you after all of the bullshit you put me through!?"

"Why?" Shigaraki tilted his head as he scratched at his neck.

"Bakugo, you've been labeled as a villain ever since the Sports Festival. Don't you want to take revenge against the people who looked down on you?"

"Screw you." Bakugo spat. "I'll be the best damn hero and show those nerds that they were wrong!"

"What about Joker?" Shigaraki grinned as he stared at the screen.

Joker's body tumbled and rolled several times on the ground after he took a hit from a cowardly Nomu looming behind him. The dust settled. Joker didn't move. The camera zoomed in, but Joker was out cold.

"Oh, would you look at that." Shigaraki grinned from ear to ear. "We have the most powerful vigilante at our mercy now."

Bakugo willed the nerd to *move*, wake up, anything! *Get up, you asshole!!*

Shigaraki turned back towards Bakugo, “So, what do you want to do to Joker?”

“*What?*” Bakugo’s voice tightened like a pulled string.

“I saw the look in your eyes when the live stream came on. You hate him too, don’t you? It took a lot of grinding, but his HP is finally in the red.” Shigaraki grinned from ear to ear. “We can execute him for you, right here, right now. You could even do it if you want to.”

“No.”

“*What ?*”

“You *really* think Joker will keel over from something like this?” Bakugo leaned forward with a dangerous smirk. “Sure, he’s a filthy liar and a complete asshole, and I’d *love* to give that dipshit a piece of my mind, but he has more balls and willpower than you’ll ever have! Just you wait and see, he’ll get back up and kick your ass in a heartbeat!”

A beat of silence passes, only to be broken by a knock on the door.

“Kamino pizza delivery!”

The wall suddenly imploded as *All Might* crashed through as if it were made of paper. They had no time to act as a hail of vibrant red feathers rained in and impaled their clothes to the wall.

“Kurogiri!!”

“Yes-” Kurogiri stiffened.

“Kurogiri, what’s wrong!?”

“The Nomu.... the ones in the warehouse are gone!”

Shigaraki’s eyes widened. “What!?”

Edgeshot slipped in through the door and unlocked it, revealing a squad of armed officers behind him.

“Ah, did you really think that we didn’t know about the other location?” All Might said. “By now, the other group would have already restrained them. Nobody is coming to help you, so just give up!”

Kurogiri’s body flared. “Don’t think it will be that-”

Kurogiri gasped as his shoulder was pierced by a red ribbon. Dabi’s body was bathed in blue flames, but the rushing form of Gran Torino flew in from the hole in the wall and kicked him in the face. Dabi’s head snapped back against the bricks before the villain went limp.

“Bah, youngsters like you need to learn your place.” Gran Torino said as he landed on his feet and looked across the bar.

“You killed Kurogiri!?” Twice shouted as he struggled against Hawks’ feathers.

“Not quite.” Edgeshot reformed his head from a thread of ribbon, which hovered inches from Kurogiri. “I just temporarily cut off the blood circulation to his brain. He’s still alive, just unconscious.”

“Young Bakugo!” All Might rushed to Bakugo’s side and locked a firm hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, you are safe now! I am proud of you for how brave you were, my boy.”

“I...” Bakugo’s lips wobbled, but he said nothing despite the tears of relief in his eyes. “It’s not like I was scared!”

“You!”

All Might, his grin immovable, turned towards the villain. “Shigaraki, it’s over for you!”

“You... you!!” Shigaraki’s body trembled as all of his hatred pooled in his crimson eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve only just begun. Justice...

peace... hope... I'll turn them all and this sham of a society to dust! Do you really think that this is the end!? I'll rip you and Joker apart! Disappear. I *hate* you!!"

All Might's insides squirmed as Shigaraki continued to thrash, mixed with a stab of pity.

"All Might." Hawks hovered outside the hole All Might made. "The others confirmed that the Nomu and the missing Pussy Cats are secure. I bet it won't be much longer before they locate Joker-"

Bakugo bowled over as gray sludge poured from his mouth. The villains cried out as they were slowly being devoured by it. Other spurts opened and several Nomu dropped out of the nothingness. Screams and gunshot echoed from the streets below.

Hawks threw a tiny feather into the goop as Bakugo was torn from All Might's grasp, his fingers spewing with muck.

"Nooooo!!" All Might howled.

"All Might, they've been taken to the warehouse!" Hawks shouted as he drew his feather blades and slashed at the Nomu. "Go, we'll cover you from here!!"

"I owe you one, Hawks!!" All Might bellowed as several Nomu scrambled over his body, "Oklahoma smash!!"

The force ripped the roof from the bar and sent Nomu flying. All Might launched himself into the sky.

~5 minutes earlier...

"Can you see anything?" Todoroki whispered.

“It’s really dark in there.” Kirishima pressed himself against the warehouse window high above, using Iida’s shoulders as a stepping stool. He adjusted the night vision goggles. “Wait... I do see something!”

“What is it?” Iida whispered.

“I-its....It’s....!?” Kirishima shoved the goggles to Midoriya, who stood on Todoroki’s shoulders next to him. “Look! Back there, on the right...”

Midoriya took them and looked inside. “Those are... Nomu tanks!?”

“What!?” Iida yelled, face paling.

“You don’t happen to see Joker or the Pussy Cats in there, do you?” Yaoyorozu whispered.

“I... yes! I see Ragdoll and Pixie Bob!” Midoriya said. “We have to rescue them!”

“But what about Joker?” Todoroki asked as Midoriya and Kirishima jumped down.

Yaoyorozu crouched in the cramped alleyway, her shoulders nearly touching either wall. “Can’t you feel something? Going by that live stream, it appears that Joker is underground somewhere. Did you see a door or an elevator in the warehouse?”

Kirishima and Midoriya exchanged glances, but shook their head.

“Wait.” Todoroki held up his hand. “I hear something-”

Kirishima saw the large form in the sky, “Watch out!”

Their screams were wiped out by howling wind and dust invading the alleyway.

“Go, go!” Best Jeanist shouted as police and heroes swarmed the warehouse.

Ryukyu, still in dragon form, ripped the brain dead Nomu from the tanks. She gagged as their slimy taste invaded her mouth, but she kept on until all the Nomu were secured by Jeanist’s quirk.

“Ragdoll!!” Tiger rushed to the tank and dragged his unresponsive teammate out. “Hey, are you alright!? What did they do to you!?”

“Pixie Bob is here!” Gang Orca called from another tank. “I’m glad that they are safe.”

“But... what’s wrong with them?” Tiger clutched Ragdoll to his chest. “Why are they....?”

“We’ll get them to safety.” Gang Orca said as he pulled Pixie Bob’s body out. “I’m sure they’ll be alright.”

Best Jeanist scanned the dark warehouse. “But... I don’t see Joker anywhere.”

“I sense faint vibrations below us.” Ryukyu pressed her ear into the ground.

“Yep, I sense it too!” Miruko said. “Maybe he’s-”

They were silenced by somebody clapping.

“Sorry, Tiger.” A deep voice echoed from within the darkness. “But your teammates had excellent quirks. It was the perfect opportunity and I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Who’s there?” Best Jeanist stepped to the front, eyes narrowed. “Does anybody have a light?”

“It took quite a while to rebuild my stock of quirks after my body was reduced to this.” A shadow slowly stepped into the light.

Ryukyu's instincts told her to *run*, but she stayed put and flared her wings. "Stop! Don't move-"

The man wearing a basic suit stepped into the light. A black mask covered his entire head. The aura he gave off made Jeanist leap into action, his quirk binding the man's arms and legs.

"Jeanist-!" Ryukyu shouted. "He could be a civilian!"

"No, there's something off about him." Jeanist tightened his quirk. "Who are you?"

"I'm glad you asked, Best Jeanist." The man said as black lightning sparked over his body. "Let me show you."

It happened in the blink of an eye.

The heroes screamed as an explosion split the sky and rumbled the earth. The moon shone down on roaring flames and plumes of choking smoke. Buildings, their windows shattered, lay crumpled and broken, a few teetering dangerously on their sides. The whistling breeze sprinkled embers over the massive crater, buildings jutting out from the sides were akin to broken bones sticking out of a diseased wound.

One form floated over the destruction, the singular man who wiped clean the face of the earth like a ravaging angel. The fetid aura he exhumed invaded the minds of the 1-A students cowering behind an untouched slab of wall, casting images of blood and rot, of their own fetid corpses bathed in blood. The hallucinations born from fear entrapped them.

"Tomura finally started thinking and acting for himself, and I *finally* acquired a most valuable test subject. I wish you wouldn't have gotten in the way of our progress."

Despite the fires sprouting across the city, a cold wind washed over All For One. He idly wondered if the ghosts of those he'd just slain

were cursing him with their dying breaths. But he'd revel in that later. Now, he clapped as he stared down at Best Jeanist, the only hero laying in the crater.

"You manipulated everyone's clothes to get them out of the way in an instant? Your quick skills and decision making are superb. You must have nerves of steel."

"Y-you..." Jeanist struggled to sit up as straps of cloth impaled the ground. "You fiend-!"

All For One flicked his finger, and a jet of concentrated air shot towards the hero.

Midoriya wasn't the only one to hold his stomach as they heard the wet squelching. Best Jeanist only knew pain, his lower torso split open, before he fell back, unmoving. His eyes glazed over.

Another noise, like splattering water, invaded the stillness.

"Eugh! What the hell was that!?" Bakugo screamed.

Other villains were thrown from the goop, coughing and gagging. Dabi and Kurogiri's unconscious bodies splattered onto the dirt.

"Ah, I'm glad you could join us." All For One floated to the ground. "I apologize for all of this ruckus, Bakugo."

"What!? You..." Bakugo stepped backwards as the villain walked towards them.

"Ah, I almost forgot one guest." All For One chuckled. "How rude of me."

Goosebumps broke out on Bakugo's arms as another body landed beside him in a dull *thump*. He would recognize that head of raven hair anywhere, fancy costume or not. Bakugo couldn't breathe as he stared down at the unmoving vigilante.

“Sensei!” Shigaraki called as he sank to the ground.

“Tomura, it seems like you’ve failed again, but that’s alright.” All For One walked over to his protege and held his hand down. “You only need to try again. Do it over as many times as you need to. That is why I am here, this was all for *you* .”

All Might, with the full moon shining at his back, dove for All For One. The villain laughs as he holds All Might’s fists in his palms, the earth cracking beneath their feet as dueling winds snapped through the clearing.

“I’ll have you return everything, All For One!!” All Might bellowed.

“Do you think you could kill me again, All Might?”

Bakugo was blown back by the explosion as a vortex of dust swirled around the clearing. Grit invaded his throat and stung his eyes. The wind took its sweet time clearing it away.

“Nice of you to join the party, All Might. Is five kilometers too great a distance for you nowadays? Just how much weaker did you get from your injury?”

“You’re one to talk!” All Might stood and wiped a bead of crimson from his lips. “What’s with that freaky industrial mask?”

Bakugo was pinned to the spot as he watched the two behemoths square off. His eyes inevitably slid to Joker, whose coat tails swayed lazily in the breeze. His body was laid over broken concrete and rebar. The gentle wind blew Joker’s bangs from his face. Joker’s eyes were open, but they were cloudy and unfocused, his lips parted to allow some sort of black muck to drip down his chin.

All Might followed Bakugo’s eyes, and Bakugo’s heart jumped to his throat as All Might’s smile sharpened like a blade.

“All For One!” All Might bellowed. “How dare you lay your hands on these children!? I’ll take Young Bakugo and Joker back! And this time, I’ll give you a nice cell in Tartarus.”

“Why would I allow you to take them?” All For One put a hand over his heart. “Besides, do you honestly think you have the power to fight me? I can already sense how much you’ve weakened since our last battle. You’re practically a walking corpse. What a marvelous twist of fate that you and Joker will die on the same day!”

“You fiend! It wasn’t enough that you’ve experimented on him all his life!?” All Might pushed down the lancing pain with a flood of adrenaline. “And now you just decided to throw him away after getting him back!?”

“Where in the world did you get *that* theory? He’s not one of mine.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

All For One laughed. “You truly have no idea just how *special* that boy is, do you? His real origins are... truly out of this world.”

“Enough!” All Might waved a hand. “I’ll give you one last chance. Hand him over and release my student!”

“No, I don’t think I will.”

Black sparks snaked around the villain’s body. He extended his arm as All Might pounced, his sleeve bulging until it nearly ripped. The sharp change in pressure popped Bakugo’s ears as a concentrated air blast sent All Might careening through several skyscrapers. A trail of dust rose into the sky, several city blocks in length.

“Air Cannon plus Springlike Limbs, Kinetic Boosters times four...” All For One flexed his hand. “Hmmm, Strength Enhancer times three. What a fun combination.” All For One looked down at Joker’s body. “I wonder what other buffs *you* would add? Oh, I am sure you would equally debuff your opponents. Those quirks always come in handy.”

Bakugo stood on shaky legs, “All Might!!”

“Calm down. He wouldn’t die from something like that. Hopefully.” All For One said, before he turned to Shigaraki. “Take this as a chance to run, Tomura. Take these children with you.”

“Buuuut Kurogiri is still out!! What is he, sleeping beauty!?” Twice waved his arms. “Eugh, I wouldn’t kiss him!”

“Let me take care of that.”

All For One’s fingers shot out lightning fast tendrils, which impaled Kurogiri. Kurogiri’s body twitched like a doll being twisted by a merciless child. It made Bakugo feel sick. A swirling purple cloud opened, and All For One retracted the tendrils.

“There. Now get out of here!”

“We... we won’t let you go anywhere...”

The villains whipped towards Joker. One hand grasped around a piece of rebar to hold himself up, the other clawed at his own chest.

“I’m glad you’ve joined the land of the living, Joker.” All For One said. “But I sense that you don’t have the energy to fight back. The majority of your items have dried up, too. What are *you* going to do now?”

Bakugo was rooted to the spot as Joker’s body trembled with exhaustion, and yet his eyes bore a crazed gleam that bordered on animalistic. A ghostly wind swirled around Joker as his lips formed into a manic smirk.

~A few minutes ago...

“REN!!”

Joker gasped as he opened his eyes. The clear night sky stretched overhead, only crossed by the light of a news helicopter circling over them. A cold wind brushed his face. When did he get outside? His body ached and his mind was clouded with fog. A myriad of familiar voices were around him... shouting, *fighting* . The ground shook beneath him when two behemoths clashed, but he was too exhausted to care. His eyes fluttered closed-

"Don't rest just yet, my Trickster. The Nomu have gone and we are upon the surface. If we want to escape this fate, then you have to get up." Arsene's soft feathers brushed over his mind. *"It's time."*

"Time...?"

"Can you not hear them, Joker? The cries of the masses flow through us." Arsene's voice mixed with a deeper timbre that Joker didn't recognize, one such voice with the power to rip apart the heavens. *"We must accomplish that which we failed to do at the pinnacle of Yaldaboath's final battle."*

"Arsene, why are you-" Joker broke out into chills as thrashing chains sprouted around the mindscape. *"What'll happen to you?"*

"I am thou, thou art I. We have a bond that can withstand the forces of hell itself! Though this form will be no more, I will be with you. Always."

Joker's breath left in a shudder.

He peeled himself from the broken concrete, his heart dropping at the raw destruction all around him. His boots crunched over rubble. Black spots threatened to snuff out his vision as his muscles screamed with pain, but he forced himself forward, legs weighed down like iron. He witnessed All For One impale Kurogiri, phantom pains burning within his own hands and shoulders.

"There. Now get out of here!"

Joker grasped a bent piece of rebar for support. “We... we won’t let you go anywhere...”

“So glad you’ve rejoined the land of the living, Joker.” All For One said as he stared at Joker with that grotesque mask. “But I sense that you don’t have the energy to fight back. The majority of your items have dried up, too. What are *you* going to do now?”

An ice cold rush welled inside Joker’s heart and electrified his veins. A swirling wind weaved through his hair, and he bore that same manic smirk as when Arsene was first brought into the Metaverse.

“What I should’ve done from the very start.”

The ground around Joker burst with writhing black chains. Clanking metal and chilly winds washed through the dusty clearing as Arsene arose behind Joker, his wings lovingly brushing against his other self. Their shadows stretched out towards the villains as Joker grasped the closest chain, their ethereal energy resonating deep within his crippled soul. He drowned Yaldabaoth's laughter with a desperate cry. He reared his arm back, chains in tow, and threw them forward.

Snap .

The chains disintegrated within Joker’s fingers. Power erupted through Arsene as he released a demonic scream. Blue flames, brighter than ever before, swallowed both Arsene and Joker until the former’s body couldn’t contain it any longer. With a bright flash of a dying star, the Persona was no more. The wind died, and all was quiet.

The villains waited, but nothing happened.

“Uh...” Toga poked her fingers together. “What was that?”

“A fancy light show and nothing more.” Shigaraki chuckled. “Is that really all you have left? What a lame final attack for a secret boss.

What do you think, Sensei?"

"That was certainly a spectacle!" All For One laughed heartily.
"However, what you did seems to have accomplished *nothing* .
Now... wait." All For One frowned as the air danced with foreign energy. "What is this?"

The heavens shuddered. A sea of stars streaked the night sky with tears of silver. All eyes in the city turned upwards to marvel at this miracle of nature before dark clouds smothered them like a blanket. The storm clouds opened in a spinning maelstrom, rays of cold light showering the city in flickering curtains. Thunder roared in their ears.

Then, the Demon Lord descended upon Kamino.

I can hear you all screaming from here. It goes nicely with a calming cup of tea, and... oh, is that the Major Character Death tag I see?

See you all next week ;)

Throw Away Your Mask

Chapter 60: Throw Away Your Mask

Joker closed his eyes and concentrated.

If he listened closely, he could hear the voices of people cheering him on.

Wow, I can't believe how long this story is already! 60 chapters and 400k words??

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Wh-what-” Kirishima gasped when the massive shadow drowned them. “*What is that thing?*”

Thunder rolled through Kamino as the divine being descended on six ebony wings, such ginormous wings which swallowed the entire city in writhing shadows. Black and silver attire glimmered under the curtains of prismatic light spilling from the clouds, highlighting the blood red sash hanging diagonally across its chest. Four magnificent horns curved from its helmet, two in the front, two in the back. A halo of pitch black wings spun slowly over its head like a floating crown.

An infernal gleam made its ruby eyes glow as hot as scorching coals. It spread its arms wide as the world took in its full glory.

“It...” Todoroki’s breath trembled. “I-it has to be from Joker.”

“He almost looks like a general.” Midoriya whispered in awe.

“A-A general?” Yaoyorozu shivered as shadow and pale light danced around them. “F-from *Heaven* ?”

“I-I don’t know...” Midoriya trembled. “I-it doesn’t look like an angel. And this light... maybe its the Shining One? Lucifer, o-or maybe Sata-”

“There’s no time to guess who it is.” They looked to Iida. Lightning flashed and thunder roared, and yet Iida had the courage to stand tall within the dark angel’s shadow. “Let’s rescue Bakugo while they’re distracted.”

“W-we can’t go out there now!” Kirishima whisper-yelled.

“I have a plan.” Midoriya’s eyes almost glimmered with resolve. “Kirishima, Todoroki, Iida... everything will depend on our timing and your quirks. We just have to wait for the perfect opportunity-”

A growl, an ethereal and musical timbre that no mortal ears should ever hear, echoed through the city and sparked fear within the hearts of mankind. The Shining One’s eyes locked onto All For One, the culmination of hatred and grief swum within its gaze. The wings flared, casting a bone chilling wind down on the clearing, before it raised its fist. Screams rang out as the Shining One punched down with the force of a meteor.

Dozens of quirks bubbled under All For One’s skin as he raised a hand and met the punch head on. The earth buckled and the sky cracked under the force of the collision. Stinging dust and debris became airborne when the wild winds whipped the clearing in a dirty maelstrom.

Joker shielded his eyes. He stood beside the boots of Satanael, a tiny speck compared to his *true, unbound* other self. A spike of fear coursed through him when another earth shattering *crack* and a rumble shook the very foundations of the city. A certain student was nowhere to be seen.

“Bakugo!” Joker called through the raging dust storm.

Joker squinted. A silhouetted form moved within the wall of dirt, and he rushed towards them, colors popping from his fast footsteps. He slid to a stop when blood red eyes pinned him with hatred. Shigaraki’s pale hair weaved with the dusty wind, his expression carved with hostility.

“*You.* ” Shigaraki spat. “This is all *your fault!* Die!!”

Shigaraki struck like a viper. Joker ducked and backpedaled from the man’s frantic swipes, for one touch could lead to a painful demise. They danced for a few steps before a voice rang out.

“Don’t touch him!!”

An explosion hurled Shigaraki through the storm, lost to the darkness swirling around them. Joker whirled around to a panting Bakugo, his face plastered with sweat.

“Are you alright, Bakugo?” Joker asked.

Bakugo whipped toward him. No amount of suave finesse prepared Joker for Bakugo’s fist. Joker’s head snapped back at the blooming pain, putting a blood red hand over his cheek with a hearty chuckle.

“You have one mean right hook, I’ll give you that.”

“Don’t you dare compliment me!” Bakugo snapped as he stomped in Joker face and snatched his collar. “You-”

“What is it?” Joker smirked as his hand dropped from his cheek. “Do I have something on my face?”

Bakugo’s grip slackened. His face drained of outright rage and he pinned Joker with accusing eyes.

“No, you *don’t* .”

Bakugo released the vigilante's collar as both of Joker's hands went to his face, where cool leather gloves prodded at nothing but the bare skin around his eyes. He stared up at his true other self as his fingers slid down his face.

"*Oh .*"

"I *knew* it." Bakugo growled as he grabbed Joker's arm. "I knew you were hiding shit! This whole time you pretended to be a weak, quirkless barista? Why!?"

"I was never even supposed to be here! Why would I tell *you* anything?"

Bakugo's eyes widened. "What the hell is that supposed to mean!?"

"It means I had my reasons." Joker tore his arm away and turned his back on Bakugo. "Besides, it's not like I owe you anything. You don't get to demand answers from me just because you think you're entitled to them."

A heavy silence lingered as the dust finally settled, but Joker could still feel Bakugo's eyes stabbing into his back like red hot pokers.

"Astonishing. Quite astonishing."

The hair on the back of their necks stood on end as All For One hovered between them and the retreating villains diving into the portal. The man stared up at Satanael. Awe, astonishment, and a touch of resentment oozed out of All For One's wicked black mask.

"Sensei!" Shigaraki, hovering at the edge of Kurogiri's portal, stared on with eyes as wide as dinner plates. "That cheater's power! It's-"

"There's no time to dawdle." All For One's held out his arm in front of Shigaraki. "You must flee. Step into that portal, Shigaraki!"

"But-"

“Remember-” All For One carefully chose one of his weaker quirks.
“Everything that I have done is for *you* .”

“Sensei-”

With the flick of a finger, All For One blew a gust of wind at Shigaraki.
“Go!”

“Sensei, you can’t do this! Don’t leave me behind!” Shigaraki reached out as he flew through the air. “*Sensei!!* ”

Shigaraki’s desperate plea went silent when Kurogiri’s portal swallowed him. All For One turned back towards Bakugo and Joker standing at the Shining One’s feet, the powers exuding from the villain chilled the boys to the bone.

The Shining One’s wings curled around them in an ebony curtain.

“Don’t think you can hide behind those wings forever, Joker.” All For One said as he gathered his quirks.

“Bakugo,” Joker tucked his hands in his pockets as Satanael lowered his hand to the ground. “At the first opportunity you see, *escape* .”

“What!?”

“Satanael and I will distract him for as long as-” A sharp twinge in Joker chest sent fire into his throat. He coughed into his hand, chuckling dryly at the black puddle staining his palm and dripping through his fingers. Bakugo bristled. “I don’t have much time to spare.”

A powerful blast buckled Satanael’s wings. A sign of impatience from the man who reaped souls.

“Trickster...”

Bakugo flinched as the massive entity’s voice sung through his bones.

"I know." Joker pulled on his gloves and wiped another black bead from his lips. "Let's do this."

"Wait-"

"No." Joker grinned at Bakugo as he hopped on Satanael's palm and put a hand on the massive Persona's thumb. "Remember what I said."

"What about you!?" Bakugo roared. "If you go out there and people see your face-"

"I'm flattered that you care so much, but worry about yourself first." Satanael slowly rose to his feet, his wings opening to allow streams of cold light through. Kaleidoscopic hues painted Joker's tailcoat as the wind wove through his hair. "Escape when you see a chance. Save yourself with your own power!"

Satanael rose to his full height with Joker in his palm. A news helicopter soared as close as it dared to the Shining One. The cameras zoomed in on the person within its grasp.

"Hey, that's-" Demizu Mika clutched her microphone. "It's Joker! But... wait... his mask is gone!?"

Joker, maskless, peered down at All For One with silver eyes as cold as the light shining down from the heavens.

"Now !"

An explosion ripped a wall apart on the other side of the clearing and a colossal glacier jutted into the sky like the tip of a spear. The light from the heavens gave it an ethereal glow, splotching specs of rainbow colored light around the city. Three bodies flew over it at blinding speeds, powered by revving engines.

Joker gaped as Kirishima, Iida, and Midoriya soared together through the sky.

All For One's body sparked as he reached out towards them.

"I don't think so." Joker said as Satanael pointed to the ground near All For One.

An ebony serpent erupted from a bubbling black pool. It rose into the sky and clamped its jaws around the tendrils shooting from All For One's fingers. The 1-A students flew over the tendrils, unharmed.

Kirishima reached his hand out towards Bakugo. "Come on!!"

A thunderous boom pounded in their chests as Bakugo launched himself like a rocket, his body flying through the air until their hands grasped together.

"Are you stupid or something!?" Bakugo called over the wind whipping their hair.

Kirishima grinned at him. But their trajectory brought them close to Satanael. Time slowed like dripping sap as Kirishima looked into Joker's silver eyes. His heart dropped and he couldn't bear to look away, for the truth was finally revealed before him.

Joker stared right back... *smiling*.

"Aniki!?"

Satanael allowed them to slip between his wings. They all gaped at Joker before the pitch black wings closed like a curtain, the desperate calls from the 1-A students all but lost.

"How irritating." All For One growled as he reduced the serpent to a puddle of ink. "This power of yours is far more troubling that I could ever predict."

"You're the one that started this play." Joker called down as he splayed his arms. "Don't you know that the villain never wins? The crowd will always cheer for the devilishly handsome protagonist."

All For One chuckled. "This act is only beginning," He said as a hundred quirks danced under his skin, deforming the man's body with bulging spikes and wires. "Besides, I wrote this little play with the intention of it being a tragedy!"

Satanael curled his wings around the Trickster as a blast of super-powered wind sent them reeling back. The tip of Satanael's boots raked through fallen skyscrapers, clouds of dust spewed into the sky as he slowly slid to a stop.

"Damnit." Joker muttered under his breath, but he froze when new energy bubbled within his fractured heart. "Satanael, what is this?"

"Can you not feel them, Trickster?" Satanael smiled as he stared to the news helicopter. "Our power has not yet peaked. Look around us."

Joker scanned the rubble. People crawled out from the smoke and ash. Civilians, heroes, those who were just going about their lives emerged from the destruction, bloody and bruised, but *alive*. Many looked upon Satanael's majesty with awe and wonder... and more importantly, *hope* .

"They call for your victory." Satanael said as All For One prepared another strike. "Harness the true power of this World and deliver them from this evil!"

Joker closed his eyes and concentrated.

If he listened closely, he could hear the voices of people cheering him on.

"I can't believe I told you that I'd kick you out if you caused any trouble." Kaito muttered. "Now look at you. Japan is cheering for you, so you better win this and come back so that I can kick your ass myself. It's the least you can do for scaring the shit out of everyone, right?"

"You can do it, Akira!" Hitoshi pounded his fist on the desk. "If anyone can win, it's you! You and everyone else taught me so much, but I won't forgive you if you don't come back to teach me more! Our family won't be the same without you!"

"You got this, kid."

"We believe in you, Akira." Risumi said. "You saved us from Silver Falcon! You gave Ayumu and I the Strength to continue doing what we love. You better win and come back to us!"

"Heh, come on Joker." Taneo smirked as he stared down at his phone screen. "I know that villain can't get the better of you. Kick his ass and win the day! Make sure to call me so we can share the all of epic details on my blog!"

"Daddy, that's the vigilante that saved me! He's going to win, right?"

"Of course, Nanako. This kid won't lose to a villain like that."

"W-wait, Tokaji! That's... that's Ren!"

"I know! He said he was quirkless, Kagome! What the hell is going on!?"

"I knew there was more to this boy than meets the eye."

"Really? Then why didn't you tell us, old man!?"

"Tokaji, calm down! Ren must've had his reasons... and besides, he's the one who saved us!"

"Yeah, well... he better win this! We haven't been able to repay him yet!"

"You hear that, Joker!?" Ichinose cackled. "I've never heard so much noise in the workshop before! To think that one of those cheeky brats that came to my junkyard was actually Joker! Smoke this loser and pay us a visit, yeah!? Whistler wants to see you again and Mei has so many babies to show you!"

"Please, deary. Don't let this evil get the better of you!" Haru-san prayed in front of her television. "We have to share another cup of tea. The Blue Lotus needs its charming barista."

"To think this boy had even more tricks up his sleeve." Nezu chirped. "Truly magnificent!"

"This isn't the time, Nezu!" Aizawa griped.

"All Might hasn't come back yet." Vlad King growled. "Are you sure Joker can take care of this himself?"

"He summoned a typhoon and leveled an entire mountain before." Aizawa, despite himself, smirked. "And now this. Do you really think the kid is completely helpless?"

"Indeed! I have a feeling that All Might is okay. All For One wouldn't just kill him like that, but as for Joker..." Nezu's eyes sharpened as he peered into the television, a fiery well bursting in his heart. "We have to cheer for him. It's the only thing we can do from here!"

"What's going on!?" Mina screeched as her phone blew up with the 1-A chat and rapid fire news articles. "What... what the hell!? Akira, what are you doing there!? You were Joker this whole freaking

time!? Everyone in our class is flipping out! KICK HIS ASS SO I CAN PUNCH YOU MYSELF, YOU LIAR!"

"Where's All Might!? Shouldn't he be in on this fight, too!?"

"Joker doesn't need All Might!" Another person shouted over the swelling crowd flooding the Shibuya Crossing. "He can take that villain by himself!"

"Damn right! He doesn't need any heroes to save him!"

"Go, Joker!"

"Kick his ass!!"

"You got this, Joker!"

Midoriya's heart hammered away in his ears. People cheering for Joker to be victorious against All For One just... fell flat.

"Th-that..." Kirishima clutched his shirt with white knuckles. "This has to be a lie, right?"

"I..." Iida's shoulders trembled as he stared at the ground. "I am having a hard time believing this."

"I knew he was hiding something."

"Bakugo!" Kirishima exclaimed, eyes flooding with tears.

"N-no, he's right. If we look at everything that's happened since we met Akira, then..."

Iida frowned at Midoriya. "What?"

"Some things match up perfectly." Midoriya bit his lip and blinked the burn of tears from his eyes. "We met him *after* the USJ. And

something's been bothering me since Hosu. How did Joker find us so fast? I sent that signal to *everyone* in my contact list. I added Akira before we left for internships..."

Iida bristled. "Many of us *did* experience a sense of deja vu. Now we *finally* know why."

Bakugo glared up at the screen. "That bastard has been using us from the start."

"No!" Kirishima frantically shook his head. "Our friendship has to mean something to him, right!? He's not the sort of person to use us for his own means!!"

"But how do we know that for certain?" Iida watched Joker and the Shining One stand off against All For One. "How much of it was the *real* Akira, and how much was a ploy to hide his secret?"

"He shared his past with us! He told us personal things when he was at his most vulnerable!" Kirishima's lips wobbled. "Deep down, he's still *Akira*. D-deep down he's still our Aniki! I know it!!"

"Kirishima's right."

"Todoroki! Yaoyorozu!" Iida breathed a sigh of relief as the pair approached. "I'm glad you found us!"

"It wasn't easy in this crowd." Yaoyorozu said, "But I'm glad we are all in one piece."

"But why do you think Kirishima is right, Todoroki?" Midoriya asked. "You... you *knew*, didn't you?"

"Yes, I figured it out before we left for the Summer Camp." Todoroki's eyes flicked up to the screen as everyone but Bakugo stiffened.

"Joker protected us at the USJ, even if he didn't know us. USJ, Hosu, the quirkless people, the Summer Camp, all he's ever done is save and protect people." Todoroki put a hand over his chest. "I can't

deny this feeling that every interaction with us was genuine on some level. He's the type that holds his friends close."

"Yeah!!" Kirishima pumped his fist. "I agree with Todoroki!"

"But that still doesn't excuse him. We've been friends with a wanted vigilante for *months*, right under our noses." Iida growled. "At the very least, I think we should ask him for his side of the story. We deserve that much after everything that's happened."

"Iida..." Midoriya whispered.

"Everyone, look!" Yaoyorozu pointed at the screen.

The whole of Japan held it's breath as gilded lights appeared around Joker.

Golden orbs floated around Joker.

He extended his hand, and the culmination of the World's voices amassed into his palm. His body flashed as the light melded into him. Satanael smiled as his weapon appeared in his grasp. A magnificent gun taken form of an executioners sword taller than the most spectacular skyscraper in the country. It sparkled as if it were crafted from starlight.

Satanael's bond, a glowing river of hope, tied the rest if his other selves together at the center of the mindscape. Joker tapped into the inner most core of himself, smirking. He waved his arm in an arc, the myriad of his Personas' voices calling out in retribution.

"Come-"

"Enough of this!" All For One said as he prepared another super powered blast.

A mighty *snap* splintered the sky as a burst of energy shot towards the Shining One.

"-Everyone! "

A mass of blue flame erupted in front of Joker and Satanael, but the airy missile hit dead on. Tremors shook the city and a cloud of smoke swirled around the giant angel, blocking them from view. Fiery ruby eyes sparked within the cloud. A wall of flowing golden scales emerged as the wind blew the dust away, the attack absorbed by one of the orbs the dragon held in its grasp.

For the first time, All For One broke out in goosebumps as the dragon opened its maw and released a harrowing cry that struck his soul. The holy battle cry summoned others. Blazing blue stars burst to life, forming a circle over the crater.

"I am thou, thou art I."

Their united inflection wove together with one mind, one heart, one united purpose.

Joker.

Satanael.

Kohryu.

Pixie.

Ishtar.

Titania.

Byakko.

Cerberus.

Black Frost.

Shiva.

Cu Chulainn.

Vasuki.

Orpheus Picaro.

Alice.

Yatagarasu.

And one other, gracefully hovering on six finned wings, which sparkled as if they harvested the glimmering curtains of sunlight beneath crystal clear seawater. Aquatic blues bled into soft greens on his arms and wings. His skin bore the same shade of blue, with hints of purple fading into legs. The sunset colored sash tied around his waist fluttered with the breeze.

“Now!” Joker cried.

Sraosha unrolled his hallowed scroll, the navy blue tassels thrashing, as he pointed a clawed finger at All For One.

Three orbs of light converged on All For One’s body, staggering him as his strength ebbed away. Ishtar’s Heat Riser flashed a multitude of colors across the clearing.

Joker sliced his arm towards All For One. Kohryu followed Joker’s movements in perfect synchronicity. The dragon dove from the heavens, golden scales glinting like diamonds.

All For One’s arm deformed as he gathered the quirks under his skin, his body lancing with black lightning. The two collided. Kohryu’s tongue prickled as he clamped the villain in his jaws and thrashed to and fro. Debris flew into the sky when Kohryu dragged his muzzle through the broken buildings, before wrenching his head upwards, tossing All For One.

“Cu Chulainn!!” Kohryu called.

Cu Chulainn howled for blood as he sprinted up Kohryu’s spine, his valiant cape flaring. Kohryu vaulted Cu Chulainn when he reached the tip of his nose, the warrior raising his spear over his head.

“Is this all you have?” All For One mocked as he and Cu Chulainn traded lightning quick blows, sparks flying as All For One’s arms sprouted with steely spires. “I expected more from gods and legends turned real! At least allow me to have some fun!”

Cu Chulainn leapt back and threw his spear. All For One simply cocked his head to avoid it.

“You missed.”

Cu Chulainn laughed. “Did we *really* ?”

Shiva, hovering behind them, bestowed Gae Bolg with a Thunder Reign. With two arms he hurled the spear at All For One, crackling with golden lightning, which impaled All For One’s shoulder and sent him to the ground. A small dust cloud clung to him as he wrenched the wretched weapon from his shoulder. His suit bore tears and gashes, and one of the pipes in his grotesque mask burst, releasing hisses of steam. Not a drop of blood was in sight.

“Don’t let up!” Byakko pounded over the broken earth, claws bared.

“Yeah!” Cerberus howled as they ran side by side. “Revenge for Seth!!”

The beasts jumped in unison, their fangs and claws yearning for the villain’s flesh. All For One batted Cerberus away with a blast of air. The Guard Dog of Hell yelped as the attack sent him crashing into a ruined apartment building.

“You’ll pay for that!!”

Byakko's fangs clasped around All For One's shoulder as his claws raked the man's torso.

"Really, you should put more effort into this." All For One said. With a grunt, he lifted his arm and slammed Byakko onto his back, his other hand raised, morphing into a spear of twisted metal that gleamed an odd green color. "But it will be fun killing you, just like Seth."

Byakko's ears flattened on his head as he hissed.

The snap and crackle of ice sprouted around them, freezing All For One in place.

"Hee ho!" Black Frost skated past, "Release Byakko!"

All For One growled as an enormous fist snapped his head back, his mask cracking. A heavenly tune played nearby, and All For One jumped back as a red hot laser danced around him and spewed walls of flame, the glacier reduced to steam in a matter of seconds.

"Are you alright, Byakko?" Orpheus Picaro asked as cold mist ghosted around them. "You should not be so careless."

"You're one to talk!" Byakko spat as he righted himself.

Meanwhile, a shadow with sickly purple scales crept through the mist. Vasuki reared up towards All For One, his six arms waving in a hypnotizing dance.

"No mortal can bear my poison!" Vasuki said as his breath became a cloud of virulent vapor.

"Bah, forget your stupid poison!" Pixie, sitting on Alice's shoulder, cackled. "C'mon little sis! Let's show them how you *really* play with your enemies."

Alice curtsied as All For One burst from the poison cloud. "*Die* ."

Blinding white overtook the light spilling from the heavens and tremors shook the earth, dust scattering from the broken buildings all around them. Bubbles of destruction popped, revealing the smooth craters underneath.

All For One panted as he floated over the craters.

"My, my." Titania fluttered only a few meters away from the villain. "Alice, Pixie, haven't I told you not to play with your enemies? Let's see how you deal with *this* ."

Titania chuckled as Concentrate consumed her body. She languidly raised her arm and snapped her fingers. A churning blue orb appeared between them, with ribbons of energy flowing around it. White hot pain burned All For One when it burst.

"Ah..." All For One slouched forward as blisters bubbled over his skin. "Radiation burns. So you even have atomic power within your grasp? Interesting."

"*Something isn't right...*" Kohryu circled over them, his musical roars heard by all. "*Why is he not fighting to his full extent?*"

"*Do you think he's holding himself back?*" Shiva said.

"*Why is he toying with us!?*" Byakko snarled.

"*Then we just have to kill him before he uses his true power!*" Alice said with an unsettling grin. "*Big brother, let me use my teddies again!*"

"*No!*" Joker cried. "*We do not kill! We'll find another way!*"

"*But Trickster, this Symbol Of Evil must not-!*" Sraosha growled.

"*Attacking one by one does no good. We must strike all at once!*" Satanael said as he raised his weapon. "*Then, when the time is right, the Trickster should rip off that terrible mask and I'll deal the final blow!*"

“Got it!!” Several voices replied in unison.

Yatagarasu’s call became the signal.

Bursts of magic *popped* and *boomed* across the devastation. Ice, fire, lightning, wind, psychedelic, nuclear, light, shadow, and almighty. A rainbow of fantastic colors exploded like the breathtaking finale of fireworks show, the dark shape within bobbed and weaved through the magic, but he could barely move before another blast forced him to change direction.

The cracks in their soul deepened as they pushed their magic to the limit. Joker pushed the pain down as he leapt from Satanael’s palm and shot out his grapple as Kohryu flew past. The dragon snatched the thrashing wire and Joker’s heart leapt into his throat as he swung across the width of the broken heart of the city.

Kohryu dropped him at just the right point.

The spotlight of the news helicopter fell on Joker as he plummeted towards All For One.

Joker’s boots slammed onto the man’s shoulders. The Personas’ held their breath as the villain’s body protruded with spikes. Mutual pain lanced between them when one spike sliced Joker’s cheek, but he reached down and curled his fingers around the base of the grotesque mask and *pulled* . Plastic and glass creaked. spurts of steam erupted from the tubes.

“Do you really thing this will work, boy?” All For One laughed as the cracks in his mask spread.

“What’s wrong?” Joker wickedly grinned as he felt the mask starting to give out. “Are you afraid to show your face? I’ll reveal your true form!”

CRACK.

Joker wrenched away bits of machinery and chunks of glass as All For One's mask shattered. His face was revealed to the light, showcasing a lump of ugly scar tissue in place of an actual human face. The only untouched parts were his bottom lip and chin, he didn't even have eyes, and yet Joker felt the piercing hatred drilling through the empty spaces where they would be.

Joker launched himself away as black sparks prickled across the man's body.

Yatagarasu dove to Joker's side, a blast of wind cushioning Joker's fall. Joker rolled into his landing, dust kicking up around his tailcoats as he slid to a stop. He looked up at All For One still hovering in the epicenter of the destruction.

Joker grasped the Tyrant Pistol and aimed it at All For One, who tilted his head.

"What do you intend to do with that?" He called. "Aren't you out of ammo?"

Joker smirked. "Pillage him, Satanael!!"

He pulled the trigger.

Click .

No bullet came from Joker's weapon.

BANG .

The villain whirled around as Satanael's gunshot, heard by millions, reverberated through Kamino. A silver bullet sliced through the air faster than a speeding train. All For One threw his arms up, the bullet catching on a massive orb of dark energy crackling. No light shown through the orb, it swallowed everything as if it were a concentrated piece of space, a black hole which threatened to wipe out the entire

city. Buffeting winds and arching lightning clashed between the bullet and All For One's final defence.

Which world's power would dominate the other?

Joker held his breath, his heart pounding, as the spinning bullet cracked.

But All For One faltered too, the orb of negative energy shuddering against the almighty power the masses of this World bestowed to Joker. Joker covered his eyes as a sudden light seared his retinas, and the sound of shattered glass nearly blew out his eardrums. All was quiet as he blinked rapidly, the bullet, and All For One, were nowhere to be seen.

Thump .

Joker jumped and looked over his shoulder to All For One's steaming body splayed out over the concrete. Joker tensed. A few seconds pass with thundering heartbeats. The man didn't move.

"Did... did we do it?" Joker whispered.

They waited several seconds more, but the man lay still.

Satanael's satisfaction leaked into every Persona as they absorbed their victory.

"Trickster... we are out of time." Satanael's wings drooped as he fully lowered himself to the ground.

Joker's jaw dropped when his true other self took a knee and *bowed* to him, the other Personas copying the motion. Kohryu, floating peacefully like a ribbon, closed his eyes and bowed his head. The cameras drank in the action as, one by one, they all disappeared into cold ash.

Satanael was the last, his ashes sprinkling across Kamino. With his departure came the clearing of the clouds and of the heavenly light.

Shimmering stars reappeared in the darkened sky.

The exhaustion took its toll as Joker collapsed onto his knees, crackling fire seared through his body as he coughed up a gob of pitch black.

“... Joker?”

Joker wiped his mouth and looked up.

All Might, or rather a familiar skeletal man swimming in a blood drenched costume, staggered towards him. All Might's once taut muscles shrunk into withered shadows of their former glory. The man's sunken eyes widened, his golden hair falling flat against his face.

“You... you're that barista.”

“*You* .” Joker's voice became raspy. “You're that customer that was arguing with his friend. I never thought the number one hero had already graced me with his presence.”

“I'm sorry to deceive you, my boy.” Toshinori stared up at the news helicopter, his shoulders sinking. “I've deceived the entire world.”

“... Because of that wound?” Joker asked softly. “You forced yourself into this state because you didn't want to disappoint the public, right?”

“Yes.” Toshinori turned his eyes back to Joker, grimacing. He clutched that cursed scar on his side. “This was inflicted by the very villain you just defeated.”

Joker stared at All For One's still body, before looking back at the walking skeleton. His SP pool was nothing but a mere trickle, a gasping brook on the verge of drying out. Joker dryly chuckled as he retrieved his tiny thermos. Tiny Might gave him an odd glance as he

chugged the rest of the coffee, hardly enough for a small mouthful. He capped the thermos and set it aside.

“What if you didn’t have to worry about it anymore?”

Small Might inhaled sharply. “... What?”

Joker reached out and touched the hero’s arm. Cool magic flowed from a silent Ishtar as Salvation washed the hero’s body in ribbons of light. Small Might’s eyes flew wide open as he bowled over and spewed crimson from his lips.

Joker flinched back as the hero collapsed, blood pooling around him.

“What did you do to him, brat!?”

A flash of yellow dove for Joker. The hero’s kick sent pain through Joker’s body as he was bat away, his back crashing against an abandoned pillar.

“This was a misunderstanding!” Joker’s voice cracked as dust peppered him. “That was supposed to heal him!”

“Toshinori...” Gran Torino looked over his shoulder. “Are you alright? What did he *do!* ?”

“I..I...” Toshinori hacked his last spot of crimson. He wiped his mouth and took a deep breath, disbelief and bewilderment swirling in his eyes. “There’s... there’s no more *pain*...”

Gran Torino paled. “What!?”

“Isn’t this bittersweet?”

Every hair on their bodies stood on end. Their eyes fell back towards All For One, his broken body and torn clothes hanging limply as he levitated.

Toshinori forced himself to his feet. “How are you even conscious!?”

“You.... no...” Joker whispered. “My power wasn’t enough?”

“Joker, you should know the value of a good act. That bullet shattered before it even touched me. But now I sense that neither of you have the energy to fight back. One For All is desperately clinging to you, Toshinori, however futile it is. That flame is sputtering.” All For One reached into his tattered vest pocket. “I have to personally thank Joker for this little trinket.”

Click. Click. CLICK!

Despair painted Joker’s face as he rapidly fired his empty gun.

Toshinori’s blood turned to ice as the villain’s wounds healed in beautiful ribbons, the same ones used to heal him of his own malady. Every wound the Personas inflicted healed over with unblemished skin.

“Too bad it hasn’t restored me to my previous strength...” All For One, his face still scarred, looked down at his hands. “But this will have to do. After all, this will be child’s play now that both of your powers are dwindling.”

Joker forced himself to his feet, but his heart lurched and fiery pain sprouted in his chest. He fell back to one knee as black ichor dripped from his mouth.

“Joker!?” Toshinori called.

All For One clapped. “I must applaud your efforts, Joker. You have no more tricks up your sleeve, and you’ve given me the greatest gift of all. I’ll get to tear All Might apart while his master’s closest friend watches. You will too, but I’ll kill you last.” All For One did a showman’s bow. “It’s the least I can do for what you’ve done for me, my boy.”

“You villain!” Toshinori scowled. “How dare you keep toying with us!?”

All For One tilted his head, smirking with amusement. "I can feel that hatred you harbor, All Might. But you know what? I *hate* you too. That's why I want you to die the ugliest and most painful death possible! I will steal away everything that you've lived to protect so far."

Joker laughed.

"M-my boy?" Toshinori swallowed as Joker's costume slowly disintegrated, beginning at the blood red gloves, before flowing over the sleeves. "Are you alright?"

"It's funny..." Joker looked up at All For One, another cold chuckle escaped him as he clawed at his eyes. "First Yaldabaoth, now All For One. I couldn't defeat either of them. Why am I such a failure?"

Toshinori swallowed. "Joker?"

Gran Torino exchanged hasty glances with Toshinori. Joker chuckled again as his hands fell to his sides. Toshinori blanched. There was so much *black*. Falling from Joker's eyes and out of his mouth like blood, only it looked like a scene straight from a horror movie. The paleness of Joker's face made the ichor as black as night.

A wave of dizziness assaulted Joker as his strength left in droves, with not even the voices of his Personas to comfort him.

"My boy..." Toshinori crawled over to Joker and placed a hand on his shoulder. All For One watched on with a grin, as if enjoying his favorite drama. "You've been fighting for so long. It's okay to rest now. Let us handle everything else, alright?"

"N-no... Have to... I can't let Yaldabaoth win again!"

"Yaldabaoth?"

"Toshinori!" Gran Torino shouted as he turned towards All For One. "If you can't fight, then escape with Joker while you have the

chance.”

“What!? But I can still -”

“This has been an entertaining comedy, but you’re not going anywhere.” All For One chuckled. “I have one more secret to divulge before you die, and I want to savor the moment.”

Joker gagged as gray goo swallowed his body. Toshinori and Gran Torino reached out, but their hands only closed on that cursed goop. Joker was dumped face first in front of the villain. All For One’s fingers shot out black and red tendrils that pierced Joker through the hands and shoulders.

Revulsion and rage swarmed Toshinori’s heart when the boy was pinned to the ground like an insect to a board. Joker’s weak cries clashed with All For One’s hearty chuckle.

“You know I only came out here because Tomura was in trouble. I wasn’t going to fight you originally, but plans always change.”

“What’s your point?” Toshinori growled. “What’s this secret you want to tell so badly!?”

“My protege.” All For One tilted his head as he tug the tendrils deeper into Joker’s body. Grinding and crunching noises assaulted their ears, and Joker bit his lip to keep from screaming out. All For One almost looked bored. “Did you ever think to check in on your master’s relatives, All Might? Young *Shimura Tenko* was left all alone in that rank alleyway. To think, your master’s grandson would make the *perfect* successor.”

“N-no... it’s... it’s a lie...”

“It’s the truth. You *know* it, don’t you?” All For One grinned. “Where’s your smile now, All Might!?”

“This whole time...” Toshinori clutched his head and screamed in agony.

“Toshinori...” Gran Torino’s voice trembled.

“Luna Fall!! ”

Miruko, her face drenched in crimson, fell from the sky. Her foot swiped through empty air as All For One shot away, the tendrils ripping from Joker’s flesh. She landed with thunderous boom, the ground underneath cracking. She cursed as a massive chasm opened up underneath her.

“Miruko!!”

Red feathers darted through the air. They snatched Miruko and Joker’s clothes and whisked them to safety as a great divide split the clearing into two halves.

“Prominence Burn!!!”

A stream of golden white flames consumed the villain’s body as he reappeared. Heat flooded Kamino as the stream died. Endeavor crashed down in front of Joker and Miruko, his body smoking.

“E-Endeavor!?” Toshinori sputtered.

The hero looked over his shoulder, eyes flicking between them.

“Leave this to us!” A voice called from above.

“Hey, I had him first, Bird Brain!!” Miruko screamed as she shook a fist at Hawks.

“Miruko, take care of our kid!” Hawks yelled.

“Huh!? Our kid-” She looked down at her feet, where Joker lay. Crimson and black mixed together like paint. She crouched down, but he shuddered under her touch. “Kid! *Shit* .”

Hawks dove as the heat waves from Endeavor's attacks disfigured All For One's body, but he remained untouched. Vibrant red feathers rained down on All For One, the impacts kicking up clouds of dust.

"All Might..." Endeavor scowled, but he turned his back on them as All For One's laughter broke through the clouds. "If you can't fight any longer, then get yourself and that boy to safety! Miruko, get any other civilians and injured heroes out of here!"

Endeavor leapt into the fray. Hawks and Endeavor flowed together as one unit, switching and dodging blows from All For One. Edgeshot seamlessly streamed into the battle, and it turned into a royale as they went toe to toe with the Symbol Of Evil.

"Someone... anyone..."

"Kid... Joker, stay down!" Miruko yelled as Joker forced himself onto his hands and knees.

"My boy..." Toshinori put a gentle hand to the boy's back as his costume continued to disintegrate. "It's okay to rest now."

"No!" Joker clutched onto Miruko and Toshinori's wrists. "I-I can't..."

"Joker." Miruko's face softened as she put both hands upon Joker's face. "Go to sleep and let the pros handle everything else!"

"But I-I can't let anyone else disappear!"

"Nobody else will disappear. Nobody will have to bear with All For One's malice any more! Come on, just one last time..." All Might stood to his full height, his skeletal frame filling out with steam and muscle. His hair sagged over his face, but his blue eyes burned as bright as a bonfire. "I AM HERE!!"

All For One whipped around as All Might prepared his final attack as the Number One hero in Japan.

"UNITED STATES OF SMAAAAASH!"

The behemoths clashed.

Hawks yelped as he and the others were blown back by the concussive force. Miruko threw herself over Joker to protect him from the spontaneous tornado generated by All Might.

All For One laughed as he held All Might's fists in his hands, neither budging in the struggle.

"No..." Joker plucked at the fractured fragments of his soul. "Just one *Persona!*"

His desperate plea called forth the most mysterious in his stock. Miruko's jaw dropped as Sraosha floated in front of him, his wings unfettered by the powerful gales sweeping over them. A strange golden glow encased him, stray sparks of Humanity's Hope that he savored just for this moment.

"At last." Sraosha unrolled his sacred scroll. "I gave this man the benefit of the doubt and followed the Trickster's sacred dogma. But now it is clear. I cannot allow this Symbol Of Evil to take another breath! It is my sacred duty to strike him down."

"No!" Panic shot through Joker. "Sraosha, that's not what I-"

Sraosha's wings flared as he cast Hamaon.

A flurry of golden prayer slips spun rapidly through the air around All For One and All Might, aided by the last dying breaths of the twister. They stopped midair when Sraosha reached towards All For One. Joker felt nothing but cold hatred from Sraosha as the Persona clamped his hand into a tight fist.

The first prayer slip stuck to All For One's back, his suit smoking at its touch.

All Might's eyes went wide as the villain thrashed away from his grasp, screaming in agony. The golden whirlwind centered on the

villain, more smoke and the searing of flesh, and the aroma of something *beyond* burnt flesh, pervaded their senses as more papers attached themselves to All For One's body.

All For One froze mid-air when the final prayer slip mummified him.

Sraosha zoomed past a stupefied All Might and grasped All For One's head in his hand.

"Now, feel the pain of a thousand souls being ripped from you!" Sraosha said.

The villain shuddered as Sraosha pulled out swirling torrents of color from All For One's body with his other hand, releasing the Sea Of Souls trapped within. The other heroes were locked in place as Sraosha sent the colors skyward, faint aurora danced through the heavens for only a moment before it went dark.

All For One dangled limply from Sraosha's grip.

"What the hell did he do?" Endeavor, despite his flames, felt a shiver course through his soul. "What was that!?"

"He's...." Hawks pupils turned to pinpricks as he stared at All For One. "He's.... dead..."

Sraosha let go. They watched as All For One's lifeless body plummeted into the same chasm in which he used to keep Joker captive. The silence of the city was deafening. Everyone's startled expressions landed on Joker.

"Joker... you..." All Might's throat clogged.

"Sraosha..." Joker looked at his Persona, tears mixing with black ichor. "*Why ?* We don't kill humans!"

"It had to be done. Satanael's bullet did not pierce him, and the captive souls in which the Symbol Of Evil harbored have been set

free.” Sraosha’s body began to fade. “We cannot have another situation like Yaldabaoth. Forgive me, Trickster.”

The Persona vanished. Joker took a shaky breath before he collapsed.

All Might rushed to Joker and Miruko’s side, but before he could do or say anything-

Joker *screamed* .

It was the sort of heart wrenching cry that would haunt the nightmares of those who survived this tragedy, forever scribed into the annals of history as the news camera broadcast All Might and Joker’s sorrows across Japan.

Toshinori shrank down, tearing up as Joker went silent.

“My boy-”

The rest of Joker’s costume disappeared, replaced with casual clothing. He slumped forward onto the stained dirt.

“Joker?” Miruko turned Joker over, the boy’s head lolling to the side. “Joker!! Hey, kid!” Miruko put an ear to Joker’s chest. “He’s breathing, but his heart is... not doing so good.”

Toshinori’s mind tried to wrap around what just happened. Those prayer slips, all of that *light*....

A small army of footsteps stormed the scene as police, EMT’s and the media sharks swarmed around the area.

“Toshinori,” Gran Torino appeared at his side as emergency workers and police hovered a few feet away. “You have to let him go.”

“But, he just-!”

Gran’s eyes softened. “They’ll take care of him.”

“I’ll stay with him.” Miruko stated.

“... Alright.”

Toshinori reluctantly let go. He followed the paramedics to a separate area when his ears picked up the tell tale *click* of handcuffs. Miruko *screamed* . He whipped around to see police dragging the boy away from the EMTs by his arms, his wrists secured by quirk suppressant. Unbridled fury boiled within him.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” He bellowed.

“Explain, now!!” Miruko’s eyes flashed with rage as she stomped into the officer’s personal space.

The officer jumped. “O-orders are to take this villain to Tartarus, sir-e-er, ma’am...”

Sharp whistling noises penetrated the air. Red feathers impaled the ground around Joker, forcing the officers to jump back. Hawks caught Joker before he hit the ground. He cradled the boy’s head in the crook of his neck and wrapped him in his vibrant wings. A shadow fell over Hawks’ face, his eyes glinting with rage.

“You won’t be doing a damn thing to him.” He growled.

The officers exchanged glances.

“But orders-”

Loud footsteps pounded on the ground as Endeavor walked in between Hawks, Joker, and the officers. He planted himself in the center, crossing his arms as the flames around his body intensified. He said nothing, but his piercing blue eyes pinned them to the spot.

Miruko stood next to him, her arms crossed.

“He’ll be going to the hospital.” Toshinori stated. “I will not allow him to be thrown in Tartarus!”

“You are fools.” Gran Torino tapped his cane on the ground and glared at the sweating officers. “If I were you, I would buck up and listen to the top three heroes in Japan.”

“B-but he just *killed* someone.” One officer shook his head. “Fine, I’ll be glad to let the higher ups know about this!”

Hawks scoffed as the officers relented. A stretcher was brought over and Hawks laid the poor boy on it. Hawks bit his lip. Sweat trickled down Joker’s pale face and that dark fluid unsettled Hawks down to his bones. Was it blood? Or something... much worse? Joker’s fingers twitched and his expression pinched.

“I’ll go ahead and get rid of these for you.” Hawks whispered.

The cuffs were undone with a quick flick of a feather. Hawks sneered at the cuffs as he tossed them aside.

“I’ll ride to the hospital with him.” Miruko said.

“Are you sure?” Endeavor grumbled. “You’re injured too, you know.”

Miruko exchanged a long glance with Hawks. “Yes. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll stay behind and help with rescue.” Hawks scanned over the myriad of cameras shoved in their direction. He could feel Kunikazu’s rage on the other side of the cameras. “But *somebody* better go with the kid.”

“Just leave it to me!” Miruko snapped.

Hawks snatched her wrist, his voice turned down to a simmer. “Make sure *you stay with him* no matter what. I have a feeling that the Hero Commission is going to try taking him.”

Miruko firmly nodded.

“Go.” Endeavor muttered.

They parted ways as the sun rose over the destroyed city. Warm light painted the broken buildings and smoldering ruins, but emboldened the spirits of those who survived this disaster.

The police station, devoid of most officers, spent the early morning plunged in grim silence. None of the 1-A students spoke, or even looked at one another, too lost in their own thoughts.

“Pillage him, Satanael!!”

BANG!

“I AM HERE!”

The end of an era lay at their feet. The heroes were victorious this time, but at what cost?

Todoroki scoffed, drawing the others out of their morose silence.

“What’s wrong, Todoroki?” Yaoyorozu asked as she pulled on her bangs.

“The news is out.” Todoroki scrolled through his phone. “Despite the media not giving out his name, its pretty much plastered everywhere else.”

He held up the phone and they all blanched at the forum. Akira’s profile was front and center, with such titles like **‘Joker: Identity Exposed!!’** and **‘Famous Vigilante Is Really A Quirkless Barista!?’** . Other forums were hyper-focused on the number one hero’s true form, or from the vibrant aurora Sraosha ripped from All For One.

“I’ve been scrolling through the news too...” Kirishima sat on the floor and grasped his head. “A lot of them are calling Joker a hypocrite or a murderer. The hospital where he and All Might are at are getting *swarmed* with reporters.”

“What!?” Midoriya yelled. “But he... he...”

“He killed that villain.” Iida stated.

“But that’s-” Kirishima’s eyes watered. “They weren’t there! They didn’t feel what we felt! All For One... he was a *monster* .”

“So that means Joker had the right to kill him?” Yaoyorozu asked.

“That’s... that’s not...” Kirishima shrank into himself, his lips wobbling.

“I’m sorry.” Yaoyorozu pinched the bridge of her nose. “I didn’t mean to sound so harsh.”

“It’s okay.” Kirishima attempted a weak smile. “We’re all exhausted.”

Midoriya’s ears burned as he looked down at his hands. All For One vs. One For All. All Might reiterated that it was One For All’s destiny to defeat that man, but that destiny was stolen away, the burden placed on another person that had nothing to do with this legacy. At the same time... it was a relief.

Midoriya’s stomach roiled with disgust. He would never have to face that monster. But *Joker killed* the Symbol Of Evil before any other heroes were murdered, possibly saved an entire city from being leveled. Thousands of people would return home to their families. The city would never be the same, but things could be rebuilt.

Iida’s face crumpled. “It keeps playing over and over in my mind, what that man’s aura showed us. We thought we were going to die. Personally, I don’t think that killing is the right way. However, in this situation...” Iida, his fingers quivering, formed into fists. “I don’t think there was any other choice.”

His words hung sourly in the air.

“Why do you losers look like kicked puppies?”

“Bakugo!” Kirishima hopped to his feet as Bakugo walked down the hall. “How was it?”

Bakugo rolled his eyes. “They just asked a bunch of stupid questions. It was more annoying than anything. Just answer my question!”

“We were talking about Joker.” Todoroki said.

Bakugo frowned. “They’re tearing him apart, aren’t they?”

They stared at Bakugo with wide eyes. Was that... *concern* in his voice? A vein throbbed in Bakugo’s forehead.

“What!?” He snapped. “Why are you all looking at me like that!?”

“There are a lot of negative things going around the news and forums,” Yaoyorozu said as she looked down at her phone, “But the opposite is also true. Many are still in support of Joker. A few people with, shall we say *gray* morals, agree that this villain shouldn’t have been left alive. Fewer still are... *thanking* Joker for ‘finishing the job’.”

Bakugo clicked his tongue. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stormed past them.

“Bakugo!” Iida said as he rapidly chopped his arm, “Where are you going!?”

“Where do you think!?” Bakugo stopped in his tracks and pinned them all with a glare. “I’m going to that hospital to give that asshole a piece of my mind! He better make it through this, or else-”

“Or else what?”

A chill overcame them as they looked past Bakugo. Aizawa stood there, clean shaven, his hair tucked in a messy bun. The suit and tie he wore, while pristine during the press conference, was crinkled and dusty.

“Aizawa-sensei!” Yaoyorozu gaped. “What are you doing here?”

Aizawa’s eyes flashed red, but he didn’t have the energy to keep it up. “To check on you brats, and make sure that you don’t do *anything else* to put yourselves in danger. You all knew that your little act would have grave consequences.”

“We’ll apologize later!” Kirishima stood by Bakugo as he stared at his teacher, eyes watering. “Just please tell us that Aniki will be okay!”

Aizawa opened his mouth, but then closed it. His eyes fell to the ground. Fear plucked at the hearts of the 1-A students as the police station drowned in the silence.

“I won’t lie and say he’s fine.” Aizawa muttered. “The last I heard, he was in critical condition.”

“No...” Yaoyorozu put her hand over her mouth as the others grimaced.

“But the doctors will do everything they can.” Aizawa looked up, his eyes hardening. “We know that Joker is a fighter.”

“Did you know Joker’s true identity?” Todoroki asked.

Aizawa blinked. “... Yes.”

“Then-!”

Kirishima stopped when Aizawa held up his hand. “Tsukauchi and I knew for a long time who he was, but we’ll discuss this later. Tsukauchi pulled some strings to have officers drive you all home.” His eyes flashed once more. “Where you *will* get some rest and stay put until further notice. Expulsion isn’t the only thing on the line for all of you right now, excluding Bakugo. Do I make myself clear?”

They exchanged glances before Iida released a long sigh.

“Crystal, Sensei.”

“Good. Now scram. The officers are tired enough from this catastrophe, so don’t keep them waiting.”

Aizawa watched as they shuffled past, exhaustion and worry etched into their expressions. He felt bad sending them off like this. He ran a hand down his face when he was sure he was alone. What he wouldn’t give for some of Kurusu’s coffee.

“God damn it.” He muttered.

His phone vibrated a few times. He read Tsukauchi’s messages, his face rapidly losing color.

“*Shit!* ”

None of his students were there to see his frantic sprint out of the police station.

[Tsukauchi]

Aizawa, get to the hospital ASAP.

Joker’s condition is much worse than we thought, and...

Kunikazu is on his way here.

Hehehe....

See you guys next time on.... November 20th

Whims Of Fate

Chapter 61: Whims Of Fate

'So we roll the dice, see where they may fall

Come on why don't we spin the wheel, see whom it may call

To give into temptation

To win it

Or maybe lose it all, yeah~

Who knows where the Whims Of Fate may lead us?'

I will put a trigger warning for this chapter, because Akira declines pretty rapidly and it's not pretty.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

FANART!

[sirblack4 on Deviantart!](#)

[Aria on Twitter!](#)

"Hello?" Akira called out.

A void devoured Akira's mindscape, smothering his vision in a thick veil of black. Akira looked down at his feet. His mirrored self, only

visible by glowing yellow eyes, stared back at him, reflected a dozen times over from the jagged fractals splintering his inner world.

Akira stepped forward. Instead of the beautiful pops of color that appeared when he was Joker, the floor creaked and sprouted ominous cracks. Each fissure struck his soul, a crystal glass on the verge of shattering, but he kept moving forward. A form emerged from the darkness. He squinted, his breath shuddering when he recognized a familiar face.

“... Alice? Alice!”

The dark mirror crunched under his pounding footsteps. He threw his arms around her, desperate for *any* sort of familiar contact. But his body shivered as if he touched ice cold stone. He pulled back, gasping as he fell backwards.

Alice... no, there were others peeking through the darkness.

Ishtar, Titania, Black Frost. Orpheus Picaro reached out towards him, his face painted with pure terror.

All frozen like statues. Their colors grayed out as if they were carved from stone. Clay dolls that would never be fired, nor given paint, nor given any other sort of life past their initial creation. His eyes slowly raised to a giant figure crouched over all of them.

Satanael's wings shielded him, *everyone*, from the shards of broken sky plummeting all around the mindscape. Every crack and fracture rippled through him, cutting deep like gashes. His soul bled profusely with an unending torrent of black.

Muffled voices echoed through the mindscape, but such garbled noises weren't welcome in this little pocket of space. He clamped his hands over his ears. Why were they so loud? Why can't that frantic beeping noise just stop? Cold prickles danced over his skin, but at the same time he felt unbearably hot. His heart beat erratically as if he just chugged a gallon of Sojiro's darkest coffee.

He just wished that it would all go away, let him bask in his own hellscape in peace. A heaviness shrouded him like a weighted blanket. He just... wanted to close his eyes and sleep, plunge into the void waiting underneath the cracked surface of his mindscape.

Can't they tell that he just wanted to *sleep* ? The void was calling to him, he just had to let it take him, and all of his senses would cease to exist. A light flashed in the corner of his eye.

A drop of navy blue light descended from above. A card. A new bond born within the same breath as Satanael. It forbade him from following his urge to plunge into the peaceful darkness.

He extended his hand. The card lazily swiveled over his palm. A new energy nestled deep within his fractured soul like a freshly hatched bird.

This was... the World.

The outside voices grew in volume. Screams disturbed what should have been his peaceful slumber. A knot inside his chest tightened as the newborn energy nudged him towards the light.

Fight.

"Fine, just this once." He whispered as he raised the World into the inky sky.

Akira allowed the World to pull him into the living plane.

"He's had two seizures since his arrival and his brain activity is highly abnormal. I've scheduled some blood tests and an MRI in a couple of hours, pending his status, as well as sending samples of that black stuff to the lab for testing. We'll be pushing fluids in the meantime. He's not out of the woods yet."

"... Thank you, Doctor." Nezu said evenly.

Nezu stared through the ICU window. His heart twisted at the boy swamped in tubes and needles. The heart monitor let off slow rhythmic beeps, and the oxygen mask fogged over with raspy breaths. The boy was so pale that it outclassed the snowy brilliance of his own fur, a sheen of sweat dampened his skin and feverish chills wracked the boy's body.

He looked over his shoulder to Miruko, who leaned against the wall. Her arms were crossed and her leg incessantly bouncing. No broken bones or bloody wounds marred her body, not even the tiniest of scrapes could be found.

"Hey! You can't go in there!!"

They jumped at the voices booming in the hallway.

"Stop!" Tsukauchi's voice echoed. "Under what jurisdiction is this even legal!? You have *no right* !"

"What the *hell* -" Miruko growled.

Several bodies dove into the ICU room. Nezu stormed inside, his rage building as he watched Kunikazu and police officers flock around Kurusu. Tsukauchi made an attempt to block them, but he was overpowered and pushed to the side.

"What do you think you're doing!?" Nezu shouted.

"We're doing what you should've done at the scene." Kunikazu turned to Nezu, his eyes smoldering. "I'm taking this criminal to Tartarus."

"You will do no such thing!"

The doctor, a small woman with glowing golden hair tied in a bun, marched up to Kunikazu. The man was two full heads taller than her, but despite her short stature, fury lay within every fiber of her being. A goddess of unimaginable wrath.

“Stand down, doctor.” Kunikazu said turned to the officers. “Do it.”

“No! Lay a hand on him and I swear to all of you that you will lose your jobs or *worse* .” She leveled her sharp gaze on the officers, who shirked back. “This *child* is not stable! Moving him right now could kill him.”

“If anyone is losing their job over this, it would be *you* .” Kunikazu spat. “Don’t you understand the chaos the public is in because of him!?”

“The way I understand it,” The doctor crossed her arms. “It was that villain’s fault for causing such a ruckus, not Joker’s.”

“Joker *executed* somebody on live television!” Kunikazu’s nostrils flared. “Those underground cameras were *still live* when the villain’s body fell into that chasm! Joker has proven too dangerous to be kept in the public. As President of the Hero Commission, I am ordering them to take that criminal to Tartarus!”

Nezu grinned as he watched the doctor emanate such a strong unadulterated wrath that it made every hair on their bodies stand on end. There was a reason Nezu kept in close contact with the best of Recovery Girl’s proteges.

“I don’t care. Who. You. Are.” She punctuated every word with a jab to Kunikazu’s chest. “This is *my* hospital, and I will not tolerate your attitude any longer. Either get out, or I’ll have you thrown out. Don’t test me on this.”

“You cannot keep him safe forever.” Kunikazu looked past the doctor to Nezu, his eyes glowing an infernal gold. “It’s only a matter of time. Mark my words, this *murderer* will be locked in the depths of Tartarus and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

A new pressure reaped the precious air from their lungs and filled their veins with ice. Machine alarms blared and the heart monitor went on the fritz.

“S-sir!”

They whipped around as the police officers backpedaled away from the bed.

Kurusu was awake, and his foggy, terrified eyes were locked on Kunikazu.

Aizawa's thunderous expression frightened off any curious nurses as he stormed towards the ICU.

“I’m telling you I’m fine!” A familiar voice echoed down the hall. “I’ll do whatever tests you want later, but right now somebody *needs* me!”

“Sir!” A nurse buzzed around Toshinori as he walked through the hall with the same fire as Aizawa. “Your body just went through a major traumatic change! We have to make sure that... that Joker’s healing didn’t mess with anything-”

“I assure you, I’m fine. I feel better than I have in years!” Toshinori’s eyes met Aizawa’s, relief shooting through him. “Aizawa! I take it you’re here to-”

“Yes .” Aizawa snapped. “I know what room he’s in, but we have to hurry.”

“But-”

Aizawa looked at the flustered nurse. “I’ll take care of this idiot and have Recovery Girl wack him for his stupidity later.”

“Hey!”

The nurse huffed, but she relented. The odd pair rushed through the hallways. Aizawa carefully listened to Toshinori’s breathing in case he had to tell him to wait or slow down. There was no wheezing, or

any trace of blood on his lips. His fresh hospital clothes were clean. Toshinori didn't show *any* sort of strain.

"I'm fine, Aizawa."

"Just making sure." Aizawa looked forward. "We need to be at our very best if we're to help Akira."

"I know." Toshinori clutched his left side, his expression grim. "My scar... my injury is completely healed." Aizawa widened his eyes as Toshinori scowled. "I owe Joker more than I could ever give back. I should have been the one to put that villain down, not an innocent teenager. Now he has to bear the repercussions-"

Aizawa shivered when a wintry bite chilled the air and stopped them dead in their tracks. Electricity jolted up their spines as a raw, hair raising scream ripped through the hospital. Terror plunged into their souls as that scream was followed by a bloodthirsty howl and loud crashes.

"Aizawa!!" Toshinori called as Aizawa surged forward.

Terrified police officers poured out of one room, all nurses and doctors dove underneath the main nurse station for the ICU. Aizawa's blood *boiled* as Kunikazu slowly stepped backwards out of the room, face sweaty and pale as a sheet.

Aizawa shoulder checked Kunikazu as he jumped into the fray.

The bed was overturned and tables smashed to bits, equipment and broken glass peppered the floor. Miruko stood valiantly in front of Nezu, Tsukauchi, and a short doctor, but the main form that drew Aizawa's eyes was-

Cerberus, whose eyes glowed a bright citrine, his snowy white fur darkened into a dreary gray. Sharp cracks mottled his skin. Red energy blazed around Cerberus and black ooze bubbled under his

feet. The air shook under another mighty howl, glass shards and broken plastic vibrated by the force of it.

“Aizawa!” Tsukauchi pointed to the person behind Cerberus.

Akira.

Crumpled against the wall to make himself as small as possible. His hair covered most of his face, but thick trickles of black poured from his eyes and mouth as the boy gripped his head with bone white knuckles.

“Hey ugly!!” Miruko shouted.

Cerberus whipped towards her with a pained yowl.

Aizawa didn't think.

He *moved* .

Aizawa skid under Cerberus as he swiped at Miruko, his claws cleaving a few strands of her hair when she bounced around the room. The beast screamed with rage when Aizawa wrapped his arms around Akira, but Miruko planted herself in between them. He held the boy tight as Cerberus' whipping tail sent equipment across the room.

“Akira, it's okay!” Aizawa pulled back and softly lifted Akira's head until they stared eye to eye. Aizawa pushed away his terror at the nightmarish goop dripping down the kid's porcelain face or the bandages around his shoulders seeping with crimson. “You're *safe* ! I promise that I'll do everything in my power to protect you. I won't let them lay a finger on you!!”

Cerberus froze mid strike.

“Sojiro...?” Akira blinked, a haze clouding his silvery eyes. Crystalline tears trailed down his cheeks and cleared away some of the ichor. “I-I...”

Aizawa's eyes softened as Akira collapsed into Aizawa's chest, his forehead resting on Aizawa's collarbone. Akira's arms wrapped around Aizawa and clawed into the back of his shirt. Aizawa held the trembling child in his arms as the kid finally broke down.

"I-I'm scared, Sojiro." Akira whispered. "I... I want to go home. I just want to see everyone... Don't let them take me, I-I can't go into the interrogation room again... *please...*"

"It's okay." Aizawa curled protectively around Akira. "Everything's going to be okay. *I promise .*"

Cerberus vanished. A dreadful silence washed over the destroyed ICU as everything returned to normal. The doctor's steps disturbed the glinting glass shards and her shadow fell over them.

"We should move him to another room." She stated. "He needs to be-"

"... Akira? Kid?" Ice returned to Aizawa's veins as Akira went limp. "Hey, stay with me!"

He wasn't *breathing*. Aizawa put two fingers to the boy's neck, but there was *no pulse* .

"Lay him out, quick!" The doctor ordered. "He's going under cardiac-"

Akira's body jolted as if he was struck with a bolt of lightning. Horrible wheezing scraped into Aizawa's ears. Their eyes met. Akira's fingers grasped onto the front of Aizawa's suit.

"Please, just make it *stop-*"

Aizawa's relief suffered a grisly death as Akira's eyes rolled into the back of his head. Black dripped from *everywhere* . Akira's hand dropped as he convulsed.

"He's having another seizure!" She shouted as she kneeled down. "Turn him on his side, hurry!!"

Aizawa did as she instructed as other nurses rushed inside. Aizawa and the others were pushed out as nurses traversed the wreckage and wheeled fresh equipment to the room. The door closed in their faces, the last thing Aizawa saw was Akira writhing on the floor in agony.

A beat of silence stewed in rage.

“*You* .” Aizawa whirled around to Kunikazu, who leaned against the nurse’s station. “What the hell did you do to him!?”

“Aizawa-” Tsukauchi tried to step between them, but Miruko latched onto the detective’s arm.

“That kid would have been fine if Kunikazu didn’t storm in there!” Miruko’s eyes bored into Kunikazu. “Now... now he’s-”

“I did what you all *refused* to do at the scene.” Kunikazu snorted as he straightened his tie. “Protocol states that any villain with outstanding charges is immediately surrendered to the Commission to be processed at Tartarus. It is *your* group breaking the law by taking him here.”

“‘Protocol’ had nothing to do with what just happened in there.” They stared at Nezu, whose beady eyes became as sharp as a knife. “What you did was beyond comprehension, Kunikazu. That was not ‘protocol’, it was a child having a temper tantrum because he won’t get what he wants.” Nezu’s words came out slow and soft, like a predator stalking their prey. “Kurusu was already unstable, but if he sustains permanent damage because of the stunt you just pulled-” Nezu stared up at Kunikazu, but he didn’t feel like the small one here. “Then I will personally see to it that you lose everything you’ve ever worked for.”

Kunikazu’s eyes flickered. “Is that a threat?”

“No.”

Their eyes turned down the hall, where *All Might* stood. Steam wafted from his muscles and his clothes were pulled tight. He bore his signature smile, yet it was the sort of smile an executioner might bare towards the most heinous of villains. His shadowed eyes gleamed bright as he held up a fist.

“It’s a *promise*, Kunikazu!” All Might boomed.

Kunikazu blinked slowly. “And how long are you able to keep your form now, Yagi? By my count, it’s only been ten seconds-”

All Might deflated. He coughed as streams of vapor coursed around him, but it was more of a natural reaction that had been ingrained into him through years of pain. There wasn’t a drop of blood in sight.

“Enough.” A deep voice interrupted.

“Chief Tsuragamae!” Tsukauchi said. “What are you doing here?”

The dog headed Chief of Police stepped next to Yagi.

“I was already on my way here.” Tsuragamae said as he scanned the group, his eyes landing on Kunikazu. “What is Kurusu’s status?”

Aizawa scowled. “He relapsed and started having another seizure.”

Tsuragamae’s expression soured. “I was afraid that something like this would happen. So I made a few calls.” Tsuragamae glared at Kunikazu. “There will be grave repercussions for you if Joker’s health declines.”

“What authority do you have over me?” Kunikazu snapped.

“Perhaps none, at this moment.” Tsuragamae growled. “However, because of the circumstances, I managed to get the hearing for Nezu’s program pushed up. A judge will be here tomorrow morning to decide who get custody of Joker.”

Aizawa’s jaw went slack. “He’s coming *here* ?”

“Seeing how this case progressed, and the increasing severity of it, the court has agreed to hold the hearing in a private conference room in this very hospital.” Tsuragamae looked everyone in the eye. “The hearing will be eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Get some rest, gather your testimonies. Until then, Joker shall remain in this hospital under the watchful eye of doctors. No exceptions.”

The ICU door opened and all eyes turned to the golden haired doctor.

“How is he, Zoey?” Nezu asked softly.

“He stopped seizing.” She sighed and shook her head. “But it doesn’t look good. His vitals are all over the place.”

“Can you do the scans before tomorrow morning?” Nezu asked. “We should have the full scope of the damage before the hearing tomorrow.”

“They will have to wait until we’re sure he’s stabilized enough...” She said, “But if everything clears up, then yes. We can do them first thing tomorrow.”

“Well, no matter.” Kunikazu rubbed his hands together, a tiny smirk pricking his lips. “Tomorrow will decide that criminal’s fate, with or without the scans.”

The man turned and stalked down the hallway.

“I... I don’t like how quick he changed his tune.” Tsukauchi muttered.

“I want Kurusu to be protected. Guards posted outside his room and eyes on the boy at *all* times.” Tsuragamae said as he watched Kunikazu disappear around the corner. “Kunikazu is not allowed to see the boy.”

“Agreed.” Aizawa growled.

“We should call in more heroes from your particular group, Miruko.” Nezu said. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to be of aid.”

“Hell yeah!” Miruko said as she cracked her knuckles. “They’ll jump at the opportunity to protect Joker from that scumbag.”

“Any extra hands will help.” The doctor pinched the bridge of her nose, “Both for Kurusu, and for the media storm right outside our doorstep. I don’t trust any of those vultures not to do something stupid.”

“I’ll make the call.” Tsuragamae stated. “We should also keep an eye on the vents and the windows.”

“The vents?” The doctor asked, brows furrowed.

“In case we get any unexpected visitors.” Nezu chuckled. “I believe Hawks would be the perfect person to keep an eye on them. Just an added precaution.”

A pair of nurses rolled a fresh bed into Kurusu’s room. They emerged a moment later. Kurusu was unconscious and wrapped up with blankets, a delicate breathing mask strapped to his face and his arms wired with IV’s.

“I’m going with him.” Miruko stated as she went to Kurusu’s side. “I’ll beat Kunikazu back if he tries anything else!”

Toshinori rubbed the back of his neck. “I also wish to stay with the boy, just in case.”

“That’s fine.” The doctor said as a tiny smirk bloomed on her face. “But I’m still telling Recovery Girl where you are. She still needs to perform a full examination on you.”

Toshinori paled, but he frantically nodded as he and Miruko followed the nurses to Kurusu’s new room.

“You don’t think Recovery Girl could heal Kurusu?” Tsukauchi asked.

“That would be unwise.” Nezu glared at the floor. “We don’t know if Kunikazu worsened the boy’s condition with that act, and it would be dangerous to drain his energy when he’s already so exhausted.”

“I don’t get why he didn’t heal himself when he summoned Cerberus.”

“He wasn’t in his right mind, Tsukauchi.” Aizawa shook his head. “Cerberus was trying to protect him from... from being taken. He *begged* me not to let them take him to an *interrogation room* .”

“We won’t let anything else happen.” Nezu’s tail flicked from side to side. “In any case, let’s use these precious hours wisely. This boy is counting on us, now more than ever.”

Aizawa remained rooted to the spot as the others split ways. All except for Nezu, who stared at him knowingly. Aizawa looked down at himself, his suit stained with gleaming globs of black. Was that press conference to distract the villains only a few hours ago? It felt like an age. He tore out his bun and allowed his long hair to drape over his face.

“Aizawa?” Nezu put a paw to the man’s leg. “What is it?”

“Akira had *no* pulse. How in the world is he still...” The image of him clutching Akira’s lifeless body churned his stomach. “I don’t understand. Is that what he went through when I... my quirk-”

“Think no more about that, Aizawa. The boy’s resilience is astounding.” Nezu fidgeted with the end of his sleeve. “We have to have faith that he will make it through this.”

Sourness prickled across Aizawa’s expression.

“Aizawa, this is an order. Go home, get a shower. *Eat something* . Come back refreshed.” Nezu peered into him. “And after, we’ll fight Kunikazu tooth and nail. You need to be at your full strength. Am I understood?”

“... Yes.”

“Good. You leave the rest to me.” Nezu turned on his heel.
“Everything shall be decided tomorrow.”

“-In other news, Joker’s civilian identity and All Might’s true form have caused quite a stir.” Demizu Mika gestured to the sea of reporters and cameras surrounding the hospital. “Many are demanding that the heroes make a statement, and are wondering on Joker’s status following his collapse, and All For One’s death, on live television. So far, the hospital doors have remained closed. No statement about Joker or All Might’s health have been released to the public. We’ll have more on this shocking story, as it breaks. Demizu Mika, signing off!”

Inko should be *furious*, but she only found herself conflicted.

The crying child she held in her arms all those weeks ago was a genuine, good boy. Her gut instinct told her that he was telling the truth about his bad home life, but to think that all this time he was a wanted vigilante, let alone how he had just killed somebody...

A villain.

An evil man that targeted *her baby*, and it was Joker that protected Izuku during their escape.

Inko picked up the remote and muted the television as it replayed the Kamino Incident.

“Izuku...” Tears burned her eyes and she shook her head. “Why were you at Kamino? Just why?”

The front door opened. Inko stood from the couch as her son stepped into the living room, shoulders slumped. Izuku looked at her with a watery, broken expression. The bags under his eyes were so

dark. All of the sour words and will to discipline her son just... melted away as she opened her arms.

Izuku crashed into her.

"It's okay, Izuku..." She said as she ran her hand through his hair. "Everything will be alright."

"Why didn't he just tell us the truth?"

Inko's heart twisted as her eyes fell on the television, where Kurusu stood upon the palm of that ginormous angel... demon? *Devil* ? She wasn't entirely sure.

"I don't know, baby. M-maybe he was scared, or lost... or maybe he just didn't know who to trust." She pulled back and locked her hands on his shoulders. "But whatever it is, you don't have to forgive him right away if you don't want to."

"But... what if something happens to him before I... What if he..." The trademark Midoriya waterworks flowed from his eyes. "I j-just *can't...*"

Inko drew him back into her arms, and they cried together in the safety of their apartment.

The Todoroki manor became steeped in a dreadful air. Not a wink of sleep came between them, and while Fuyumi made a full sprawling breakfast after Shoto and Momo shambled into the house, nobody had the appetite. Instead, the four of them huddled around the living room, cups of steaming chamomile tea sat on the table.

Fuyumi frowned at the television. "They're *still* going on about it?"

"Of course they are, Fuyumi." Shoto whispered. "What else are they going to talk about on national news?"

“I’m just glad that you two came back safe.” Fuyumi put a hand to Shoto’s shoulder. “You had us worried sick!”

“... Yeah.”

“I *KNEW* IT!!!”

“Natsuo, please.” Fuyumi glared at her brother. “What is it now?”

“I figured out where I’ve seen Kurusu before!!” Natsuo said, grinning.

“Really?” Shoto glanced behind him. “Where?”

“At the mall! I- Oh my god.” Natsuo paced behind the couch. “I can’t believe I bought Joker his own merch, with *Endeavor*’s credit card! Do you think he knew!?”

“Given how intelligent Kurusu is, I would say he did.” Momo rubbed her arm, her eyes downcast. “I can’t believe he deceived us for so long. I never thought such a powerful vigilante would moonlight as a quirkless barista, let alone how... attached our class would get to him.”

“Sorry.” Natsuo stopped in his tracks. “I didn’t mean to-”

“No, don’t worry about it.” Momo attempted a weak smile. “Shoto, has Iida texted you back yet?”

“Yes.” Shoto scrolled through his phone. “He said his brother is at the hospital with some other heroes. We know that Endeavor is there, too. Whatever is happening, it can’t be good.”

“... I see.” Momo sighed as she snatched her phone. “Mina is absolutely heartbroken. I don’t think our class is responding well to this at all. Kurusu’s situation, paired with All Might’s true form, might be too much for them to handle.”

Shoto scowled.

“Hey, come on, you guys!” Natsuo threw on a grin. “Cheer up! This is *Joker* we’re talking about. He’ll... he’ll be fine! You can work past this when he gets better, I know it.”

Shoto’s eyes flicked up to the television screen. “... Let’s hope so.”

“No, this can’t be right...”

“Maybe the machine is malfunctioning dear,” Recovery Girl frowned as she look at the scans. “I suggest we do more, just to be sure.”

Zoey leaned back on the chair as she stared through the window, where the boy lay inside a massive machine. Kurusu hasn’t regained consciousness since the *incident*. It was more likely that he fell into a coma because of Kunikazu’s recklessness.

“I suggest we check the machine and redo the scan.” She said as she scrolled through her computer. “It’s just... this has to be an error.”

“Dear,” Recovery Girl patted her arm. “There’s always the chance that these results *are* genuine. This boy’s powers have confounded many people. He’s such a unique individual.”

“‘Unique’ is putting it lightly. His whole make-up shouldn’t even be possible!” She huffed. “He has *no* quirk factor? There haven’t been brains like this since before the era of quirks!”

“I know.” Recovery Girl furrowed her brow as she looked through the window. “Nezu loves nothing more than to exploit loopholes at the Commission’s expense. He is going to have a field day.”

“Recovery Girl,” Zoey pursed her lips. “Nezu can exploit all the loopholes he wants, but if the hemorrhaging of his brain is *this* severe... then it won’t matter. How are we going to tell them?”

“We cannot hide it.” The older woman sighed and sagged into her chair “This poor child.”

“R-right. One more scan, and then I’ll go straight to the hearing.”

They went silent as a weight settled in their hearts. The others were working so hard to get custody of this kid, but...

They might already be too late.

Gang Orca and Ryukyu prowled down the hospital hallway with a profound sense of purpose. Any hospital staff took a single look and ran the other way for fear of being hunted by this pair of furious apex predators.

“Gang Orca, Ryukyu.”

They stopped in their tracks as somebody came through another intersecting hallway.

“Jeanist!?” Some of Ryukyu’s rage drained away with shock. “You’re awake!”

Gang Orca looked his fellow hero up and down. “You’re back in your hero costume already? How are you feeling?”

“I... am fine.” Best Jeanist put a hand on his stomach, his eyes turning thoughtful. “Tsuragamae brought me up to speed when I woke up.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling up for this?” Ryukyu asked as she crossed her arms. “We’re going up against Kunikazu.”

“Yes .” Best Jeanist’s hands formed into fists. “If it wasn’t for Joker’s healing... I might as well be dead. I’m going to fight for him, no matter what.”

Gang Orca exchanged a long glance with Ryukyu.

“Okay.” Gang Orca said. “Then feel free to come in with us.”

“We’re already running late.” Ryukyu marched down the hallway.
“Let’s not waste any more time.”

They reached the conference room and Ryukyu threw open the door. The disparity was staggering. The top heroes in Japan were all crowded on one side, along with Nezu, Aizawa, Tsukauchi, Iida Tensei, and Chief Tsuragamae.

Hawks sank into his chair and stared at the table, as if he wished to be devoured by the void.

Endeavor, far too large to be sitting in such a small chair, was beside Hawks. If this situation wasn’t so grave, then Ryukyu might say that Endeavor’s expression bordered on constipated.

A skeletal All Might sat in between Nezu and Aizawa.

Kunikazu sat alone on the other side, his lips curled as he stared directly at Hawks.

“Welcome,” A man stood at the head of the table, “Please take a seat, and then we can get started.”

Ryukyu’s resolve hardened as she sat down beside Miruko, who grinned as she swiveled in the chair. Gang Orca and Best Jeanist took the last remaining seats on their side of the table, the latter’s fiery eyes locked on Kunikazu.

“Good morning, everyone. I’m Judge Sadamu.” The man with black eyes straightened his dark suit. “We’re here to decide the placement of a young vigilante currently in this hospital. I’ll listen to both sides before taking the time to make my decision. This is an utterly unique situation that requires the utmost professionalism. Outbursts won’t be tolerated. Does everyone understand?”

A round of nods went around the room.

“Good.” The judge sat down and gestured to Kunikazu. “President Kunikazu, we’ll start with you.”

“Thank you.” Kunikazu stood to his full height. “Joker could easily be classified as an S-rank villain, and is far too dangerous to be kept with the general public. His powers are beyond our control. He *attacked* heroes right in this very hospital.”

“Only because *you* threatened to clap him in irons and throw him in Tartarus!!” Miruko yelled.

“Miruko, please contain yourself.” The judge said serenely.
“Otherwise you shall be removed. Understood?”

Miruko ground her teeth and nodded.

Kunikazu cleared his throat. “How much longer will it be before the public turns against heroes, and *authority* itself, because of him? Most importantly, he showed that he is willing to kill to fulfill his own agenda. Judge Sadamu-” Kunikazu slid a folder across the table. “Here are the results for All For One’s autopsy when his body was brought in earlier this morning. The man is *unrecognizable*. Joker’s demon reduced this man’s body into a mummified husk. No blood or viable tissue sample could be taken due to how fast decomposition took place.”

Hawks wrinkled his nose as the judge glanced through the file, frowning deeply.

“I ask this -” Kunikazu prowled back and forth across his side of the room. “What else can he do? The area around the Wild Wild Pussy Cat’s lodge is still experiencing mass landslides. What’s next? Tornadoes? Another typhoon? A tsunami that would wipe out entire coastlines? Would he slaughter *more* people like he did with All For One? For all of these reasons, I believe the custody of the criminal should fall to me.” Kunikazu stopped and stared at the judge. “His rightful place is Tartarus, where this uncontrollable mastermind can no longer be a danger to the people of this country.”

Kunikazu sat down and folded his hands on the table.

“Thank you, Kunikazu.” Judge Sadamu glanced to the other side of the table. “Which of you would like to go first?”

“I have something to say.” Toshinori rose to his feet. “I thought I killed All For One years ago. His death should not be placed on a young man fighting for his right to live. It should be placed on *me*, for failing to do my duty as the Number One Hero.”

“Joker brutally executed the villain on *live* television! Civilians are absolutely terrified of him now.” Kunikazu stated. “You cannot take the blame when the evidence is so concrete!”

“Enough.” Judge Sadamu held up a hand. “I will take that into consideration, if the other side could continue?”

“It’s true that Joker summoned a typhoon and caused insurmountable damage, but I counter Kunikazu’s statement with a single question.” Nezu’s ears pricked forward. “*Why* did Joker do those things? Was it not because the Hero Commission called a manhunt against a terrified boy? If it weren’t for that raid, then the typhoon would never have happened. As for the landslides, Joker did that to put an end to an army of Nomu and protect the students.” Nezu gestured to the others on his side. “These valiant heroes and those in the police force will attest to his character.”

“I detested Joker and took part in the raid.” Ryukyu squared her shoulders. “However, his own actions and words opened my eyes to what he *really* is, a boy that would do anything to protect those he cares about.”

“His sense of justice might seem skewed in the eyes of the law,” Gang Orca leaned forward, “But his heart is in the right place.”

“I agree.” Iida Tensei placed his hands on his knees. “Without Joker, I would never be able to walk again. All of Stain’s victims returned to their lives because of his selfless act of kindness.”

“I will stand by Joker.” Best Jeanist said. “Without him, I most likely would have died or been severely crippled due to the damage All For One inflicted on me. It’s also true that one of Joker’s companions healed and escorted dozens of citizens out of the danger zone.”

“Hell yeah!” Miruko cackled. “He would *never* hurt an innocent civilian on purpose!”

“Is it true that Joker was responsible for taking down multiple trafficking rings?” The judge asked.

“Yes.” Tsuragamae slid two bulging folders towards the judge. “I will provide the reports of each villain taken into custody and the victims who were rescued. Without Joker, those people would still be trapped and those rings would not have been taken down so quickly. The second folder holds every person he’s healed at Musutafu General Hospital, as well as heroes previously injured by Stain.”

Thick silence pervaded the room as Judge Sadamu flipped through the pages. The crinkle of paper hounded their ears until he shut the folders and placed them aside.

“Very well. I’ll accept these reports, and these heroes’ testimony, as evidence of Joker’s character.” Judge Sadamu said.

“I have a counter statement.”

“Go ahead, Kunikazu.” Judge Sadamu said with a cordial nod.

“I have read some *interesting* reports on Detective Tsukauchi and Eraserhead.” Kunikazu narrowed his eyes at the pair. “I heard that you two figured out Joker’s civilian identity long before anybody else. It’s your duty as authority figures to report such things. Why did you allow Joker to keep doing his illegal work?”

“It’s quite simple, Kunikazu.” Detective Tsukauchi smiled. “We gave Joker space and confronted him on neutral ground, without the threat of being arrested or causing potential harm to his well being.”

“Look what happened when we treated him with respect and eventually gained his trust. The evidence is in this room.” Aizawa glared daggers at Kunikazu. “He’s *willing* to work with heroes who give him a chance. This *child* does not deserve to be locked away in a maximum security prison.”

“So, it’s alright to bend the law when it suits you?” Kunikazu said, “And the fact of the matter is that you *all* bent the law to work with Joker. What’s to stop you from going even further? In fact, I think you already crossed the line, Nezu.”

“What do you mean, Kunikazu?” The judge asked.

“What was Joker doing at the Summer Camp?” Kunikazu jabbed his finger at Nezu. “Evidence suggests that they lodged in the very same place where the students and other faculty did. Police found their belongings on the second floor.”

The judge stared at Nezu. “Do you have an explanation for this?”

“Simple.” Nezu stated plainly. “I invited Joker and his team.”

“You *invited* them?” Kunikazu spat. “To a privately sanctioned trip from a *top hero school* ? Why in the world would you do such a thing?”

Nezu and Aizawa exchanged long glances before the mouse spoke up. “Because we knew the League Of Villains would attack the school, sooner or later.”

“You *knew* that you were going to be attacked?” The judge said, frowning.

“Yes.” Nezu said. “I wanted to keep their attack centralized in an unpopulated area. The League wanted to get to my students, it didn’t matter the location. If we chose to abandon plans for the Summer Camp, then they would have found another way to strike. What

would be next? Hostages? The death of my students' family members?"

"Are you serious?" Kunikazu's eyes burned. "Look at what happened with Kamino! You dare say that this course of action was better?"

"An event like Kamino might have still occurred, with or without the Summer Camp." Toshinori stated. "I've known All For One for decades, he would have gotten what he wanted regardless if Nezu approved the Summer Camp or not. That *villain* was a walking calamity."

"But that's just speculation." Kunikazu waved his hand. "The hard facts are still in front of us. *All of you* turned your backs to the law and did what *you* wanted, regardless of the legal consequences."

"I have to agree with Kunikazu." Judge Sadamu sighed deeply, regret flashing in his eyes. "Nezu, I hope you can explain why you think your program should be approved in light of all of this."

"If he falls under U.A.'s custody," Nezu faced the judge head on, ignoring Kunikazu's words. "Then imagine what we will accomplish in the future. This young man is simply lost. With proper guidance, he would be an outstanding hero."

Judge Sadamu rapped his fingers on the table. "Endeavor, Hawks." The duo straightened in their chairs. "You've been quiet. What are your statements on this situation?"

"This child..." Endeavor held out his arm, where his scar from the golden dragon lay hidden beneath his sleeve. "He opened my eyes to what really matters in life and to the gaping discrepancies present in hero society. I believe that Joker should stand alongside the next generation of heroes so that they can make this society a better place for everyone."

Their eyes widened at Endeavor's words.

“Uh...” Hawks scratched the back of his head and avoided Kunikazu’s piercing gaze. “He’s a good kid who’s been through a lot of shit. He deserves a second chance.”

Kunikazu bristled. Hawks shrank further in his seat, sweat beading on his forehead.

“I see.” The judge stood from his chair. “I have heard everyone’s testimonies. We’ll take a short recess. I’ll announce my decision when we reconvene-”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“I’m sorry to intrude.” The doctor walked inside, holding a folder to her chest.

“We were about to call a recess.” Judge Sadamu frowned. “Is this important?”

“... Yes, it is.” She stepped up to the table. “I have updates about Joker’s health that all parties need to hear.”

Judge Sadamu sat back down, and nodded at her.

“I’ve always hated this part of my job.” She put the files in the center of the table and opened it. “But I’m afraid that this hearing is ultimately pointless.”

“... What are you talking about?” Aizawa growled, his brows furrowed as he watched her place several brain scans on the table. “It’s anything *but* pointless!”

The doctor paused, her finger tracing over the final scan. “Joker is dying.”

The atmosphere would’ve been welcome in a funeral home. Nobody dared move, or speak, or even breathe too hard, for it could disrupt the fragile peace between both sides. A pin could drop, a bomb could’ve went off, and none of it would have mattered. Despair

rattled the heroes' hearts as they took in the doctor's words. Kunikazu, on the other hand, looked as satisfied as a sunbathing feline.

"... I don't understand." Tsukauchi murmured.

"You.... you're not lying." Hawks spoke over his pounding heart and the lump stuck in his throat.

Kunikazu studied the scans. The heroes zeroed in on his expression as it shifted through several phases.

"*Interesting.*" Kunikazu's smirk widened as he turned towards Aizawa. "What was it you said before? That putting Joker in Tartarus was a fate *worse* than death? Well, it looks like you got your wish."

Aizawa's eyes flashed red and his hair stood on end, but he was held back by Tsukauchi.

"L-let me explain." The doctor said as she pointed to the first scan. "At first, we thought this was a fluke, or that the machine was malfunctioning because according to these scans, Joker doesn't have a quirk factor."

"*What ?*" Tsukauchi's jaw dropped.

"But my quirk always worked on him, as well as suppressant cuffs!" Aizawa stated. "If this is your version of a sick joke-"

"It's not a *joke* ." The doctor snapped. She sighed when Aizawa and the others jumped at her tone.

"H-he..." Tsukauchi scrubbed his eyes. "My quirk always registered as *truth* when Kurusu said he was quirkless. Now it makes *sense* ."

"But how is this even possible?" Toshinori scratched the back of his neck. "Such strong powers... and no quirk factor? What could this mean?"

“Perhaps that’s why All For One was so interested in him.” Nezu criss-crossed his paws. “That man always loved studying such mysteries, and if Kurusu was in his grasp for so long-”

“A-about that-” They looked to Toshinori as he grimaced. “I don’t think All For One ever had him as a test subject.”

Nezu frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I confronted him about it at Kamino. He said he’s never had the boy as a test subject.”

“But he could’ve been lying to confuse you.” Tsukauchi said.

“No.” Toshinori put a hand over his chest. “He was telling the truth. All For One *laughed* at me. He said that we truly had no idea how special Joker was, and that his origins were... out of this world.”

“... Fascinating.” Nezu slowly turned to the scans, an unreadable glint sparked within his beady eyes. “Truly fascinating.”

“B-but a missing quirk factor doesn’t explain why he’s dying!!” Miruko threw her chair back and pounded her fist on the table. “Explain! Now!!”

“I’m not going to sugar coat it.” The doctor pointed to multiple discolored splotches on the scans. “Many areas of Kurusu’s brain are hemorrhaging. Given the extent of the damage... it’s not likely that he’ll ever wake up.”

“Recovery Girl can’t heal him?” Tsukauchi asked as the blood drained from his face.

“No. In his current state, her quirk *would* kill him.”

“This is bullshit.” Aizawa dragged a hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry.” The doctor bowed her head. “The most we can do is make him comfortable.”

“How long does he have?” Nezu asked.

“Nezu!” Aizawa glared at the rat, his eyes watering.

“We have to face the truth, Aizawa.” Nezu blinked rapidly as his own eyes watered. “How long does he have?”

“I...” She deflated as her hands knotted into fists. “It depends. It could be a matter of hours, it could be a day or two. We’ll make this as painless as possible for Joker.”

Aizawa shook his head rapidly as his shoulders shook. He ducked his face into his capture weapon and stormed out of the room.

“Aizawa!” Tsukauchi called.

“Let him go.” Toshinori said as a haunted look appeared in his eyes. “He needs time to process this. We all do.”

“Well then,” Kunikazu straightened his tie and raised his chin. “I suppose I’ll allow you the time to say goodbye, but I propose that we use his body for study after he passes. Such powers without a quirk factor? Think of what it could mean for science.”

SNAP!

The arms of Gang Orca’s chair *broke* under his grip. Plastic splinters flew around the room, but nobody bothered to comment on it.

“You-” Ryukyu’s eyes flashed with reptilian hostility. “You’re enjoying his suffering, aren’t you!?”

“Please, I have better things to do rather than watch a criminal deteriorate.” Kunikazu looked directly into Hawks’ eyes. “Joker will serve as an excellent example. Now, I have other appointments to keep. Excuse me.”

The man left the room, the door shutting softly behind him.

“Damnit... DAMNIT!!” Miruko pounded the table so hard that it split in half.

“We must calm ourselves.” Nezu stated, his voice cold and calculating.

“How can we be calm after all of this!?” Miruko shouted.

Instead of answering, Nezu looked at the doctor. “How recent is the damage to Kurusu’s brain?”

“Activating his quirk-” The doctor shook her head. “Or, well... forcefully summoning Cerberus in that state is what caused his last seizure. The time frame of the hemorrhaging matches with the incident with Kunikazu.”

“I see.” Nezu hopped down from his chair and walked out of the room.

“God dammit.” Tsukauchi ran a hand down his face. “La Brava and Gentle Criminal are still in custody. We have to tell them.”

“If you can, bring them here.” The doctor said as she gently gathered the scans together. “Everyone deserves to say goodbye to the ones they love.”

“That’s... I don’t know if I could get clearance for that.” Tsukauchi said.

“Judge Sadamu.” Chief Tsuragamae said, his voice grave. “Would you at least grant permission for Joker’s allies to say goodbye?”

“... Yes.” Judge Sadamu sank into his chair. “I could approve a transfer for these circumstances.”

“Of course.” Tsukauchi suddenly looked as if he gained ten years. “It’ll take a few hours to get the paperwork finalized, then I’ll bring them here.”

“I....” Hawks took a shaky breath, his face pallid. “Excuse me.”

Hawks bolted from his chair and out of the room.

“Hawks!!”

Miruko, Ryukyu, Best Jeanist, Tensei, and Gang Orca chased after him to the nearest bathroom.

Men’s bathroom be damned, Miruko kicked open the door and they all streamed inside.

“Hawks...” Ryukyu murmured as they listen to him lose his breakfast in the nearest stall.

Hawks spat into the toilet as acid coated his tongue. He flushed it before he dragged himself back out, collapsing against the wall and curling into himself. He couldn’t look into the others’ face as they all exchanged uneasy glances.

The air was sucked out of the room. Nobody could breathe. Their hearts beat as if there were daggers lodged in them.

“Th-this has to be a nightmare, right?” Tensei sagged to the floor. “It can’t be.”

Miruko whipped around with an angry shout.

Crunch .

“Miruko, I don’t think punching through the wall will help.” Ryukyu said as exhaustion washed over her.

“What else are we supposed to do!?” Miruko yelled as she threw her hands up in the air, dust falling from her knuckles. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this! It wasn’t... that kid was going to be *fine* !!”

“I wish...” Best Jeanist clutched his stomach, his brow knotted. “I could give back what Joker gave me. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“It’s Kunikazu’s fault.” Hawks growled as he forced himself to his feet. “That asshole caused all of this. I’m going to make him *pay* .”

“Hawks!” Gang Orca snatched Hawk’s arm. “Don’t do anything that you’ll regret. We cannot act on our anger right now!”

Hawks stiffened. Gang Orca’s hand trembled over Hawks’ arm. But whether it was from rage or grief... or *both*, Hawks didn’t know.

“I’m just going to say a few explicit words.” Hawks pulled his arm back. “I promise I won’t lay a finger on him.”

Hawks, his wings drooping so low that his feathers brushed the floor, left the bathroom.

“I need some air.” Miruko stated as she scrubbed her eyes and held back a snuffle, the door slamming behind her.

“I think we all need some air.” Gang Orca looked in between the others. “Come on, let’s not linger here any longer.”

“... You’re right.” Ryukyu said as she helped Tensei up.

Miruko pounded down a separate hallway.

Jeanist headed off to who knows where, remnants of deep seated guilt weighing on his heart.

Tensei’s world became a hazy blur as the rest went to the rooftop. The pleasant breeze brushed their faces, the late afternoon sun shone brightly upon the ruins of Kamino in the distance. The clear blue sky had no right to be so damn *happy* .

Ryukyu and Gang Orca paced together around the edge of the rooftop, whispering among themselves. They stopped halfway across the building. The duo looked down at the growing sea of journalists and Joker fans congregating outside the building. Endeavor’s sidekicks and a squad of police officers kept them at bay.

Another realization sent roiling dread through Tensei's body. His baby brother had admired Kurusu and shared tales of what the 'quirkless barista' did before this whole mess. Joker's own smile flashed in Tensei's mind. A bubble locked in his throat as he imagined what his little brother must be feeling right about now.

Tensei looked to the sky as a lone cloud blotted out the sun, the cool shade splashing the rooftop with a blanket of shadow.

He just wanted to go home and hug his little brother.

"Nana..."

Toshinori, slumped over on a hospital bench, clenched his shaking hands together. He glanced at Joker's room across the hallway. A few heroes from Joker's group were inside, whispering between one another. Hawks was gone. Best Jeanist had his own room down the hall. They switched rooms every once in a while, their expressions more grim than ever before.

The air coming from Joker's room was morose, as if they were attending the boy's wake. But judging from how his heartbeat weakened over time-

It made him feel sick to his stomach.

His... stomach. Toshinori ran a hand over his side. Smooth skin brushed his fingertips instead of an ugly mass of scar tissue. He took a breath. Free and clean of coppery undertones or lancing pains that would cause his whole body to seize up. He had forgotten how painless it was for other people to just *breathe* .

"Toshinori..."

"Gran Torino." Toshinori stood from the bench as two figures approached. "Sasaki..."

Nighteye adjusted his glasses, his expression neutral. “How are you feeling?”

“I... I feel better than I have in years. Like... like before All For One gave me that injury.”

Gran Torino tutted as he hopped on the bench. “Did Recovery Girl clear you?”

“Y-yes. My stomach and lung have been... regrown.” Toshinori swallowed. “She’ll put me on a meal and exercise plan to help me gain a healthy weight. I... I’m still having doubts that this is real.”

“Like a dream.” Nighteye’s brow pinched together. “How about your quirk?”

“I can retain my other form for a few seconds, nothing more.” Toshinori shook his head. “I’ll officially have to retire.”

Nighteye’s expression soured.

“What’s up with you?” Gran Torino asked.

“Nothing... or it should be nothing.” Nighteye glanced through the window to Joker’s room. “This is not what I witnessed. The events I saw are practically nonexistent.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Toshinori asked, his face paling.

“*Meaning* that I have a theory about Joker.” Nighteye shook his head. “He was the reason behind the Sapporo raid, where my quirk acted highly unusual. If my theory is correct, then *Joker* himself is the reason my quirk went haywire. Toshinori, when I used my quirk all those years ago and predicted your death...” A hollowness came into the man’s eyes. “I saw... *none* of this. Joker was never supposed to be here.”

Toshinori and Gran Torino exchanged glances.

“What, are you saying the kid is a paradox or something?” Gran Torino muttered.

“I don’t know.” Nighteye said.

“All For One said something strange about Joker, and Nezu has been acting differently since I told him the man’s words.”

“What did that bastard say?” Gran Torino asked with narrowed eyes.

“That Joker’s origins were ‘out of this world’.” Toshinori scowled when their expressions became skewed. “I know. It makes no sense to me.” His eyes turned towards the teenager laying comatose in the hospital bed. “But if he’s *not* one of All For One’s experiments... then who is he? Where did he come from? All of Nezu’s theories were *wrong*, and we’re right back at square one.”

“The only one to know the truth is Joker himself.” Nighteye’s expression softened. “I’m sorry to say that we might never get those answers.”

Toshinori grimaced. He frantically shook his head to clear these thoughts, but the reminder of his failure was right in front of him.

“What about Nana’s family?” He latched onto the other subject worming through his mind. “Did you find anything....?”

The two men deflated.

“Yes... we found them.” Gran Torino curled his lip. “Nana’s son, and most of his family, were all murdered years ago.”

The world tilted as the ground under Toshinori’s feet were torn out from under him. He sank back into the bench as the dizziness overwhelmed him.

“And Young Tenko...?”

“Listed as missing.” Nighteye pinched the bridge of his nose. “But if All For One was telling the truth about his protege, then we all know where he ended up. All For One must’ve scooped him up and twisted him into a monster.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Toshinori, calm down!” Gran Torino snapped. “You have to face it. What will you do when we face Shigaraki again? All For One sculpted him to *hate* heroes. Shigaraki will see his mentor murdered on live television, and now that Joker is...” Gran Torino sank into himself, his wrinkles filling with shadow. “How do you think he’ll react when he learns that the boy who killed his mentor will die anyway? Shigaraki won’t be able to take his revenge. Do you know what he might do with all of those unstable emotions? The next time he appears, he *has* to go down. This is what we *have* to do.”

“To honor Nana.” Toshinori whispered.

Gran Torino firmly nodded. “Exactly.”

A shadow lurked behind them. “Considering the circumstances, I don’t think you’d be able to fight Shigaraki.”

“Aizawa...” Toshinori stood as the haggard man walked down the hallway. “*Where* have you been? It’s already dark outside.”

“I needed some time to clear my head.” Aizawa’s eyes fell to Joker’s room. “... How is he?”

Toshinori shook his head.

Aizawa’s lips pursed. “I see.”

“How are you handling this?” Nighteye asked softly. “You’re one of the heroes who’s known him the longest.”

“How do you think?” Aizawa growled as his hands knotted into fists. “We’re *finally* able to get him this far, and he just... he’s.... *damnit* .

This wasn't how things were supposed to be!"

"Stewing in guilt's not going to help anything." Gran Torino said. "Do you really think the boy would want you to beat yourself up over this?"

"... No." Aizawa said as he buried his face in his capture weapon. "You know, I remember the first time we met, clear as day."

"At the USJ?" Toshinori asked.

"Yeah. The brat healed me and then had the gall to-"

Toshinori frowned as Aizawa went stiff. "Aizawa?"

"*Healing* ." Aizawa jolted as if he had been electrocuted. "Where are Detective Tsukauchi and Nezu!?"

"Uh..." Toshinori opened and closed his mouth several times as Aizawa's eyes bored into his. "They left to finalize some paperwork with Tsuragamae and the judge, a-and then they would go pick up La Brava and Gentle Criminal and take them here? Why are you asking?"

"Mona."

"Mona?" Nighteye tilted his head to the side. "You mean Joker's cat?"

"Yes!" Aizawa snatched his phone from his pocket and speed dialed Nezu. "Mona has the *same* power as Joker. His companion, Mercurius, took a bullet for me during the Summer Camp and then healed himself right after."

Toshinori's eyes lit up. "Mona could heal Joker?"

"Yes. It's possible that Gentle Criminal and La Brava could bring Mona here and-" Aizawa tore the phone away and redialed. "Damnit, why isn't Nezu picking up!?"

“Come to think of it, they’ve been gone for hours. It’s already getting late.” Nighteye frowned. “I don’t know what’s taking them so long.”

“I’ll try calling Tsukauchi.” Toshinori said as he grabbed his phone and dialed his best friend. After a few moments listening to the dial tone, a rock sank into his gut. “He’s not picking up either.”

“Odd.” Nighteye got out his phone, dialed, and held it to his ear. “Chief Tsuragamae isn’t answering.”

“*Shit* .” Gran Torino spat. “This can’t be good.”

“Let’s calm down and confer with the other heroes.” Nighteye turned towards Joker’s room. “The more people we have, the faster we can get answers. Joker doesn’t have much time.”

They streamed into Joker’s room.

Gang Orca sat on Kurusu’s left side, giant hand gently ruffling the kid’s hair.

Ryukyu was on the other side, both hands gently clutching Joker’s, careful not to disturb the IV.

Miruko leaned against the end of Joker’s bed. Her red eyes locked onto them like homing beacons.

“Is something wrong?” Ryukyu asked softly.

“Yeah, with expressions like that-” Miruko cracked her knuckles. “Who do I have to punch?”

Aizawa shook his head. “Nobody, yet.”

“Yet?” Gang Orca said.

“There might be a way to save Joker.” Aizawa shook off the way they jumped in their skins. “But we need Gentle Criminal and La Brava first. Tsukauchi and Nezu were supposed to bring them here, but

they aren't back yet and they haven't been responding to any of our calls. It's possible that something went wrong."

Ryukyu's grip on Kurusu's hand tightened. "Take a step back. How will those two be able to save Joker?"

"Mona has healing powers." Aizawa's expressions hardened. "His other teammates might know where to find him. If we can bring Mona here-

"We can save Joker!?"

"Miruko!" Ryukyu hissed. "We're in a hospital!"

"I'm *not* sorry!"

"There's a *chance* we could save Joker." Nighteye said. "We don't know if Mona's powers are going to be enough."

"Its our best shot." Gang Orca rose from his chair.

"You have yet to realize something." Gran Torino grumbled. "If Joker does end up being healed, then there's still a chance that he could be shipped straight off to Tartarus. The justice system won't look kindly upon you all breaking the rules for him. Kunikazu is going to do whatever it takes to bring him in. Ask yourselves, is this really what you want?"

"We cannot sit here and do nothing!" Toshinori said.

A familiar voice turned their blood to ice.

Akira found the darkness of his splintered mindscape peaceful.

Once again, he stood in the center of the creaking crevice, which spider-webbed as far as the eye could see. The plunging drop into the void was but a step away. The noises from the outside world were garbled, but if he focused, familiar voices became clearer.

Heroes he *thought* he could trust. Were they in league with the man with glowing yellow eyes? The same man who wanted to throw him in the darkest cell in Japan?

Sojiro promised that he wouldn't let the yellow eyed man hurt him. Who was telling the truth? Whose side were the heroes on!?

He took a breath as he tried to make sense of the noise.

"-we need to find Gentle Criminal and La Brava.... Tsukauchi and Nezu were supposed to- It's possible that something is wrong."

Something is wrong? What happened to his friends....?

"His other teammates might know where to find him. If we can bring Mona here-"

Mona...?

"-be shipped straight off to Tartarus."

No.

No!

Did they want to throw them in that prison too? His teammates would come and rescue him no matter what, but this hospital was *infested* by heroes. Is that their plan? Dangle him like a lure to entrap his teammates?

He would rather die than be used as bait.

A realization froze Akira.

He would rather...

Die.

Akira listened to the void's siren calls. The Personas, reduced to tranquil statues as black ooze dripped down their faces, could not stop the inevitable. Orpheus Picaro's Endure and Cerberus' Enduring Soul had been used. His body teetered on the brink between life and death, but death wasn't permanent in this world.

Mona...

Akira swallowed. This place overrun by powerful people, but there would be no reason to watch a *dead body*. The morgue would most likely be underground, much easier for Mona to sneak in and revive him when everyone's guard was down.

An ominous rumble, like the sound of a massive iceberg breaking, disturbed the mindscape. Coldness washed through Akira as the last of his strength left him, and he sank down to the fractured floor. A shaky chuckle bubbled from his throat. This was it. His body knew it was his time.

"I..." He grasped his hair as his whole body quivered. "I don't want to die..."

The infinite blackness crept closer. His insides burned as if his body was filled with boiling tar. Is this how Okumura felt when he suffered a Mental Breakdown? His soul torn asunder, his body failing. He collapsed onto his back as the rumbles grew louder. The death of a universe was at hand. Akira reached up towards Satanael's stony expression marred with dripping black.

"I'm so scared, Mona...."

The ground splintered under him, and with a beat of silence-

The mirror shattered. His body dropped into the undulating void, the wind roaring in his ears as his Personas fell out of his grasp.

"Trickster, no!!!"

Lavenza, her body surrounded by glowing butterflies, dove towards him, her outstretched hand desperately trying to reach him. He willed himself to reach for her, but his appendages were nothing more than dead weight. A coldness rushed through his veins like snow melt, his final breath squeezed through his lips as the void claimed his soul.

“Trickster... Ren!! Please, don’t go!!”

Lavenza’s desperate pleas faded into nothing.

“I’m so scared, Mona...”

Kurusu’s scratchy voice trilled through the room.

“Joker!?” Ryukyu whirled around. “Kid, are you-”

The machines surrounding Joker *screamed*. They jumped back in horror as black pools spilled from Joker’s pure white eyes and dripped down his cheeks. Nurses swarmed the room and gently pushed them out into the hall. Recovery Girl and her protege appeared within seconds to join in the frantic movements.

Aizawa’s ears rung. All other sound was drowned out and he couldn’t breathe, his vision tunneling onto Akira’s pale face.

Mere minutes stretched into an eternity as the nurses slowed down, their expressions grim, until they came to a stop. Recovery Girl’s crestfallen demeanor told them what they already knew. The screech of the flat lining heart monitor became forever etched into their memory.

Aizawa waited for a jolt to bring Akira back again, but it never came.

Recovery Girl turned off the heart monitor and looked at the clock.

“Time of death: 11:20 pm.”

HOLD UP! I see those tomatoes you're about to throw. This twist was planned from the very beginning. I've been foreshadowing this ever since Hosu, after all. I've shown what happens to people when they die and are brought back, and Akira was never immune to that even with Endure/Enduring Soul. Believe me when I say that this is a **vital** thing for Akiren to go through, and currently nobody but the betas understand **why** it is so important. So put those tomatoes down and maybe we could all make some delicious sauce from them, yeah?

Anyway, for the next chapter we will finally be catching up with Morgana and see what trouble he and the others get into. And... he may or may not be forced to reveal the final secret that he and Akiren have kept from the rest of the group regarding Samarecarm...

Next update days and possible chapter names since I'm taking a break. Please note that some dates and/or chapter names could change!

Break In To Break Out - Dec 25th

Dark Sun - January 1st

Mementos - January 15th

New Beginning - January 29th

And no, Mementos is probably not what you're thinking. I'm totally abusing the fact that Royal has multiple Mementos soundtracks.

Break In To Break Out

Chapter 62: Break In To Break Out

“I’ll make sure everyone returns safe.” Mercurius said smoothly.
“That’s a promise.”

“You better.” Kaito crossed his arms and glared. “Someone has to be able to keep their promises around here.”

Happy holidays everyone <3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

FANART!

Miss Noir on Twitter! [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

Soreness and fatigue plagued Morgana’s body as consciousness rolled in like a lazy fog. His dry throat whined as he flexed his stiff paws and tail, his eyes scrunching. A soft noise whispered into his ears, a gasp.

“Hey, he’s finally waking up! Kaito, get in here!”

Morgana peeled his eyes open as blurry figures approached him. He blinked as his vision cleared, until he could focus on a familiar shade of lightning blue eyes. Kaito spoke before Morgana uttered anything.

“We’re at the Raven’s nest.” Kaito’s hand gently massaged Morgana’s head and ran down the length of his back. “Take it easy, Morgana. You’ve been through a lot.”

“What...?” Morgana’s throat was scratchy. “What... what happened? How did I get here?”

“I brought you here! Stubbs and I were running through the forest, when Mercurius swooped down and pushed you into my arms! Then he went poof!” Shuichi poked his fingers together as he sank into the opposite couch. “I thought you were dead, little buddy! You’ve been asleep for days!”

Days!?

“What the hell happened to you, Morgana?” Kaito asked.

Morgana’s memories flooded back, full of smoke and ash and the scent of charred wood burning his sensitive nose.

“Joker and I separated, I-I went with Eraserhead while Joker dealt with the flames. Afterwards, I went to look for him. Joker was close by, and then... Todoroki went insane and lit himself on fire. The next thing I know, I hear Mercurius screaming, then intense pain, a-and then... nothing.” Morgana inhaled sharply. “Mercurius!”

Faint green flames brought forth the Persona. His brilliant blue clothes were splotted with ash and multicolored ichor, his left wing nothing more than a burnt stump. The barest edges of new, sapphire feathers poked through the marred flesh. Morgana’s heart lurched. Tears stung his eyes and a heavy lump formed in his throat.

“... Magician.” Kaito stepped back when Mercurius knelt in front of Morgana. “I apologize. I... I have failed you. If only I could-”

“H-hey! None of that!” Morgana put his nose against his Persona’s forehead. “You did what you had to do and got me out safe and sound! R-right?”

A knot of uncertainty flowed between them, but Mercurius nodded.

“Mercurius,” Morgana sat up, peering into his other self’s eyes.
“What happened after I blacked out?”

“The Trickster found us in a near-death state after Todoroki’s white flames scorched us.” Mercurius shook his head as Shuichi and Kaito exchanged horrified glances. “Ishtar healed us the best she could. Joker ordered me to get you to safety and that was the last I saw of him. I ran into Spinner not long after.”

“What happened to him? Where are the others?” Morgana’s heart raced when Kaito and Shuichi sank further into themselves. “Wh-what’s with those faces? Where is everyone!?”

Shuichi swallowed. “Uh, Lady Stubbs is keeping an eye out for police outside?”

“Okay?”

“Let’s just tell him.” Kaito said.

“But-!”

Kaito ignored Shuichi’s protest, his eyes glinting with steel. “Gentle Criminal and La Brava have been arrested.”

“*WHAT !?*” Morgana hopped on all fours, but his shrieking outburst sprouted tingling pain in his throat.

Mercurius ran a soothing hand down his partner’s back as he fell into a coughing fit.

“I’ll get you some water.” Kaito said as he rushed to the kitchenette.

“It’s okay though!” Shuichi waved his hands. “Hitoshi located them, so we know where they’re being held! We were just waiting for you to wake up first.”

“Good.” Morgana breathed a crackled sigh of relief. “How did you escape? If Gentle and La Brava were arrested, then...”

“Hah!” Shuichi beamed. “I waited for the perfect opportunity! Sneaking past them was child’s play with that Stealthanol!”

Kaito looked over his shoulder and deadpanned. “I think you mean how you were terrified and desperately clung on the bottom of a speeding ambulance over 50 miles through mountain terrain?”

“Wha-hey!! It took over two days to get back because everything was shut down! I got Stubbs and Morgana back here, shouldn’t that count for something!?”

“... You’re right.” Kaito sighed as he turned on the faucet. “Sorry.”

“You still haven’t explained what happened with Joker?”

Shuichi bit his lip. “Uh... you see....”

“What’s wrong? Where’s Joker?”

“W-well... that’s....”

An icy dagger plunged into his heart as Shuichi shook his head.

“*Where* is Joker!?”

“He’s in one of the most guarded hero hospitals in the country.” Kaito said plainly.

“Wh... what?” Morgana whispered. “A hospital?”

Shuichi avoided Morgana’s eyes as Kaito came back and set a water dish on the table.

“Drink first, then we’ll show you.”

Morgana looked at Mercurius, who nodded. With a hoarse sigh, Morgana hopped onto the table, and all was quiet until he lapped up the last drop. Morgana quickly washed his face with a paw. He curled his tail around himself and stared at the other two.

“There. Now tell me what happened to Joker.”

“It’s easier to just show you.” Kaito retrieved his phone and opened it to a news site. “But... it’s not easy to watch.”

Morgana went rigid as he watched the horrible recap of some live stream, and onto the *nightmare* that became cemented in history. The Kamino Incident.

“That’s....Oh my god.” Morgana whispered. “That’s a Persona!”

“Persona...?” Shuichi said as the not-cat’s eyes were glued to the screen.

“Did Joker break his chains? Did Arsene evolve?... All of his Personas at once!?” Mercurius shuddered at the mutual sorrow flooding his body as Morgana heard Joker’s agonized scream and eventual collapse. “That’s... th-that black stuff, it can’t be.... no.... NO!!”

Morgana bolted from the table.

“Hey!” Shuichi jumped from the couch. “Where are you going!?”

“You said Hitoshi had information, so I’m going to the Blue Lotus!” Morgana looked over his shoulder, a determination swelling in his eyes. “We have to get to Joker before it’s too late!”

Kaito facepalmed. “Morgana, you just woke up! Give yourself time to-”

“No!” Morgana screamed. “You don’t understand! If... if that black stuff is there... then Joker might not have much time! I need to get to him!!”

“H-hey, take it easy! I’ll go with you, yeah?” Shuichi whispered. “I want to rescue Joker too!”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Kaito muttered as exhaustion weighed heavy on his shoulders. “That’s what I *would* say, but you’re all impossible to keep track of anymore.”

Shuichi snorted as he and Morgana left the lounge.

“I’ll make sure everyone returns safe.” Mercurius said smoothly.
“That’s a promise.”

“You better.” Kaito crossed his arms and glared. “*Someone* has to be able to keep their promises around here.”

Mercurius nodded before he faded to ash.

Tap.

Tap tap.

TAP.

Hitoshi swiveled in his chair and went to his window. With a grunt, he threw it open.

“You shouldn’t be here!” Hitoshi whisper yelled as two figures rolled in, one less graceful than the other. “It’s *dangerous* !”

“S-sorry!” Shuichi said as he lowered his jacket hood. “But you weren’t answering my texts and we were worried.”

“You look beat.” Morgana jumped on Hitoshi’s bed, “When was the last time you slept?”

“I...” Hitoshi lifted his black fox mask and rubbed his eyes. “I haven’t slept since the Summer Camp happened.”

“Dude, it’s been *days*! ”

“Shhh!!” Hitoshi lunged forward and clamped his hand on Shuichi’s mouth, his fox mask balanced on his forehead. “You have to be quiet. How the hell did you guys even come here without being spotted? In case you haven’t noticed, our little cafe has become a ‘point of interest’ since Akira’s identity went public.”

Shuichi waved his arms. Hitoshi rolled his eyes as he pulled his hand away.

“Oh, that’s easy. Stubbs is distracting them!”

Hitoshi looked out the window. Lady Stubbs sat on the other side of the street with her massive, ghoulish eyes wide open, unblinking. She either stared at an invisible entity or found some secret to the universe that no mortal should ever witness. Whatever it was, a pair of police officers and the hero Death Arms surrounded her, their backs turned to the cafe.

“Ugh, what is it staring at?” AN officer stated.

“I don’t know.” Death Arms said, “But this is one ugly cat!”

Hitoshi muttered several curses as he shut his window.

“We came here because we need your help.” Morgana bowed his head, his ears flat. “It’s important.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Hitoshi walked back to his chair and sunk into it with a heavy sigh. “I understand.”

Morgana’s eyes softened as he studied the purple bags under Hitoshi’s eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Define ‘okay’.” Hitoshi muttered dryly. “In case you haven’t noticed, this turned into a complete shit show for everyone since Akira’s identity came out.”

Shuichi ran a hand through his vibrant hair. “Did your parents have to close the cafe because of it?”

“Temporarily.” Hitoshi growled. “Investigators came to interrogate my parents, but you should have seen them. They were all high and mighty when they barged in, but came out of my parents’ office looking like kicked puppies. They had nothing against Silver Falcon’s scare tactics. They threatened to take our phones and computers too, but Detective Tsukauchi prevented them from taking anything.”

“How do you know that?” Morgana asked.

Hitoshi gestured to his desk, where his personal computer and home built laptop screens danced with code.

“This is....” Shuichi cocked his head to the side. “Uh, I have no clue.”

“I’m in the police network. Tsukauchi never stepped foot inside the cafe, but it was because of him that the other detectives aren’t going so hard. But more importantly-” He tapped on a few keys. Camera footage appeared on screen. “I know where they’re holding Gentle Criminal and La Brava.”

Morgana’s eyes turned bright. “How are they holding up?”

“La Brava is doing the best she can.” Hitoshi frowned as they watched her pace back and forth in the holding cell. “But I’m worried about Gentle Criminal.”

“Why?” Morgana gasped. “... No, they didn’t beat him up or anything, did they!?”

“No?” Hitoshi glanced at Morgana, his expression falling. “Actually, it’s his quirk. He was out for about a day, but when he woke up he accidentally turned his entire cell into rubber. They cuffed him with a quirk suppressant and moved him to a different holding cell. They closed those cells because it hasn’t worn off yet.”

Shuichi’s mouth dropped open. “Did his quirk evolve? It wasn’t that powerful before!”

“Dunno, maybe. But we have Tsukauchi to thank *again* . Without him, they would be in Tartarus. But enough about that.” Hitoshi glanced between Morgana and Shuichi. “What the hell happened at the Summer Camp?”

“We don’t have the full story.” Morgana said.

“We were split apart when the villains attacked.” Shuichi’s shoulders sank, “Akira must’ve done *something* .”

“Sacrifice himself like a complete moron?” Hitoshi growled. “People are going crazy over how he destroyed a mountain and an entire swathe of forest. Not to mention... that horrible live stream and then the Kamino disaster. Everyone got a taste of his true power.”

“That’s why we need to get to him before it’s too late.” Morgana stared into Hitoshi’s eyes. “What have you figured out?”

“W-well, it wasn’t *hard* to find him, per se.” Sweat broke out on the back of Hitoshi’s neck under Morgana’s sharp eyes. “The crowd outside Kamino’s hospital is growing by the hour, so we know *where* he is.”

“Buuuut?” Shuichi said, his arms crossing.

“It’s one of the top hero hospitals for a reason. Their security system is on a whole other level. It’s not like the local police network. La Brava might be able to crack it, but me...” Guilt flashed in Hitoshi’s eyes. “No luck.”

“So it’s settled.” Shuichi said as he cracked his knuckles. “We’re going to rescue La Brava and Gentle Criminal first, and then we’ll find our way into the hospital to rescue Joker!”

A creak came from the other side of the apartment, soft footsteps.

“How many times do I have to tell you to be quiet!?” Hitoshi whisper-yelled at Shuichi. “Do you *want* my parents to find you in here?”

We're walking on thin ice as it is!"

"Sorry!"

Morgana pushed down the flutter of nostalgia as Hitoshi went to the door and put his ear on it. After a short silence, he nodded.

"The next question is, *how* do we get to Gentle Criminal and La Brava." Morgana stared at Shuichi. "It'll be just the two of us."

"And Lady Stubbs!"

"Of course, but I don't think she could distract an entire station like she's doing right now." Morgana sighed. "We'll have to figure out something else."

As if by divine intervention, a *ping* came from Hitoshi's laptop. He raced back to his computer.

"What is it?" Morgana asked.

"It's an order of transfer...." Hitoshi sat down and frantically typed. "I figured out where they're transferring Gentle and La Brava! It's... the hero hospital in Kamino? Why would they take them there?"

"Who cares? This could be our chance!" Morgana flicked his tail. "If they make it to the hospital then our entire operation will fail. Who knows what they'll do there!"

"You don't trust the heroes." Hitoshi deadpanned.

"Gee, you think? Look at everything they did! They arrested our friends, and who knows what they're doing to Joker right now! I'm going to do everything it takes to get him out of their clutches." Morgana's fur bristled and Hitoshi's room became a few degrees cooler. "I won't lose anybody again. I *can't*."

Shuichi shivered and took a step away from Morgana.

Hitoshi cleared his throat and ignored the gaping pit in his stomach. "The transfer is tonight. Give me some time and I'll have their route. After that, it'll be up to you."

"... Thank you, Hitoshi." Morgana whispered. "This means everything to me."

"Don't mention it. If this situation wasn't so screwed up, then I would say that it's kinda fun." Hitoshi tapped the fox mask on his forehead "You know, wearing this was actually pretty cool."

Morgana snorted. "You'd make a great phantom thief."

"... Thanks." Hitoshi turned his chair to hide his reddened face. "I... was trying to think up a code name, but it might be stupid."

"Really?" Morgana's eyes lit up. "What?"

"I-I kinda don't want to say, but I'm calling one piece of equipment the Persona Chords. It can change my voice and-" Hitoshi blushed as Morgana beamed at him. "What? It'll be a good reminder after you and Joker leave!"

"Hold up!!" Shuichi whirled to Morgana. "What do you mean you're leaving!?"

"Well..." Morgana flinched. "Our ultimate goal is locked behind U.A. gates. We *have* to get to the USJ if we ever want to get home."

"Wait," Shuichi scratched his head. "So.... so you're saying that we might have to *split up* ?"

"... Yes." Morgana's eyes drooped. "Joker and I are only here temporarily, we'll have to part ways eventually."

"Is it related to your past?" Shuichi frowned. "Gentle Criminal said that it would be a bit unbelievable, but that whatever you told me would be the truth."

Hitoshi cleared his throat. "You'll have to share that story later, Morgana. You don't really have time for chit-chat."

"He's right." Morgana gave Shuichi an apologetic glance. "I'll explain everything when I can, *after* Joker is safe and sound. I promise."

"O-okay!" Shuichi gave him a thumbs up. "If you say so, then I'll trust you!"

"One last thing before you go." Hitoshi said. "The Raven's Nest."

"What about it?" Morgana asked.

"It might not be safe." Hitoshi sighed. "I got them to drop it when Akira pulled his stunt in Sapporo, but I don't know if that's possible this time around. If there's any chance they could find it, then it's not safe for any of you."

"Thanks for the heads up." Morgana nodded. "We'll figure something out."

"Psst, we should go." Shuichi said as he glanced out the window. "I don't think they'll be interested in Lady Stubs much longer."

Morgana hopped on Shuichi's shoulder as the lizard man pulled up his hood and opened the window.

"Good luck." Hitoshi whispered as they dropped into the streets below.

Manami circled her holding cell. Plain, bright white walls stained with various questionable splotches sent shivers of disgust through her, not to mention how it felt like the walls began to close in on her after who knows how many hours went by as slow as a snail trapped in sap. A small, rickety bed was set up across from a toilet, but she didn't dare use it because the camera watched her every move.

More hours ticked by in maddening silence.

Her only pastime were the horrible memories replaying in her head.

Every time she closed her eyes, she experiences Gentle being ripped out of her arms, bleeding and unconscious. The burn of smoke that made her eyes water. The terrifying reality that she might not see any of her family again, whether they were arrested or suffered worse fates by the villains roaming the forest.

Simply *not knowing* constricted her heart more than anything else.

She received no updates. This little piece of hell became cut off from the rest of the world. Nobody came for her, no matter how hard she banged on the door. Meals were delivered through a slit in the door, but she hadn't eaten anything since that dreadful night.

A knock on the door heralded her first visitor. Though she didn't know whether to count it as a curse or a blessing.

"Detective Tsukauchi." Manami narrowed her eyes.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion." The man had the *nerve* to say as he scanned the dreary cell. "Are you ready to go?"

"Where am I going?" She bit her lip. "What's going on?"

Tsukauchi grimaced. "Long story short, you and Gentle Criminal are being taken to a hospital in Kamino. We don't have much time, and I apologize for this in advance-" Her stomach fell as he produced a pair of quirk suppressants from his trench coat. "But you have to wear these."

"Why!?" Manami *seethed* as she threw up her arms. "It felt like an eternity being locked up in here, and nobody as told me anything! What the hell is going on!? Why are you coming *now* !?"

"I understand you're frustrated." Tsukauchi said, unphased by her outburst. "But these are for your safety. Everyone is nervous over the

Kamino disaster. If the officers mistreated you in any way, then let me know.”

Kamino disaster?

She scoffed. “Where is everyone else? I won’t step a foot out of this room until you tell me!”

“And I thought I was one to ask questions.” Tsukauchi’s smile, although tense, irritated her to no end. “Gentle Criminal has been treated for his Quirk Exhaustion. We’ll be meeting up with him in a few minutes. Mona and Spinner are still missing in action.”

Her lips quivered. “A-and Joker?”

Her heart lurched as the detective stared down at his hands. “He’s.... well...”

“If you hurt him I swear to all that is holy-!”

“We haven’t done anything to him.” Tsukauchi held up his hands, but he sighed as he reached for his phone. “You wouldn’t know.”

“Know *what* ?”

Tsukauchi unlocked his phone and showed it to her. Her stomach plummeted as she gaped at a picture of *Joker* within the palm of a giant black angel floating within the epicenter of a destroyed city. His mask disappeared. His silvery eyes peered right into the camera. A chill crept up her spine.

“What!? When did this happen!?”

“Look,” Tsukauchi sighed as she shook his head. “We’re short on time. Nezu and I will explain on the way there. Right now, Joker *needs* his teammates.”

She curled her lip, and held out her wrists. “*Fine* .”

“Thank you.” Tsukauchi was surprisingly gentle as he put on the cuffs, with enough room so that her skin wouldn’t chafe. “Come on, Nezu and Tsuragamae should’ve retrieved Gentle Criminal by now.”

She walked by his side as they finally left that mania inducing cell behind. The police officers scattered when they saw her, one practically dove into an office and slammed the door shut. Hidden eyes peeked around corners and watched them like hawks. She glanced up at Tsukauchi with a raised brow, but he only shook his head.

Were they afraid because she was part of Joker’s team?

Joker, who was held in the palm of a god, or an angel? Did he keep that power under wraps, or was it something new, born from the horrors of the Summer Camp?

Her thoughts were cast aside once they stepped into the barren lobby.

“Gentle!!”

Gentle Criminal turned to her, his face lighting up. “La Brava!”

He knelt down and they embraced, rather awkward with the cuffs limiting their movements, but it was worth it just to be able to take in his scent again, to listen to his voice. Tear blurred her vision as the other adults exchanged glances behind their backs.

Nezu cleared his throat. “Apologies for splitting up this touching reunion, but our time is rather short.”

Tsuragamae checked his watch. “It’s just past nine thirty. We’ll make it before eleven if we leave now.”

The parted, but were practically glued at the hip as Tsuragamae swept them down another hallway. Tsukauchi and Nezu followed behind, silent.

“Have they treated you well, my dear?” Gentle Criminal asked. “You look rather thin.”

“I could say the same about you.” She rapidly blinked tears out of her eyes. “I’ve been worried sick since.... since....”

“I know.” Gentle Criminal’s smile never reached his eyes. “You don’t have to say.”

Tsuragamae opened the door to the garage. Police officers waited in other vehicles, while the back door of a van remained open, its engine running. Gentle Criminal exchanged a nervous glance with his partner.

“There’s no need to worry.” Nezu hummed as he gestured to the van. “I promise that no harm will come-”

“Don’t bother.” Manami snapped as she hopped into the van first. She turned on her heel and jangled the cuffs at him. “You already broke your promise with us. We don’t need another liar spewing sweetened words.”

Nezu kept a blank face as Gentle Criminal stepped in after her, though a slight twitch in the tip of his tail revealed how he was caught off guard. Thankfully, nobody saw it. Aside from Tsukauchi, but he had enough tact to keep his mouth shut.

Tsuragamae let out a deep sigh as he hopped in the driver’s seat.

Nezu jumped into the van. He took the opposite bench to Gentle Criminal and La Brava. Tsukauchi was the last to enter the vehicle, shutting the back doors and planting himself beside Nezu.

Tsuragamae waited for them to be seated, before the vehicle lurched with motion.

Silence permeated the van. It didn’t help that La Brava stared at them as if they were disgusting insects unworthy of being squished

beneath her boot. Gentle Criminal just looked exhausted.

They spent the first one-third of the trip in ear ringing silence, both parties unable to breach the bubble. Nezu braved it first.

“Don’t worry, detective.” Nezu said as all happiness drained out of him. “I’ll start.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Nezu clasped his paws together. “After all, I bear most of the blame.”

Tsukauchi sank into the bench. The air grew thick with tension the longer Nezu went on about what had happened over the days while Joker was trapped down in that hell, nor could he stomach their expressions as Nezu reached the beginning of Kamino. He thought they would be in for a long ride, when Tsuragamae suddenly cursed and wrenched the wheel. Explosions and crashes echoed outside as the van lurched onto its side.

The others screamed as the van tumbled over.

Sharp pain exploded in the back of Tsukauchi’s head before everything went dark.

~A Few Minutes Earlier~

“Careful!!” Monabus screeched as Spinner yanked the wheel.

The tires squealed as half of the van lifted from the pavement in a sharp turn. Lady Stubbs dug her claws into the seating, her fur poofed out like a cloud.

“Where the heck did you learn to drive!?”

“Who said I ever learned!? I don’t have a license!” Spinner cackled as all four tires landed with a harsh *thump* . “I got my skills from playing video games!”

“I am *never* letting you drive me again! When this is all over, I’m only letting Joker or Gentle Criminal drive me!”

Spinner sputtered. “You wouldn’t!”

“Watch where you’re going -!”

Monabus breached onto the sidewalk and clipped an innocent mailbox. Chunks of metal and mail spewed out into the street.

“Ack! I can’t see!” Spinner cried as letters clung to the windshield. “Hey Mona, where are the windshield wipers?”

“It’s the little switch on- AGH! NOT THERE!”

“Merp!!” Lady Stubbs spat as she batted towards the multi-function switch by the wheel, her other claws firmly planted in the lush seating.

“How is it that Lady Stubbs knows where it is and you don’t!?” Monabus cried.

“S-sorry!” Spinner tumbled back onto the road once the windshield was clear. He swerved as he felt around for his phone, which pinged with a new message. “Look at this! Hitoshi sent the route with the *perfect* ambush location!”

“Eyes on the road!!”

“Okay, okay!!” Spinner pocketed his phone and scoffed. “We’re almost there!”

“G-great... urp...”

“Uhhh, you’re not gonna get sick, are you!?”

“Keep driving like this and I’ll target *you* when I do!”

“How many times to I have to say sorry!?”

“Merp.”

“I know! Besides,” Spinner glanced in the rear view mirror. “This place is practically deserted. The coast is totally clear!”

“Yeah, but let’s not be reckless!” Monabus grumbled. “Especially since this is a rescue operation!”

“Yeah, we- Ooh, the caravan should be right up ahead! But-” Explosions and screaming sirens pierced the night air. “Something is happening!”

“Wait, we need a plan! We can’t just-”

Monabus screamed as Spinner put the pedal to the metal. They reached the devastation. A pair of police vehicles had crashed into the streetlights, abandoned. Another crashed into a fire hydrant which spewed water into the street. A black van, larger than the Monabus, was turned on its side, the back doors wide open and its occupants missing.

Spinner screeched as multiple blue orbs dropped from the sky in front of them. The harsh *cracking* noises brought forth giant spikes in the road. Spinner cursed as he yanked on the steering wheel. The pungent smell of burnt rubber rolled by as Spinner lurched Monabus into a stop.

“What the heck is going on!?” Monabus yelled.

“I don’t know!” Spinner threw open the door and got out.

“I’m afraid you’re too late!” A voice called from the rooftops.

Spinner gasped when he saw the figure. Donned in a dark orange overcoat with a popped collar, a feathered top hat, and a new mask

that was a near perfect copy of Arsene's facial markings. The moon was at his back and watched on like a silent companion, casting him in a veil of silver.

"It's you!" Spinner jabbed a finger at Mr. Compress, before looking at the overturned van. "What did you do to them!?"

"I'm simply keeping them safe from heroes like you." Mr. Compress tipped his hat, "Apologies, but I must cut this meeting short and bid you adieu!"

"W-wait!" Spinner shouted. "We're not-"

Mr. Compress threw a handful of polished blue orbs. They burst into clouds of smoke. Spinner coughed as the smoke made his eyes water and burned his nostrils. A familiar screech pierced the cloud and a blast of wind cleared it away.

"M-merp!?" Lady Stubbs jumped onto Spinner's shoulder as Mona reverted into a cat.

"Raaaaugh!" Mona, his voice shaking with rage, launched himself all the way to the rooftops with a whipping cyclone. "Get back here!!"

"H-hey, wait for us!!"

"Merp!"

Spinner skittered up the nearest building. Mona's dark shape flew across the rooftops with blinding speed. Mr. Compress stayed ahead by throwing more orbs, smoke and debris were batted away by angry winds.

"Mercurius!!"

A pillar of green flame erupted in front of Mr. Compress, who skid to a stop, his body highlighted in a shower of wicked emerald. A blast from Mercurius' wings mixed wind and fire, the swirling elements dancing together as they shot towards Compress.

Mr. Compress pirouetted to the side. He patted down his feathered hat, which caught a spark.

“How rude!” Mr. Compress yelled as ribbons of smoke wafted from his top hat. “I *just* got the bloodstains out of this costume, and now this!? You’ll be hearing from my dry cleaner!”

“Surrender!” Mercurius pointed his staff at the kidnapper. “Give us back our comrades!!”

“*Your* comrades?” Mr. Compress asked with a tilt of his head.

“You bet.” Mona, his fur standing on end, hopped on the other side of the rooftop. “Give it up, otherwise we won’t go easy on you!”

“You’re... oh my.” Mr. Compress shook his head. “I believe we have a misunderstanding here, Mona.”

Spinner and Lady Stubbs finally jumped onto their rooftop, panting.

“You guys are too fast!!” Spinner wheezed as he put his hands on his knees. “Way too fast!”

Mona stared down Mr. Compress, ignoring Spinner. “You know who I am.”

“Of course I do! Anyone would know if they paid attention.” Mr. Compress waved a finger at him. “I regret that we didn’t get a proper introduction at the Yaoyorozu manor. My sincerest apologies for this mix up.”

“A mix up!?” Spinner snapped. “My eyes are *still* burning from that smoke!”

“I thought you were backup for the heroes.” Mr. Compress shrugged. “You can’t blame a thief for having aces up his sleeve.”

Mona scoffed. “Just give us back Gentle Criminal and La Brava, and maybe we’ll forgive you.”

“Very well.” Mr. Compress threw two orbs at Mona’s feet, and with a *snap*, La Brava and Gentle Criminal emerged.

“Wh-what the heck!?” La Brava frantically looked around. “Where are we?”

“La Brava! Gentle!” Spinner grinned and waved his arms. “You’re okay!!”

They whipped around to Spinner and Mona, their expressions brightening.

“You’re safe!” Mona sputtered as La Brava picked him up and kissed him on the forehead, then proceeded to snuggle him tightly. “I was so worried!!”

“Yes,” Gentle Criminal smoothed down his clothes and smiled. “I’m happy that we’ve been reunited! Well... almost all of us.”

“Here,” Spinner produced a lock pick from his pocket, “Let me get you out of those cuffs.”

“... Thank you.” Gentle Criminal said as Spinner tore through the locks, before doing the same to La Brava.

La Brava sighed contently as she kicked the cuffs aside, but Gentle Criminal held one cuff onto his wrist, the other dangling from the silvery links.

“What’s wrong, Gentle?” La Brava asked softly.

“It’s my quirk.” Gentle Criminal grimaced. “I’m not sure how much control I have over it now, so if I take these off...”

“Then the whole building might turn to rubber?”

They turned to Mr. Compress, who flinched under their gazes.

“... Yes.”

“We can keep one on.” Mona said from La Brava’s arms. “Hold out the other one as tight as you can.”

Gentle Criminal complied, and a sharp blade of wind snapped the chains in half.

“Thank you.” Gentle Criminal adjusted the single cuff onto his wrist. “I believe it would be safer this way, for now.”

“*You* !” La Brava pointed at Mr. Compress. “Explain yourself!”

“I...” Mr. Compress ran a finger under his singed hat. “I was hoping to break you out and reunite you with your teammates. This was all a huge misunderstanding, I promise!”

“But how did you know about the caravan?” Mona asked.

“I have my own reliable information network, thank you very much. How else did I know about Gentle Criminal’s quirk?” Mr. Compress put a hand on his chest, as if he were wounded by Mona’s words. “I was hoping to ease my debt with Joker by freeing you two. I never thought I would encounter Mona along the way!”

Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged a long glance, the tension draining from them.

Mona sighed, and nodded to Mercurius, who vanished without a trace. The wind carried the remaining cold embers down onto the street below.

“What debt do you have to Joker?” Mona wiggled out of La Brava’s arms and stepped closer to Mr. Compress. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed how that mask of yours looks *exactly* like Arsene. What game are you playing here?”

Mr. Compress didn’t move for several seconds, as if he were contemplating something. One of his red gloved hands fidgeted with the polo tie around his neck. After another minute, his shoulders fell

with a long sigh. He took off his top hat and gently set it by his feet, before his fingers trailed down his mask.

"Wait, you don't have to-" Mona cut himself off when Mr. Compress held up a hand.

"I do." Mr. Compress said. "It's the very least I can do to gain your trust."

Mr. Compress slipped off the mask, the balaclava underneath only revealing his mouth and slate brown eyes. The mask was lovingly stored within his breast pocket, and he pulled off the balaclava. They gaped as Mr. Compress shook his head and ran a hand through a head of curly brown hair. He had short, black eyebrows and a pointed nose, his eyes slanted inwards like a cat. Sharp wit twinkled in those eyes.

"My real name is Sako Atsuhiro." His voice drained of all playfulness. "Joker saved my life back at the Summer Camp-"

"You were *there* !?" Spinner shouted.

"... Yes. My intention was never to harm Joker, but to save him." Mr. Compress stared at the ground, his gloves creaking as he gripped his shoulder. "I was trying to convince Joker to trust me, when... when Toga Himiko appeared behind me and stabbed me." His hand dropped and he reached into his coat. He pulled out an old book, the curled pages and cover steeped with flaky brown stains. "If Joker didn't leave that healing item for me, then I would have bled out in that cursed forest. My former comrades left me for dead."

"Th-that's horrible!" La Brava paled.

"It was worse for Joker." Atsuhiro grimaced as he tucked the book away. "Toga drank from a vial of blood and turned into a woman named Shinsou Risumi. They knew *everything* about the Blue Lotus, and used that information against Joker."

“Wh-what!?” Mona shrieked. “But... Hitoshi didn’t seem distressed about his parents...”

“Toga got the blood when she disguised herself as a patron under All For One’s orders.” Atsuhiro said. “There was nothing I could do to stop it, unless I wanted to out myself early. It seems they had me figured out the whole time.”

Mona’s eyes sharpened. “How did Joker get kidnapped?”

“*Kidnapped* ?” Atsuhiro chuckled dryly, “Joker went *willingly* . Otherwise, they threatened to kill Bakugo, the Shinsous’, as well as the rest of the students and heroes at the lodge. I doubt you’d all be spared either. He assured everyone’s safety in exchange for his own.”

“I... I can’t believe this...” Gentle Criminal murmured.

“I can.” La Brava’s expression soured. “It’s just like Joker.”

“That... that *idiot* .” Mona trembled with rage. “Of *course* he put everyone else before himself!”

“But now we just have to rescue him, yeah?” Spinner put his hand on his hips as he looked between his comrades. “We’re all together again, so let’s go rescue our Leader!”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs mewled proudly.

“About that.” La Brava shook her head. “Nezu and Tsukauchi were about to tell us something about Joker’s condition when we were...” Her eyes flicked to Atsuhiro. “Interrupted.”

“I’ll apologize as much as you want later.” Atsuhiro said as he pulled his balaclava back on. His hat and Arsene mask followed. “Right now, we need a plan. That hospital is going to be near impossible to break into, but it should be a bit easier if I can sneak you in with my quirk.”

“Wait, wait!” Spinner said. “You wanna join in!?”

“Of course I do! After all-” Mr. Compress reached into his breast pocket for another orb, which broke to reveal-

A familiar silvery gun with angelic wings.

“I also want to return this to Joker.” Mr. Compress twirled it around his finger. “It’s the least I can do after everything he went through because I was too cowardly to enact my plan sooner. This... Kamino, Joker’s situation, *everything*... is my fault.”

Spinner clicked his tongue. “Don’t be like that, man. The League’s leader was absolutely terrifying!”

“And you did try to rescue us, technically.” Gentle Criminal said.

“Wait a minute!” La Brava glanced back, “If we’re here, then what happened to Tsukauchi and the others?”

“They’re still in the van.” Mr. Compress chuckled. “I was going to release them after we got a good distance away.”

“I guess this is the best outcome, all things considered.” Mona flicked his tail. “But enough dallying around. This place will be crawling with heroes before the hour is up.”

“But... my laptop, my phone, I brought it all to the Summer Camp and they confiscated everything!” La Brava said. “It’s too risky to hack from the computer at the Ra- at our hideout. We need to take more precaution if I want to hack into the hospital’s security.”

“Then we need to borrow a certain laptop.” Mona said. “But it’ll be risky going back with this many people.”

Mr. Compress pulled on his gloves. “Child’s play with my quirk! We won’t have to split up that way.”

The rest of the team exchanged long glances.

“His quirk... could be vital if we are to get in that hospital.” Gentle Criminal said. “We need every advantage since my quirk is out of commission.”

“And uh...” Spinner rubbed the back of his head. “We don’t really have many items that Joker gave us. A few smoke bombs, sure, but I used the last Stealthanol just to get out of that forest.”

“I guess you’re right. We don’t have many options and we could use the extra firepower.” Mona glared at Mr. Compress as harsh gale rustled the latter’s coat and nearly blew his top hat away. “But I’m watching you. If you give me *any* reason to think that you might back stab us, then I swear I won’t hold back.”

“You don’t have to go that far!” Mr. Compress put a hand over his heart. “I understand. As one gentleman thief to another, and with an outstanding debt towards Joker, I pledge my services to you.”

“Show off.” Spinner muttered under his breath.

“Good.” Mona looked to the star speckled sky as sirens echoed in the distance. “Let’s go.”

“-auchi! Tsukauchi!”

Tsukauchi gasped as his eyes flew open. He coughed as soft paws helped him sit up, his throat scratchy and bone dry. The air was thick with a smokey scent and the sound of rushing water splashing on pavement.

“Nezu?” Tsukauchi muttered as he rubbed the back of his head, where splitting pain throbbed. “What the hell happened?”

“It seems that we were attacked.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know. Come, let’s exit the vehicle and get a feel for the situation.”

Vehicle? Tsukauchi blinked as he looked around. He sat down on the the wall of the van, if it were turned up right. He stood on shaky legs and followed Nezu as he hopped over the doors.

“Tsukauchi, Nezu!” Tsuragamae approached from the front of the van, rubbing his head. “I’m glad you are safe.”

Tsukauchi glanced up and down the dark street, half of which were blocked off by towering spikes. Other officers, equally dazed, were peppered around them.

“Likewise.” Tsukauchi said.

“Gentle Criminal and La Brava are missing.” Nezu ran his paws down his face. “Whoever staged this must have kidnapped them. Do you gentlemen remember anything?”

“Not much.” Tsuragamae turned towards the spikes blocking the road. “I tried to swerve when something fell down from the sky, but then I must’ve blacked out after.”

“I got knocked out when the vehicle swerved. In any case, we have to report this.” Tsukauchi swore under his breath as he reached into his pocket. “It’s already past midnight... what?”

“What’s wrong?” Nezu asked.

“Check your phones.” Tsukauchi said as his furrowed his brow. “I have over two dozen missed calls from Toshinori and Aizawa. I’m going to call-” His phone lit up with a call and he answered.
“Aizawa-”

“Tsukauchi! I’ve been trying to call you for over an hour!”

“I’m sorry.” Tsukauchi pinched the bridge of his nose as sirens echoed in the distance, Nezu and Tsuragamae exchanged glances.

“We were attacked, and Gentle Criminal and La Brava are missing.”

“... *What?*”

“We’ll find them. Joker needs-”

“No...” Aizawa’s voice became strained. “*We were too late.*”

“Too late?” Tsukauchi’s heart raced. “What do you mean *too late* ?”

“*Joker... he.... the kid’s gone, Tsukauchi.*”

Tsukauchi’s phone dropped from his slackened grip and shattered at his feet.

“Detective!” Nezu cried. “What’s wrong!?”

Hollowness carved into Tsukauchi’s heart as he collapsed against the roof of the overturned van. Tsuragamae steadied him with a hand on his shoulder, but the touch felt numb.

“We were too late...”

Tsukauchi’s own voice sounded disheveled and far away. Nezu and Tsuragamae’s expressions crumbled. The three of them stood within the destroyed street, silence ringing within their souls as police vehicles and ambulances descended upon the scene.

But what would a hundred police or EMT workers do now?

After all, *they were too late.*

Tap tap.

“Are you freaking serious.” Hitoshi growled as he opened his window for the second time that night. He turned his back to the figure jumping inside. “I told you that coming here is dangerous! Do you guys not listen?”

“Apologies for the intrusion.”

Ice plunged into Hitoshi’s veins as he whipped around to the unfamiliar voice. “Who the hell are you?”

The mask stranger tossed a handful of marbles on the ground and snapped his fingers. Hitoshi’s room became cramped with familiar faces. Morgana shook himself as he hopped onto the desk. La Brava and Gentle Criminal backed away to give Hitoshi room. Spinner was turned upside down, his back painfully arched over Hitoshi’s bed.

“Owww....” The lizard man whined.

Lady Stubbs tilted her head at an unnatural angle as she pawed Spinner’s face. “Merp?”

“Why?” Hitoshi felt his soul leaving his body as Spinner righted himself. “Honestly, should I really be surprised at this point? All of you have a death wish.”

“Sorry.” Morgana’s ears drooped. “But we needed your computer to hack into the hospital.”

“So you decided to shove everyone in my tiny room? Joker might be an idiot, but he was the brains of the operation.” Hitoshi deadpanned. He stared at Gentle Criminal and La Brava, his expression softening. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks.” La Brava smiled at him. “What about you? You look dead on your feet!”

“I’ll sleep after a certain moron gets rescued.” Hitoshi narrowed his eyes at the stranger. “By the way, who the hell is this?”

Mr. Compress perked up as all eyes turned to him. He stood tall and put a hand over his heart, the other flourishing towards Hitoshi.

“I’m glad you asked, young man!” He stated. “My name is Mr. Compress! I am the newest member of-”

The door flung open. Golden light spilled into the room. Everyone stared at a deadpanned Risumi in the door frame, her shadow magnified against Hitoshi's wall. Hitoshi turned bone white. His skin prickled with goosebumps as her eyes fell on him.

They expected a cry or a shout, *something* to alert the heroes and police that Mr. Compress so succinctly snuck by to get in here. No, Risumi regarded them with mild disappointment, as if she had merely caught her son's hand in the cookie jar minutes before dinner.

"Uh," Hitoshi took off the fox mask and hid it behind his back. "I can explain-"

"No need. Have everyone come to the table for curry." She scanned over the rest of the vigilantes as they stood like deer in the headlights. "You all look famished."

With that, she gracefully slinked down the hall.

Mr. Compress was glad nobody could see him sweating bullets. Toga's impression had nothing on the *real* Shinsou Risumi. She was somehow far more terrifying in person than any mimicry Toga could've whipped up.

"... Merp?"

"You said it." Morgana whispered.

"Welp, this was fun while it lasted." Hitoshi tossed the mask on his desk. "I'm going to die."

"I-I'm sure you'll be fine?" La Brava asked.

"It's *one-thirty in the morning* and she just found a bunch of wanted vigilantes in my room. How is this fine!?"

"Should we sneak out while we can?" Gentle Criminal said as he inched towards the window.

“This is *Risumi* we’re talking about. She could’ve called in the police or heroes, but she didn’t. We should give her a chance.” Morgana said, though he looked unsure as he climbed on Hitoshi’s shoulder. “I’m sure she’ll understand if we explain?”

“Oh sure she’ll understand, and *then* we’ll all die.” Hitoshi huffed as marched out of his room. “It was nice knowing everyone.”

The group of vigilantes awkwardly shuffled into the living room.

“Sit.” Ayumu, regarding them with mild interest from the kitchen counter, gestured towards the kitchen table. “The food will be done in a minute.”

Hitoshi’s eyes fell to his clenched fists as he sat down. The others sat around him, the chairs screeching across the floor when everyone took their places. Stubbs was glued to Spinner’s shoulder, Morgana ducked under Hitoshi’s chair.

The apartment became thick with disquiet, the only noises were the soft clatter of dishes and *tink* of cutlery. This atmosphere would be more welcome to death’s row inmates. Their final meal tantalizing as his parents set enormous helpings of curry in front of them.

Strange, how he didn’t smell any of this five minutes ago.

“Would anyone like coffee?” Risumi asked pleasantly.

“I would *love* some coffee!”

Hitoshi glared daggers at Mr. Compress.

“Alright, but you have to take off your hat and mask if you want to eat.” Risumi crossed her arms. “Your gloves too. It’s bad table manners.”

“O-oh. Apologies.”

“You too, Gentle Criminal.”

Gentle sat ramrod straight in his chair. "O-of course, ma'am!"

Hitoshi buried his face in his hands as they complied.

"We have some cat food, too." Ayumu said as he leaned against the counter. "Morgana, can you eat human food, or would you prefer cat food?"

Morgana poked his head out. "M-meow?"

Risumi smiled. "We know you can talk, sweetheart."

The vigilantes continued to lose color.

Morgana bristled. "N-no, I-I'm not hungry..."

"If you say so." Risumi looked across the table. "Well? Don't let that curry go to waste!"

Nobody spoke as they dined in suffocating silence. Hitoshi kept his eyes down as the minutes dragged on, and he craved for the floor to open up beneath him and swallow him whole. After fifteen minutes of clanking spoons, the dishes were clean of curry.

Hitoshi just wanted this agony to be over .

"I have to say," Mr. Compress leaned back in his chair with a smirk. "This was delicious! You are fine cooks. It's no wonder this cafe skyrocketed in popularity."

"... Thank you." Risumi looked over to the empty pot on the stove. "It's Kurusu's recipe."

"Speaking of Kurusu," Ayumu frowned as he and Hitoshi's eyes met. "We've known that he was Joker ever since that big raid in the warehouse district."

"What!?" Hitoshi shot up from his chair. "Why didn't you say anything!?"

“We wanted him to feel safe.” Risumi shook her head, “He needed a place where he could relax and not have to worry about anybody ratting him out to the authorities.”

“So that’s why you kept quiet?” Morgana asked as he looked in between them.

“Well, that and he saved our asses from Silver Falcon. Not to mention he single handedly put our small cafe on the map.” Ayumu said. Risumi glared at him, and he shrugged with a shameless smirk. “What? All of it is true.”

“He didn’t say it outright,” La Brava stared down at her plate, frowning, “But you could tell that he loved working here.”

“Indeed.” Gentle Criminal smiled. “He truly cared about all of you and the patrons here. You hold a special place in his heart.”

“I’m glad.” Risumi breathed a sigh of relief. “So, what’s your plan to break him out?”

“Mom!”

“What’s wrong, Hitoshi?” Risumi bore a smirk of her own.

“I... I just thought...” Hitoshi waved his arms towards the others. “You’re not mad?”

“Oh, we’re absolutely furious.” Hitoshi withered under Risumi’s motherly glare.

“We’ll talk about how long you’re grounded later.” Ayumu deadpanned. “For now, you’re all safe to come up with a plan.”

“But for how long?” La Brava asked. “There are police and heroes right outside.”

“True.” Risumi huffed. “But they’re not due for another check in until 8 o’clock this morning. That gives you a few hours.”

Spinner whistled. "She's not wrong."

"... Thank you."

Risumi blinked. "What for, Morgana?"

"For... for taking care of Akira a-and..." Morgana frantically shook his head. "For risking your necks. You could easily go to prison for this, and yet you're still acting on what you believe in. It's... really admirable."

"Of course." Risumi knelt next to Morgana and gently scratched behind his ear. "He's family, you know. That includes all of you."

Morgana sputtered before he could let out an accidental purr. Risumi laughed as she pulled back and stood straight.

"So tell me," Ayumu glanced at his wife, before smiling back at Morgana. "Is it true you can turn into a bus?"

"Ayumu!" Risumi cried.

"We have to settle our bet once and for all!"

Hitoshi facepalmed. "Please tell me this whole thing is just a bad nightmare."

"Afraid not, Hitoshi." Morgana said, "And yes, I *can* turn into a bus."

Ayumu grinned. "It turns out you're doing dishes for a month, Risumi."

"Fine." She said, rolling her eyes. "Just wipe that smile off your face."

Mr. Compress cleared his throat. "We *are* coming up with a plan to rescue Joker, right?"

"R-right." La Brava turned to Hitoshi. "Can I borrow your laptop?"

“Sure, one second.” Hitoshi ducked out of the kitchen and returned a moment later, laptop tucked under his arm.

“I was wondering who taught you that stuff, Hitoshi.” Risumi said when Hitoshi handed it over to La Brava.

“It’s a good thing, too.” La Brava opened the laptop and began typing away. “Without Hitoshi...”

“Our goose would be cooked!” Spinner shouted.

“... Pretty much.” Gentle Criminal said.

Hitoshi’s face burned, and it took everything in him to avoid his parents’ curious stares.

“How long will it take you to get into the system?” Morgana asked as he hopped into Hitoshi’s vacant chair.

“A few hours.” She said as Gentle Criminal and Risumi looked over her shoulder. “It won’t be easy, but I should be able to do it!”

“I see.” Risumi said. “In that case, why don’t the rest of you try to get some sleep? You’re all exhausted. We have a comfortable couch. I’m sure Hitoshi’s room has enough space for one or two futons.”

“I don’t think I could sleep if I tried.” Mr Compress said. “I’ll survive on coffee.”

“... Same here.” Spinner muttered.

“Merp!”

“Coffee won’t help your exhaustion.” Morgana said. “We don’t need anybody crashing before we rescue our leader.”

“My quirk will come in handy.” Risumi said as she rubbed her hands together.

“But what about dishes?” Gentle Criminal glanced between their dirty plates. “That’s a lot to do.”

“I’ll handle them.” Ayumu stated. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Besides, getting some rest isn’t a bad idea.” Morgana said. “We’re running on fumes at this point, a-and we’ll need our strength. We *can’t* mess this up!”

“Morgana’s right.” La Brava said. “I’ll wake anybody up if I find something!”

The others hesitantly nodded.

A few hours of shut eye wouldn’t hurt, right?

“NO!!!”

Morgana shot up from the armchair, hackles raised.

Shuichi fell off the couch in a tangled pile of limbs and blankets. The others rushed into the living room, dreary eyed.

“What’s wrong!?” Tobita asked. “Who screamed?”

“It’s five in the morning!” Shuichi said as he tossed blankets back onto the couch. “I was just having a good dream, too!”

Manami ran into the living room. Tears ran down her face as her shaking hands tried and failed to grip the television remote.

“La Brava?” Morgana whispered. “What’s wrong?”

“H-hospital....t-the n-news...” Manami’s voice cracked. “A-Akira...”

She managed to turn on the TV. Everyone stiffened at the words rolling across the screen.

'BREAKING NEWS: Update On All Might and Joker's Status After Epic Kamino Battle!'

The scene shifted to Demizu Mika standing in front of the Kamino hospital, the angry crowd behind her shouting at the mass of heroes surrounding it.

"Th-this just in..." Demizu Mika swallowed and blinked rapidly. She took a breath to steady herself, before staring into the camera with a knotted brow. *"We just received an anonymous report that the vigilante Joker, now known as Kurusu Akira, succumbed to his injuries last night at 11:20 p.m. All Might, on the other hand-"*

"-ight, on the other hand, seems to have made a full recovery from the events at Kamino-"

"Shiggy won't be happy." Toga whispered.

She pulled her hood tighter and hugged herself. Other distraught whispers broke out on the nearby street, others simply stood there, mouths agape, as they stared up at the giant screen. Toga glanced to her partner, who stood as rigid as a statue beside her. She wrinkled her nose as the dreary rain brought forth the putrid smell of the mouth of the alley they clung to.

"What do you think, Dabi?"

"What do I care?" Dabi scoffed as he turned his back towards the street. "Shigaraki lost his shit since his precious 'Sensei' died. You go ahead without me."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm just going to wander around. I'm not in the mood to sit around in our shitty hideout and listen to Shigaraki rant."

Toga watched him meld into the shadows. He had been acting different since the Summer Camp, more subdued, thoughtful, even. She thought she heard he and Twice whispering late into the night once. She collapsed against the wall and sank down to the icy cold concrete, all warmth seeping from her body. Toga wiped her nose with her sleeve as the gentle rain pattered around her, oblivious to the despair thrumming through the rest of Japan.

“No....” Bakugo’s phone creaked in his grip. “That’s a lie!! THIS IS BULLSHIT!”

“Who the hell would hire someone so useless?” Bakugo had said before a massive shadow swallowed their table.

“You’re lucky.” Kurusu smirked as he set out their plates. “This is the last of today’s curry. Enjoy.”

He walked away like a shadow, and Bakugo would never admit it was the best curry he’s ever had-

“You should take a look an number nine, you didn’t do it right.” The flash of amused eyes jabbed him, “Thirteen too.”

“I DID NOT-!!”

They were wrong-

Joker’s silver eyes stared into his, as sharp as razor wire and holding enough pain to end an entire world-

“I was never supposed to be here!!”

Bakugo screamed and threw his phone against the wall, heaving as it exploded into bits of plastic and metal. He couldn’t get *any* air. He clawed at his own throat as he burst out of his room. He just needed to *get out* !

“Katsuki!?” His mother called as he ran out the front door. “Where the hell do you think you’re going this early!? Katsuki!!”

He never heard her, only focusing on the burning in his lungs as the world fell around his shoulders. Bakugo collapsed once his feet tread sand and the salty aroma battered his nose.

Inko knocked on her son’s door. “... Izuku?”

She opened the door. Her son swiveled around in his chair, his computer screen painting him in dreary light. The streaming tears dripped down his chin as he pointed a shaky finger at the screen, his other hand grasping a fake Joker mask with white knuckles.

“Why? This can’t be happening...” He said, his voice quivering.
“Right... mom?”

A memory resurfaced in Inko’s mind, of her little boy pointing at the screen and asking if he could ever be a hero. Her legs moved and she found herself throwing her arms around Izuku.

“I’m sorry, baby.” She said over the tears sprouting in her own eyes.
“I’m so so sorry!”

She felt like a failure when Izuku sobbed into her chest, just like that time all of those years ago.

“... Did you hear the news?”

“Yeah! What were those doctors doing!?”

“They say someone from the inside leaked it.”

“Really? Who leaked the info?”

"No idea, but it's too late for them to do anything about it. The truth is out."

"So... Joker's really...?"

"Well, it's not like they are trying to cover it up, and Joker hasn't made an appearance or anything. All of it points to the obvious."

"Damn... and he was so young, too."

"They should've been able to save him! What the hell!?"

"After everything this kid did for us... he's.... I can't believe this..."

Kota kicked his legs back and forth from the hospital chair.

Pixie Bob and Ragdoll's hospital rooms looked more or less the same. Similar white washed walls, the burning smell of antiseptic, the rhythmic beeps of various machines cluttered around their beds. The assortment of 'get well soon!' cards was the only difference with the happy colors and balloons.

He's been back and forth between their rooms so many times that he couldn't really tell the difference anymore, sparing the person who slept comatose in the bed. Today, with the golden sunshine streaming in from the windows, he sat next to Ragdoll.

He ducked his head so that the rim of his hat hid her from view.

It's not that he *didn't* care about Pixie Bob and Ragdoll. He... did. Begrudgingly. That ice in his heart melted with warm relief when everybody came back safe.

Barring one exception.

Kota tried to sneak out several times to where they kept Joker in a completely different wing of the hospital. He never got far. Always

blocked by a pair of heroes guarding a certain doors and passageways, and when the heroes switched off then it would always be a locked door or a keypad. The last time he had been dragged back by a sharp eyed nurse, Mandalay's frantic bows and apologies still rang in his ear.

"Damn adults..." He muttered, but the words soured his tongue.

He just wanted to thank Joker and Deku. Hell, he still had the letter crammed in his pack that he wrote for Deku, but he wouldn't feel right by thanking one and then not being able to thank the other. He grasped the hem of his shirt and twisted it around in his fists, wondering if he should attempt to sneak towards Joker again.

A golden haired doctor had come in a few minutes ago and called out Mandalay with an expression he couldn't read. They were still outside blabbering. He sat back in his chair with a huff. Sneaking out would have to wait, for now.

He jumped when the door opened and Mandalay came inside, her eyes red rimmed from crying. She glanced at Ragdoll before her eyes landed on him. She walked towards him and knelt down to eye level, gently placing a hand on his knee.

A trickle of cold dread tangled in his stomach as she looked at him. He *knew* that look, seen it before.

Momma...

Papa...

His eyes flicked to Ragdoll, sleeping peacefully. Ragdoll was fine! So was Pixie Bob the last time he was forced into her room. So that means-

The door burst open again, and Tiger stood there, panting.

“Tiger...” Mandalay stood, missing how Kota’s insides squirmed with rage and grief that made hot tears spill from his eyes. “Did you hear?”

“I... did.” Tiger closed his eyes and released a long sigh. “But there’s other news. Pixie Bob is awake. I think it would be best that we go see her right away.”

“Kota.” Mandalay placed her hands on his shoulders. “I want you to... no. Do you want to go see Pixie Bob? I know she would be happy to see you. Or would you rather be alone right now? We can find you a spare room if you don’t want to talk.”

His lips wobbled as he dove forward and latched onto her. She stiffened, before he melted in her grasp with stifled sobs. She scooped him up and locked eyes with Tiger.

“I’ll wait until he calms down.” She whispered. “Go on ahead without us.”

Tiger solemnly nodded as he left the room behind. He tread the familiar path to Pixie Bob’s room nearby, the uneasy swells of dread and relief crashing like waves inside of him. He reached Pixie Bob’s room and knocked before he walked inside.

“-should be impossible!”

A doctor and a few other nurses stammered around Pixie Bob, her long blonde hair spilling down her shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” Tiger asked, frantic.

“Tiger!” Pixie Bob looked up at him, tears spilling down her cheeks. “My quirk...”

“I know.” He bowed his head. “That man took it, didn’t he?”

“I thought he did, but look.” She held up a tiny earthen serpent slithering around her palm. The small lump of gouged earth came

from a potted plant by the window.

“Are you *certain* your quirk was taken?” The doctor asked.

“He had to have stolen it.” Tiger’s hands balled into fists. “I was there when he said so!”

“Yes...” Pixie Bob’s brow furrowed as she ran a finger down the snake’s rocky spine. “He used Ragdoll as an example first. I saw it as he stole her quirk away, *laughing* while she screamed. Then he turned on me. That last thing I remember is him putting his hand on my head, then immense pain as I felt my quirk being ripped out, then... I woke up here. I thought I had a weird dream about my soul returning to my body? I don’t recall.” She sniffled as the tiny serpent coiled around itself, seemingly content with the splotch of sunlight on her palm. “This isn’t a dream... right?”

“Thankfully, you’re not dreaming. We’ll have to run a few more tests to make sure everything is alright. It wouldn’t be the first time we recorded a quirk anomaly in this hospital.” The doctor said, “But it’s obvious that your quirk *works* . I’ll give you two a moment.”

With a nod, the doctor and nurses filed out of the room.

“How is this possible?” Tiger asked.

“A miracle?” Pixie Bob chuckled as the serpent slithered down her arm and bedside, back into the potted plant it called home. “What happened since the Summer Camp? Why do you... look so sad?”

Tiger planted himself at her bedside and shared the unfortunate news about Joker.

“No way... there’s just no way.” Kaito stared at the screen, the announcement *burned* forever into his memory. “It’s a lie. It has to be a lie... right, Akira?”

The man never felt the river of tears pouring from his eyes until his phone rang several minutes later.

"I bet the heroes were in on it. Let some kid vigilante die so that they can swoop in and take over."

"It's all the Hero Commission's fault! They wanted to hurt Joker from the start!"

"Do you think they're going to hold a funeral or something?"

"I don't know. I just... why did this have to happen?"

"But.... but he can't die! Joker's supposed to be invincible!!"

"C-calm down! There has to be an explanation, right!?"

"Then why won't they give us details!? What exactly killed Joker? We deserve answers!!"

"He got what he deserved. I don't care what anybody says, he straight up executed that villain on live television."

The remote dropped from Manami's hand and onto the floor, the backing popping off. A battery came loose and rolled over to the entertainment stand, but nobody seemed to care.

"No way." Hitoshi collapsed into the couch and gripped his hair.
"There's.... there's no way!"

Manami fell to her knees and curled up on the floor, her sobs echoing throughout the apartment. Tobita rushed to her side, though it was hard to see through the tears flooding his eyes.

“This... this is just a nightmare, right?” Shuichi whispered.

“I don’t think so...” Mr Compress muttered.

Risumi collapsed into Ayumu, both of their expressions becoming pained and haunted.

“Everyone,” Morgana hopped onto the coffee table. “Get yourselves together! This is no time to be crying!”

“How can you say that!?” Hitoshi yelled, his eyes pinning Morgana to the spot. “After everything... Akira... He’s....”

“I know! But I... I can... Arg!” Morgana’s heart hammered as everyone stared. Guilt visibly gnawed away at him. “I... I can *revive* him!!”

A beat of muddled silence passed.

“You-” Manami’s voice caught in her throat. “You *what* ?”

He bounced between his paws and spoke as quick as lightning. “W-we didn’t know if it would work, b-but Joker first tested that power on Native, who died when he fought Stain! A-and then that little girl i-in the fire... he told me that he had to revive her because he was too late to save her...”

The group looked at him as if he just sprouted another head.

“You can...” Atsuhiro scrunched his brow. “*Bring back the dead* ?”

Morgana stilled. “... Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before?” Tobita whispered.

“Because we didn’t *want* you guys to know.” Morgana shivered at a handful of wounded stares. “What do you think would happen if that knowledge got out!? Joker is already overwhelmingly powerful, but

reviving the dead is a whole new level of trouble! But now, th-that... that he's..."

"Now that he has passed away, this knowledge is a game changer." Mr. Compress said solemnly.

"Th-that's right." Morgana shook his head. "Joker was able to revive the other two when they *just died*, but if there's a certain time limit-"

"Then we better move!" Shuichi yelled as fire came into his teary eyes. "We can't waste time here!"

Manami wiped her eyes. "B-but we just saw the news! That hospital is going to be *packed* with heroes and reporters!"

"My talents will come in handy." Mr. Compress put a hand over his heart. "I grew up on stories of Arsene Lupin, the man that could become *anyone*. With the heroes so preoccupied on keeping an angry mob back, and with a decent disguise and credentials, I believe I could walk right into the hospital. They know *your* faces, but not mine."

"Are you sure you can handle it?" Shuichi asked.

"Of course!" Mr. Compress splayed his arms to to side. "It will be an act worthy of savoring!"

Morgana rolled his eyes. "Fine, as long as you can get us inside. If... if Akira passed away at 11:20 last night, then he might be... might be...."

"In the morgue?" Gentle Criminal murmured.

"Y-yes."

"I made it into the system, so I can take care of the cameras and a fake identity for Compress." Manami pulled herself to her feet and wiped away the tears. Her shoulders trembled, but she stood tall.

“The morgue would be on the basement level. There’s a back entrance that leads right to it.”

“Then that settles it.” Morgana stated.

“Right!” Shuichi grinned, but his smile staggered. “Uh... somebody should let Kaito know. He’s probably having a heart attack right about now.”

“*Kaito* is in on this, too?” Risumi asked.

“Y-Yeah...” Morgana said. “He owns the internet cafe where we’ve been living.”

Ayumu and Risumi paled. They stared with equal shock at Hitoshi, who grimaced and sank further into the couch.

“You can call this... Kaito on the way.” Mr. Compress said. “This curtain call simply cannot be delayed any further!”

“Use the backdoor into the alley.” Risumi said. “It’s less conspicuous than jumping out of our windows.”

“Ah, rather boring, but understandable.” Mr. Compress said as he deflated.

“Manami, take my laptop.” Hitoshi said.

Her eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, its all yours.” Hitoshi’s lips quirked in an exhausted smile.

“You need it more than I do and besides... you taught me how to build them. I’ll just get parts for another one.”

She rushed to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Hitoshi stiffened but he melted into her arms as he hugged back. She pulled away and ruffled his hair. They gathered what little possessions they had, thanked the Shinsous' for their hospitality, and vacated down the stairs.

Mr. Compress paused at the apartment door, being the last one to follow the pack.

"I feel like I owe you an apology, Miss Risumi." Mr. Compress said as he turned on his heel. He took off his hat and placed it over his heart.

"Me?"

"Yes. I admit that I had knowledge of the villainous plans that whisked Joker away, and... and that I didn't stop them from harming you or Joker. And for that-" Hitoshi and Ayumu gaped as Mr. Compress got on his knees and laid his forehead on the floor. "I sincerely apologize!"

Risumi looked down at her hand. The bandage was gone, and all that remained on her palm was a thin, pale scar.

"So, that patron that dropped the plate, that wasn't an accident?"

"... No." Mr. Compress wouldn't dare look at her. "It was intentional, and a pivotal move to apprehend Joker."

Risumi sighed through her nose as she walked over to Mr. Compress. She put a hand on his shoulder as he sat up, but kept his head bowed. Even with his mask on, he didn't dare look her in the eye.

"I'll accept your apology when that boy is safe and sound." She said sternly. "Got it?"

"Understood, Miss Risumi."

"Compress!" Shuichi called from downstairs. "Are you coming or what!? We need you for this plan, dude!"

Risumi let her hand drop and he stood up.

Mr. Compress bowed to them once more before he rushed downstairs to join the team.

The atmosphere of a morgue was unique. Common small talk and inklings of joyful emotions died within the chilled air, for what was it, other than an insult, to those who had just passed away? Their time in the light ran short, to be shut away in cold storage until they were put to rest.

Five stood around one such locker, which had been opened and its contents pulled out on a steel slab. The ghostly white sheet had been pulled down to the boy's shoulders. It looked as if Kurusu slept peacefully, but the raw truth settled heavy in their hearts.

"I can hold off on the autopsy for a limited time." Doctor Zoey whispered. "But after that, someone will be forced to claim him. There are several options, but we'll need to talk through them before any funerary rights are given."

"I see." Nezu said. He stood upon a small step stool, his ears drooped, his tail void of its usual languid movements to fall flat onto the floor. "Kunikazu just wants to rub this in our faces. We already know what killed him, so an autopsy is completely pointless. I intend to claim this boy, that man be damned."

"I can't...." Tsukauchi blinked several times, but the teary flood became relentless. "I'm sorry."

Tsukauchi turned around and walked out of the morgue.

Aizawa shoved his hands in his pockets. The harsh lighting of the morgue cast a shadow over him, his unkempt hair falling around his face in messy strands, but he really didn't have it in him to care. Aizawa's puffy red eyes could be mistaken for his usual lack of sleep, if not for the occasional snuffle.

"Do you wish to say anything, Aizawa?" Nezu asked softly.

Aizawa reached out and gently ruffled Kurusu's hair. The kid's curls were still soft and fluffy, and the picture of Kurusu getting annoyed at

the contact, his eyes flashing with a certain playful glare-

“As long as the three of us stick together, then there’s not a problem in the world we can’t resolve!!”

Aizawa pulled his hand back as if it burned, Kurusu’s body blurred with another whom he lost long ago. He buried his face in his capture weapon and stalked out of the morgue without a word. The door closed before Aizawa could hear anymore chitchat between the others. He walked down the hall in a daze, unaware of the nurse pushing a laundry cart until it was too late. The collision made Aizawa stumble into the wall. The pain felt numbed.

“Oh, my apologies! These things are so hard to control sometimes. Loose wheels, you know?”

Aizawa looked to a man with slanted brown eyes and curly hair of the same color. His eyes fell to the ground. Curly hair was too hard to look at right now.

“It’s fine.” Aizawa muttered as he pushed himself from the wall. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

He felt the nurse stare into his back before he turned the corner.

Aizawa *craved* caffeine now more than ever, but he didn’t know if he could ever stomach cheap coffee again. He needed something just a little bit stronger.

He sent a quick text to Tsukauchi, who agreed to meet up later tonight.

Atsuhiro pressed his back to the wall as Nezu, Tsuragamae, and a golden haired doctor left the morgue behind. He breathed a sigh of relief as their quiet voices faded away. Nobody could stop him when he ditched the cart and slipped into the morgue, the bleak atmosphere infecting the place like a plague.

And he thought these dreary scrubs he had to wear were depressing.

“I thought they would never leave.” He muttered as he scanned the wall of cold storage lockers. “Now, which one holds the treasure?”

He slipped on gloves and opened them one by one. Atsuhiro dreaded the inevitable as most of them were empty. Until one particular locker revealed a body draped in a white sheet. Atsuhiro swallowed thickly as he pulled the slab out, the screeching metal sounded too much like the wailing of the dead. With a steady breath, he pulled the sheet back. He yelped and jumped away.

This wasn't Joker.

It was *All For One* .

Only recognizable by that sorry chunk of flesh he once called a face, as eyeless and disfigured as it was. His skin was like ancient, dried leather wrapped around a skeleton. He pictured a petrified raisin. Atsuhiro stood frozen, as if the wretched demon would suddenly come back from the dead and slaughter him. He'd rather not be the first victim to a cheesy zombie movie, thank you very much.

“I don't think any amount of moisturizer or make-up will make you look pretty for a funeral, old boy.” Atsuhiro muttered as he pulled the drape back up, his hands trembling. “Definitely a closed casket.”

He wiped the cold sweat from his brow and, double checking that All For One's icy tomb was *locked*, moved on. He finally pulled out one on the opposite side of the room. The screeching metal grated in his ears and sent a shiver down his spine. He pulled back the shroud. Atsuhiro gasped sharply as the boy's pale face was revealed. With a shaky hand, he reached into his pocket for a particular orb and broke it open.

Morgana blinked rapidly at the harsh lights. His eyes fell to Kurusu. His fur puffed up as if he had been electrocuted. For a cat, an oddly

human-like sob escaped his lips. Atsuhiro practically heard the poor thing's heart breaking into pieces. Morgana sniffled, and turned towards Atsuhiro with watery eyes.

"Wh-where are the others?"

"They're still in my pocket. Do you really want them to see him this way?" Atsuhiro asked, his own expression heavy. "We should speed up this particular act, for we don't know when other actors could barge in... or if rigor mortis will affect a revival attempt."

"R-right."

Morgana climbed up the man's shoulder. Mercurius appeared on the other side of the steely cot, a sweetened flurry from his wings sent the aroma of fresh pines into the morgue.

"Please let this work." Morgana prayed to whatever gods would lend their ear. "*Please* ."

Atsuhiro watched as Mercurius lay the tip of his winged staff upon Kurusu's chest. The mystical god took a deep breath before he uttered a single word, a prayer plucking at the very strings of reality.

"Samarecarm."

I have been relentless with these cliffhangers, huh?

Zero regrets.

Dark Sun

Chapter 63: Dark Sun

Dark Sun

Wherever you shine

Eyes turn

Away

Dark Sun

What choices have I

But live another day

Live another day

Live one more day

FANART!

[Kirisuma](#) on Twitter

Nil on Twitter [1](#) [2](#)

[Koyu](#) on Twitter

Darkness.

Endless cold.

The bleak nothingness consumed his soul.

But Ren didn't cower. Peace blanketed him, the same type of tranquility a thief would find on the night of a new moon. Still, this place was like reuniting with an old friend. This *stillness* harbored the same feeling with every Persona he put to the guillotine or noose, the harmonious end of a life before it was birthed into new power.

As for his Personas....

A heavy void nestled in place of their familiar voices and presence, but he wasn't worried. The serenity of this place wouldn't let him. His eyes felt so heavy. He was about to drift off to his final sleep, like a ripple fading in a too still lake.

A familiar chuckle shocked him awake.

"Somehow, you still manage to surprise me."

The endless void shifted. A bubble of prismatic light warped all around him, molding itself into a place he was intimate with. Leblanc. Ren found himself standing behind the counter, coffee stains from his first attempts at making a brew were ingrained into the wood. Ren ran his finger over the knife marks and many other scratches. The light *tap tap* of rain pattered on the windows. Eerie light bathed the whole cafe, like a rainbow of colors glinting through a diamond.

The person sat with his elbow planted on the counter while he cupped his face with a black gloved hand. His brown hair spilled just past his neck. His tan peacoat and tie remained in pristine condition. Another sort of light emanated from him, an internal pyre that gave off warm glow.

Ren found his breath stolen from him. "... Akechi?"

"What's wrong?" Amusement flashed in Akechi's eyes. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

“What-” Ren took a step back, his eyes wide. “What is this place? I thought I was...”

“Perhaps a sort of limbo for lost souls like us. I’ve been trapped here since, well... you know. Besides that, isn’t it customary to serve your patrons before any sort of chitchat?” Akechi looked around Leblanc. “I don’t see Boss or any of your other friends, but I suppose that’s a good thing. Yaldabaoth wouldn’t kill them that easily.”

Ren’s mouth went dry. His legs moved automatically towards the wall of coffee beans. There was no mistake. This *had* to be Leblanc. The smell of coffee and curry had been ingrained into the cafe as if it had been steeped in the brew. The fridge, the stove, the ingredients. Everything was in the exact place it had been the last time he saw it.

Ren glanced at Akechi, who had that smirk on his face.

“Well?”

Ren turned back to brewing. When it was finished he grabbed a cup under the counter, the familiar coolness gracing his skin, and poured a cup of liquid gold. He set it in front of Akechi, who tenderly picked it up. Ren held his breath as Akechi took a sip.

“Interesting. What brew would this be?”

“Mexican Altura. I didn’t forget.” Ren tucked his hands away in his apron pockets. He swore he wasn’t wearing an apron just a second ago. “You don’t actually like sugary things, so I chose one that wouldn’t be as sweet.”

“Quite. As usual, it’s delicious.”

Akechi set the drink down with a soft *clink* . An uncertain stillness crept between them as the two rivals stared at one another.

“Akechi-”

“Don’t.” Akechi looked down and allowed a curtain of his hair to cover his face. “I already know what you want to say. Isn’t it ironic?”

Ren stayed silent as Akechi looked up, his eyes stabbing like the end of a knife.

“You cheated death back home.” Akechi searched Ren’s face as if it were a missing piece to a puzzle. “And now you’ve done it again, but this time you *actually died* . Multiple times. The rules of that new world are different though, correct? You can cheat death any number of times granted that you’re lucky enough to get a revival item or a Samarecarm. Are you shrugging your own death off like it’s nothing? Is this all a game to you?”

“No.” Ren couldn’t lie when Akechi stared him right in the eye. He knotted his hands into fists and took a shaky breath. “This isn’t a game.”

“Then why are you treating it like one?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The accusation stung Ren. “I’m not the one playing with other people’s lives. That’s Yaldabaoth’s job.”

“Are you so certain of that?” Akechi chuckled coldly. The mask of a Detective Prince cracked, revealing a hint of something feral. “By what *right* did you have to drastically change the history of a world you never belonged in?”

Ren scowled. “I can’t just sit by and let people suffer.”

“Look where that got you.” Akechi snapped. Ren flinched, but Akechi’s glare remained firm. “You could have found a way home. Reunited with your friends. Saved our world. But no, you decided to run around and play hero. You’ve forgotten that you’re a foreign entity dropped into that world by a malevolent false god.”

"I didn't *forget* !" Ren shook his head. "What's your point? You're saying that I should've ignored people who need help?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But whether they lived or died, to either be saved or continue their suffering, that is something you never should have messed with." Akechi glanced down to the lukewarm cup, tracing the rim with a frown. "Don't you think that was part of Yaldabaoth's plan? To drop you in a place where your powers go unchecked, to distract and exhaust you until something like this happens? You've eliminated the top powers of that world and you're the weakest you've ever been. What's to stop him from taking over multiple worlds, now that all of these elements are out of commission?"

Ren opened his mouth, then closed it. He ducked his head, his hair shielding him from Akechi's scathing glare.

"Tell me the truth. What made you lose sight of your goal?" Akechi leaned forward and pointed at Ren's heart. "The root of all of your actions began there, when you chose to be a Phantom Thief in a world of heroes."

"Originally..." Ren put a hand over his heart. "It was to get our name out so the others could find us if they made it there."

"But that's never happened. Your friends remain trapped in other worlds, no closer to getting home than you are right now." Akechi tilted his head. "Where did it all go wrong?"

"I..." Ren's hand balled into a fist, the apron's fabric scrunched in his grasp. "I was... no, I'm *still* terrified. I have nightmares of that interrogation room. Then you... and Yaldabaoth... and everything else that's happened since then.... *I'm so scared*, Akechi." Tears stung Ren's eyes, but Akechi's expression remained stoic. "The uncertainty. The pain. *My failure* . I was reminded of everything whenever Morgana looked at me. It grew the longer we were in that world, and I ended up using my powers to run away from it all. I just... I'm so tired. I want to go home. I want to see everyone again."

Akechi remained silent as Ren sniffled and wiped his eyes. He had no glasses to hide behind. Ren shook his head as he pulled himself together, the sharpness in his chest easing as he wiped away the final tear.

“But those people we saved... I will *never* regret it.”

“I see. It’s not a bad thing to admit your fears. A true fool would continue burying them and pretend that they never existed. Thank you for your honesty. It was rather refreshing. *However*,” Akechi’s smirk was like jagged ice. “It doesn’t matter how many you save in that world of heroes, it will never make up for the *millions* of people suffering under Yaldabaoth’s rule back home, whether they are conscious of it or not. Don’t you dare forget *their* suffering.”

Those words struck Ren like the crack of a whip.

“You still have quite a journey ahead of you, but you’ll do just fine as long as you don’t run away from your origins again.”

Akechi’s gaze flicked to something behind Ren. With a sigh, he stood and pulled at his gloves. He looked down at the empty coffee cup, and then beamed brightly at Ren.

“Thank you for the coffee. It seems our time has run short.”

Ren flinched. “What?”

A sapphire butterfly soared over Ren’s shoulder and landed on the rim of Akechi’s mug. It slowly turned towards him, its wings fluttering. It took off and landed on Ren’s chest. A sudden heat flooded Ren, as if his heart became home to a gentle flame, which grew until it slowly spread over his entire body.

Several things flitted through his mind.

"Ah, you're back-"

Ryuji grinning after an intense workout-

Ann's perfume-

The sound of Yusuke's brush over a canvas-

Pages turning in a textbook and Makoto's firm voice-

The clacking of Futaba's keyboard-

Haru's fresh garden-

Morgana's vow of companionship before facing the truth of Mementos-

The resigned gleam in Akechi's eyes. A BANG of a gunshot resounded in their ears, and they locked gazes before steel jaws snapped shut and separated them.

Leblanc faded as the heat burned as bright as the sun.

"Wait!" Ren shouted as Akechi's silhouette became blurred. He reached out, but the other boy stepped away and turned his back. "Akechi!"

Faint silhouettes appeared on either side of Akechi, rippling through the haze of sapphire embers. A duality of black and white, of righteousness and malicious deviance.

Robin Hood and Loki.

The pair of Personas regarded him with unified tilts of their head, a cocktail of different emotions burning within their eyes.

"Oh, and Ren?"

Ren's vision blurred as Akechi looked over his shoulder. Something feral sharpened Akechi's smile and lit his eyes with bloodlust. The facade of the handsome ace detective crumbled into an apex predator.

“Don’t hesitate next time.” Akechi said, “Kick Yaldabaoth’s ass for me, will you?”

The promise was on Ren’s tongue, but the heat had devoured his entire being. Leblanc fell into the void like cascading sand. Akechi and his Personas vanished. The butterfly melded into his body, and with it the thrum of a heartbeat.

Amamiya Ren lived once more.

“Akira!?” Morgana cried when Akira jolted violently, his chest shuddering with raspy noises. “Hey, open your eyes! Akira!”

Atsuhiro kept his jaw from dropping, his hand resting over his pounding heart. He put two fingers on the boy’s neck. *Joker had a pulse.* Weak, but still there. He swallowed back the storm of emotions brewing in his chest, before he put the back of his hand on the boy’s forehead.

“He’s burning up, but... he’s alive.... I can’t believe it...”

“Mercurius!” Morgana shouted.

Mercurius waved his staff. Instead of the soothing green and blue ribbons from Mediarahan, navy and violet light swirled together in a vortex. Akira gave off a soft glow, but it did nothing.

“Was that... Salvation?” Morgana asked.

“Yes.” Mercurius ran a hand down his singed staff. “We have been through much, and it is a new spell I recently acquired to replace Mediarahan.”

“But... if it’s Salvation, then why isn’t it doing anything?”

Akira broke out in a cold sweat, his eyes moving rapidly beneath his clenched eyelids as if he were having a nightmare.

“Akira!” Morgana huddled against Akira’s chest. “Please wake up!”

“I don’t want to sound brash, but we should vacate the premises and tend to him later.” Atsuhiro turned and rummaged through various drawers. “There must be clothes in one of these cabinets somewhere-”

The door swung open. They froze as Recovery Girl waddled inside, the door shutting behind her. She leaned on her cane as she scanned the room.

Mercurius growled, deep and bone rattling. A razor sharp wind split the room in half as the fleet footed god’s burned wings splayed. His shadow loomed over Recovery Girl, who only regarded him with mild interest as she shook her head.

“You would really threaten violence on an old woman?” She tutted. “I thought you would have some manners, being phantom thieves and all.”

“I normally respect my elders, Recovery Girl.” Atsuhiro smirked as he reached into his pocket for a handful of blue orbs. “But we’re in a bit of rush and not open to friendly banter. I hope you understand.”

Her eyes landed on Akira, a mix of relief and sorrow glinting in her eyes. “Ah, so Mona has revival abilities too? It seems I was correct.”

“Wh-what!?” The winds died as Morgana’s ears pricked forward. “How did you-”

“I suspected it after the Musutafu fires.” She said, “Nobody, especially a little girl, would survive flames that hot. You can stop glaring at me, dearies. I came alone. I haven’t told Nezu about my theories, either. I never told a single soul.”

Mercurius and Morgana exchanged a long glance. With a bow, Mercurius and his wind faded from reality, but that power lay just under Morgana’s skin.

Atsuhiro scowled, but stayed silent. The marbles in his tight grasp ground together.

“Can I...?” Recovery Girl stepped closer. “A real doctor should examine him. The poor boy doesn’t look so good.”

“... Okay.” Morgana stepped onto the side of the slab. “But I’ll be watching you closely. If you think you can-”

“None of that, please.” She said as she unwound her stethoscope and approached Akira. She pulled the white drape down Akira’s bare chest and listened to his heart, her brow knotted. “I only wish to help.”

Morgana’s tail twitched as she performed a few more basic tests. “Well?”

“It doesn’t look good.” She shook her head. “Not only does he have a high grade fever, but his heartbeat is erratic and his pupils-”

“Get to the point.” Atsuhiro said coldly.

“For his safety, he needs to be hospitalized again.”

“No.” Morgana growled.

“No?” Recovery Girl’s eyebrows shot up. “Deary, right now he needs professional help-”

“Professional help? *Professional help!?* ” A storm brewed in Morgana’s eyes. The air in the morgue gently stirred. “Look where we are! Look at what your *professional help* got him! How could I ever trust you people again after everything that’s happened!? No, we’re taking him out of here and then-”

“And then what?” She asked softly. No malice or anger stained her voice. Just... exhaustion. “His death was revealed to the rest of the world. What do you think will happen when his ‘body’ goes missing? People may hunt for him again. The best place for him right now

would be U.A., where he could be kept safe while he recovers. In secret, preferably.”

“Nezu couldn’t keep him safe from All For One, and he allowed our friends to get arrested. Joker had to *rescue himself* from that villain!” Morgana seethed. “We’re not going anywhere *near* that place.”

Recovery Girl studied him, the last of her tension draining from her body. “Let me share a story-”

“We don’t have time for stories.” Atsuhiro said as he glanced at the clock on the wall. “If Mona says we’re leaving, then *we’re leaving.*”

“If that is really your choice, then I don’t have the power to stop you. However, I believe you need to hear me out.”

“Perhaps it would be wise to hear another opinion, Magician.”
Mercurius whispered. *“If nothing but to gain another perspective. We do not need heated recklessness ruining an opportunity.”*

“Fine.” Morgana said, “But make it quick.”

Recovery Girl nodded. “Many years ago, there was a young girl named Chiyo. One day, there was a car accident while she was out playing. A rogue driver has hit her best friend and drove off. Her friend was on the street, bleeding out, and there would be no time for the paramedics to arrive before it would be too late.”

“A tragedy, to be sure.” Atsuhiro said dryly.

“It would have been, if Chiyo didn’t awaken her quirk. You see, she can heal people with a single kiss, given that the victim has enough energy for it. Chiyo healed her friend, and he survived long enough to be taken to the hospital. The people in her small town called her an angel, a blessing. From then on, they came to her for any number of injuries.”

“What happened?” Morgana asked.

“The men in suits came. People from the Hero Commission heard about her miracle powers, and stole her away from everything she loved.” Recovery Girl seemed to age ten years as her voice became somber. “Over the years, they vigorously trained her until she broke. Chiyo witnessed many horrible things. Burnt bodies, desiccated corpses, people dying from the most diabolical effects of man-made weapons, all experiments in the name of ‘improving her quirk’. The goal was to force her quirk to evolve far enough to where she could even revive the dead. It never did.”

“That’s horrible.” Morgana shivered as his tail wrapped around his legs. “What happened to her?”

“Nezu.” A small smile restored life into her expression. “He heard what was going on with the Hero Commission, he pulled strings and called in every favor he had to get the girl into his custody. Eventually, on the threat of exposing the horrible experiments to the public, the Hero Commission gave him custody.”

Morgana blinked rapidly. “How long ago was this?”

“Nearly forty-five years, deary.”

“Forty-five years!? Just how old is Nezu?”

“Only Nezu knows that.” She said. “But the point is that Nezu will do anything to protect this young boy from harm. That mouse doesn’t know the meaning of ‘giving up’, so one defeat won’t stop him.”

Atsuhiro scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“If you told that story to convince me,” Morgana said, standing, “Then my answer is still *no*. We made it this far without your help. *I’m* going to protect him this time, and nothing is going to stop me. I’m sorry, but I can’t trust you right now.”

“... I see.” Recovery Girl pointed to a drawer across the room. “The boy’s belongings are in there.”

Atsuhiro rushed over to it and pulled out Akira's clothes.

"You're really going to let us go?" Morgana asked.

"I know what people will do to get powers like yours and Joker's." She turned her back on him. "I just hope you know what you're doing, dearies. If it gets to be too much, or the boy's condition continues to worsen, then you know where to find us."

Recovery Girl stayed as they dressed the ill boy to the best of their abilities. Atsuhiro looked at the not-cat, who firmly nodded.

"This won't hurt one bit, I promise." Atsuhiro gently touched the boy's curls. With a small flash, he was stored away in a tiny orb, which Atsuhiro tucked into his pocket. "Shall we, Mona?"

"Yeah." Morgana said as he hopped onto the man's shoulder. "Let's get out of here while we can."

They left without sparing her a glance.

Recovery Girl looked at the empty cot, frowning. She drew out her phone and dialed Nezu.

"*Chiyo?*" Her heart twinged by how exhausted her father figure sounded. "*Is something the matter?*"

"Where are you? There's something I have to share." She stared at the door, which swung lightly. "It's better if I tell you about it in person."

Ding .

Hawks stepped out of the elevator and marched down the hallway. Office workers in the Hero Commission HQ glanced at him and bolted in the other direction. It was as if a dark cloud hovered over his head, his stormy expression promising a painful death if anyone

dared look him in the eye. He crossed through the building with a purpose, and nobody had the balls to stop him.

Except one.

“Hawks?” Ryoto looked up from a file in his hands. “What are you doing here? You weren’t called-”

Hawks passed him without even looking.

“H-hey, Hawks!” Ryoto rushed to Hawks’ side, nearly out of breath since Hawks didn’t bother slowing down. “Hawks, what’s wrong? As far as I know you weren’t summoned, so what are you doing? Hawks! Talk to me!”

“Don’t bother stopping me.” Hawks snapped. “It’s already too late.”

“Stopping you....?”

They reached the hallway with Kunikazu’s office. Ryoto paled. The file dropped onto the floor as Ryoto swerved around Hawks and put both hands on his shoulders. To say that Hawks looked *murderous* was an understatement. His feathers were stiff and twitchy. His eyes, bloodshot and puffy, held a primal glint that welcomed incoming doom.

“Hawks....” Ryoto whispered. “*What did you do ?*”

“You already know.” Hawks looked at the watch on his wrist. “Check the news in five minutes and you’ll see my *update* on Joker’s death.”

“What? It was... *that was you ?*” Hawks shrugged the man off and continued on his way. Ryoto snatched his wrist. “You can’t go in there! Kunikazu will use his quirk when he finds out!”

A bark of laughter stopped Ryoto cold.

“Do you think I really give a damn about Kunikazu anymore?” Hawks wrenched his wrist back. “I’m only dropping in to tell him goodbye.”

“What... Hawks!!”

Ryoto tried to chase after him, but a wall of massive red feathers blocked the hallway on either side of Kunikazu’s door. Hawks kicked open the door and let himself in.

Kunikazu looked up from his desk with a sneer. “Hawks, what do you think you’re doing? You’re scheduled for a patrol right now.”

“Oh, am I really? I didn’t bother checking my schedule today.” Hawks tilted his head. “I only stopped in so that I could see the look on your face when your whole world comes tumbling down.”

“What are you talking about?”

Hawks looked at his watch as it beeped. “Well, would you look at that. If I were you, I’d tune in to channel five news. I heard that there would be a particularly *striking* video that might peak your interest.”

Kunikazu glared at him, but complied.

Hawks wickedly grinned when the man tuned into the news channel on his computer. Satisfaction curled up Hawks’ spine when Kunikazu’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates, his face going so pallid that his veins became visible.

“What... what is this!?” Kunikazu’s eyes *burned* gold as sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Did you know that those ICU rooms have cameras?” Hawks chuckled as he shook his head. “I get you wanted to show how ‘unstable’ a terrified teenager was to a court of law, but you really should’ve thought it through. That was one of the *worst* places to throw one of your tantrums. Some people may have turned their backs on Joker, but there are many more that still love him. How do you think they’ll react when they learn you used your quirk on a helpless kid?”

Hawks got out his phone and watched as Kunikazu sicced the police officers on a bed-ridden child. Kunikazu's golden eyes blazed like lanterns just before Cerberus summoned himself, his wild roars shaking the camera. The world witnessed the room's destruction, Eraserhead wrapping Joker in his arms, and the seizures that made the kid go comatose and lead to his eventual death.

"The truth is out." Hawks stated as he pocketed his phone. "Joker is dead and the grieving public wants somebody to blame. With this, *everyone* will know your hand in the kid's death. This is all *your* fault."

"You... you!!" Kunikazu's blazing golden eyes fell on Hawks.

Hawks stiffened when a familiar inferno cooked his insides. He snickered through the pain, a feral grin plastered on his face as his organs boiled. But this searing agony had nothing on the new hole punched through his heart.

"Do you have any idea what you just did!?" Kunikazu roared.

"Yep!" Hawks chirped. "But you know what? I *don't* care! I'm sick of your fear tactics, I'm sick of being the Hero Commission's little puppet, and most of all, I'm sick of *you* ! Because of you, I just lost one of the most important people in my life! For once, I tasted *real freedom* . You'd never understand what Joker meant to me, what he meant to the people of Japan!"

"I had to retain order!" Kunikazu banged his fist on the desk. "And now the country will fall into chaos because of what you just did! I'll see you punished-"

"No, you won't. You don't hold any power over me anymore!" Hawks reached into his pocket and slammed a red and black card on the desk. "Too bad it's not an official one from Joker, but I'm leaving it here for you anyway. I cooked it up, special. Just for you! Think of it as my final present to you. Goodbye, Kunikazu." Hawks stood tall as

the infernal glow in Kunikazu's eyes faded. "I hope we never see each other again."

Hawks marched out without another word, leaving the man in dreadful silence.

Kunikazu stared at the card.

To the Pridedeful Sinner, Kunikazu Hiroto,

Your days of abusing the weak, manipulating your way to the top echelons of society, and lording over the general populace are over. The hand you have dealt has been revealed to the public. That tower you built around yourself will soon lie in crumbling ruins.

~ Never Yours, Raptor ☆

Kunikazu screamed as he tore the card to bits. Red and black confetti rained over his desk and onto the floor, and he collapsed down into his chair, panting. He jumped when his phone rang. He straightened the stray bangs sticking to his forehead. Cold shivers crawled over his skin as he answered.

"Prime Minister. Let me explain."

"No, Kunikazu. No more of these games!"

"Sir-"

"Do you have any idea what position you're in!? People are crying out to get justice for Joker, and you-"

"Sir, please. I can make everything right. Just give me another chance. I'll take care of-"

"No, you won't." The Prime Minister sighed, short and irritated. "I gave you another chance when you botched that raid in Musutafu, the bounty, the instability that went rampant over my country! You made the heroes, and the Commission itself, look like a bunch of headless chickens! And for what? All of this because a teenage boy played you like a damned fiddle! A boy who is dead, and the public lays the blame on you. You're finished."

"Wh.... what ?"

"I'll give you an hour to get your affairs in order."

"Wait-"

"Don't think you can run, either. I've sent a certain group of heroes to the HC headquarters to apprehend you. Don't make a bigger fool of yourself by resisting."

"Wait!!" His chair flew back as he rushed to his feet. "I'm not finished here!!"

The line went dead. He pulled it away from his ear and gaped at the screen. His attempts to redial went unanswered, and the sinking feeling in his stomach sprouted like thorny vines. Kunikazu fell to his knees as his phone dropped from his grasp. The ringing in his ears drowned out all sound and rational thought, like howling wolves gathering for a kill.

Time held no meaning in this spiraling daze. The pounding on the door didn't register until it burst open, and his furious executioners swooped inside.

Gang Orca.

Ryukyu.

Miruko.

Chief Tsuragamae and a small handful of police officers.

“Come on.” Gang Orca growled as he wrenched Kunikazu to his feet, the grip on Kunikazu’s arm enough to make his bones creak. “It’s over.”

Tsuragamae read his rights, but the static muddling Kunikazu’s brain turned it into muted garble. He was dragged from his own office by Gang Orca. Miruko took his other side with an equally bone breaking grip. The faces of the HQ workers blurred together with masks of shock, except for a single person.

Ryoto’s eyes followed them as they made their way down the hall, but the shocked man’s mask cracked as Kunikazu and the heroes passed him.

Ryoto *smirked* .

A small grin that would forever be seared in Kunikazu’s mind as he was torn from everything he’s ever worked for.

Shoto tossed another pellet into the water.

The pond swelled as the koi fish dashed madly to devour the tasty snack. But another swooped in while they plowed over one another, one of sable black scales with ivory markings around its eyes, followed by lustrous flowing fins as flamboyant as a certain vigilante’s own coattails. Joker the koi fish swiped the treat in elegant, fluid movements, leaving the rest of the gaping mouths empty.

Shoto snorted as he tossed the next one in, much to the same result. Once the waters calmed, his scaly audience turned to him with hungry eyes. Shoto wiped his hands on his pant legs.

“Sorry, I’m all out.”

The fish all but ignored him then, swimming serenely through their crystal clear pond. Water lilies and blooming lotus flowers provided

shade from the scorching summer sun. Joker the koi fish continued staring at him. Hovering just below the surface, its frontal fins waving back and forth like a curtain. If Shoto didn't know better, he would think that a mischievous intelligence glimmered in its eyes. It continued to stare at him, as if prompting something.

"What does it all mean, Joker?" Shoto asked as he leaned forward, the black fish gliding a few inches closer to him. "I can't seem to figure you out."

He was the only one that knew how Joker brought back Native from the cold hands of death. Did he bring back others too, or was Native the only exception? Was it possible for Joker to revive himself? Could Mona have the same abilities, and if so, could he control one or more of those mythological beings?

Shoto looked at his phone, which balanced on his knee, and unlocked it to the website he'd been pouring through. Information on Arcanas.

"He called me an Empress-"

"My Tower! And..." Seth's eyes bored into Shoto like searing rays of sunlight, "The Hanged Man?"

Empress. Tower. Hanged Man.

Empress: *This Arcana represents elegance, nurturing, creation, and beauty. This card calls you to connect with the beauty and happiness in your life.*

Tower : *Can represent pride, change, falsehood, and ruin. Beware this card, for it can be associated with sudden and unforeseen changes, both good and bad.*

Hanged Man : *Represents self sacrifice, surrender, or being caught between two extremes. This card in the upright position means that one should take advice and reflect over one's actions.*

The Arcana described them to frightening levels of accuracy. But what did it all *mean* ? Shoto roughly tapped the side of his phone as the thoughts rolled through his head.

Seth stated *my Tower*, so did that mean that Seth had power over that particular Arcana? Did Joker's mythological companions bear different Arcanas? What did it have to do with Joker and the relationships he forged since his appearance at the USJ?

Shoto's thoughts were drawn aside by a sudden twinge in his chest.

"Then there's this..." He muttered as he rubbed the invisible wound over his heart. "Last night I felt as if... I couldn't breathe." Shoto's stared at Joker the koi fish, who stared back from his watery plane. "Iida said that it was grief, but we all felt a similar pain *last night*, several hours before his death was announced. Everything must be connected, but *how* ?"

Joker the koi fish floated there without a care in the world. Silent. Serene.

Shoto huffed. "Of course. Keep your secrets then, just like the real Joker."

The koi fish bolted through the water. It dove into the shade of water lilies, its dark scales a perfect camouflage against shadowed rock. The ripples stilled, and the watery mirror reflected a familiar figure. Shoto looked over his shoulder.

"Mother."

"Shoto." Rei sat beside him with one elegant movement. Love and pride sparkled within her eyes as she stared at him, and he

wondered if she could be an Empress too. “Should I be concerned that you are talking to fish?”

“No. I’m fine.” Shoto ducked his head, his dual colored bangs masking the redness in his face. “I just... needed some place to think out loud. Where is everyone else?”

“In my room. I had the nurses bring tea.” Rei frowned as she stared into the pool. “They are... understandably upset. How are you feeling about this, Shoto?”

“I don’t know. Everything is becoming one big blur. I’m glad that Kunikazu is getting what he deserves, but....”

“But?”

“I just have this feeling.” Shoto’s hand stilled over his heart. “I don’t know how to describe it. I felt like my chest was going to burst all through the night, but then this morning... it faded a little, but its still there.”

“You’re experiencing grief.”

“That’s what my class rep said. But I *know* that there’s something more going on, I just can’t connect the dots. It doesn’t feel like its over. Joker isn’t done telling his story.”

Her hand fell on his shoulder. “If your gut instinct tells you that there’s more to this, then it might be wise to follow it.”

“... Yeah.”

“Momo and Fuyumi were starting to get worried.” Rei smiled. “How about we rejoin everyone for tea? We can have an early dinner and just chat, if you want to.”

“Yeah, sure.”

They stood and wiped the grass and dirt from their pants. Shoto looked at Joker the koi fish, who watched on through the darkness. A sudden hope cast away the sharp, suffocating pain in his soul.

Joker *had* to be alive.

He just knew it.

Aizawa and Tsukauchi wrinkled their noses against the overpowering aroma of alcohol, and ignored the drunken murmurs as they chose the loneliest table in the back. The lighting in this place was stained by the curling wisps of cigarette smoke, the sound of *clacking* echoed from the other side of the bar from the pool table.

“Sorry, it was the closest place.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Aizawa said as he melted into the booth. “At this point, I don’t give a damn whether its a shithole like this or a fancy-”

A waitress cleared her throat when she approached their table. Tsukauchi grimaced as he placed an order for the both of them, nothing too strong so that they wouldn’t be sloshed the next morning. She walked away with an indignant curl to her lip.

“Here, I can pay.” Aizawa droned as he tossed a familiar wad of 5,000 yen on the table.

“Hey, isn’t that for-”

“Yep.”

“Shouldn’t you keep it?”

“What for?” Aizawa glared at it. “I don’t need it anymore.”

Tsukauchi frowned. “It’s something we wanted to give him. I think we should keep it as a reminder.”

“I don’t care.” Aizawa scoffed and turned his eyes away. “Do whatever you want with it.”

Tsukauchi tucked the 5,000 yen in his coat pocket before he got out his wallet. Aizawa didn’t say anything as the waitress set cold bottles on the table, her eyes roamed over Tsukauchi, who paid out of his own pocket, leaving the 5,000 yen untouched. She swiped the bills and stalked away, and they were left to their own devices.

Tsukauchi’s heart lurched as Aizawa opened one and took a massive swig. “Aizawa-”

The man slammed the beverage back on the table, the liquid inside bobbing back and forth. “Did you know I was the last one to see Joker at the Summer Camp? It was *his* plan to split up. If I had just... just...” His knuckles turned white as he gripped the bottle. “If I had just stopped him, or went with him-”

“Aizawa, *no* .” Tsukauchi leaned forward. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for what happened.”

“How else am I supposed to see it?” Aizawa glared back. “*I* was the last one who saw Joker and Mona at the camp. Joker is dead, we don’t have Mona, or Gentle Criminal and La Brava. The Hero Commission is crumbling. That utter *bastard* Kunikazu got what’s coming to him, but all of this happened because *I* let Joker go.”

“Aizawa.” Tsukauchi’s eyes hardened. “We had no way of knowing what the League’s plans were. All For One would’ve tried grabbing Joker no matter what we did. You know that.”

“And look where *that* got him. At least that villain can’t harm anybody else.” Aizawa muttered as he took another sip.

Tsukauchi hummed. “I heard that they were pushing to cremate the villain’s remains. All Might is making sure that it happens soon.”

Their conversation died on soured tongues. They stewed in their dread as they nursed their drinks. Aizawa tapped his fingers against the glass bottle. Aizawa's phone buzzed incessantly. He silenced it with a scowl and shoved it back in his pocket.

"Who is that?"

"Midnight and Mic keep trying to reach me, but I'm not in the mood." He grumbled. "Are you going to take that promotion?"

"What?" Tsukauchi's eyes snapped up to Aizawa. "What's with the sudden change in topic?"

"I don't want to just sit here in silence. I can't take it."

Tsukauchi looked across the bar. "But it's so loud in here--"

"Tsuragamae offered, right?"

"He did, but..." Tsukauchi pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know. We've been short staffed since the Silver Falcon incident, but... *me* ? As a police commissioner? That has to be a joke."

"You're more qualified than you think."

Tsukauchi narrowed his eyes. "Is the alcohol getting to you already? I didn't know you were a lightweight."

"Shut it." Aizawa griped. "Come back to me after you survive one of Midnight's cocktails. That would knock anybody out for the rest of the night. Besides, who was it that decided to keep Joker's identity a secret? If it were anybody else, then they would've barged into his safe space and cause another typhoon or something. You kept your head, and we got to know the kid on a more personal level. That has to count for something."

Tsukauchi rolled the bottle between his palms, the glass gliding on the table. "I'll think about it, but no promises."

Aizawa nodded, and was about to take another sip before somebody stormed into the bar. The den of debauchery went silent for a moment, studying the cat headed man, before the ambience returned to normal.

“Is that Sansa?” Tsukauchi said.

Sansa zeroed in on them and rushed to their table. “Here you are! I’ve been trying to call you!”

“We put our phones on silent.” Aizawa said. “Why?”

“It’s Nezu and the chief-”

“What do they want?” Aizawa’s eyes flashed red “The kid *just* died and they can’t even give us a day to grieve?”

“That’s just it...” Sansa looked over his shoulder, then leaned in and whispered. “Nezu, Tsuragamae, and Recovery Girl are calling a select few people back to the hospital for an emergency meeting. The kid... he...” Sansa’s voice was barely audible over the bar’s other patrons. “His body went missing.”

Tsukauchi’s hand flew to the pocket where he stored the 5,000 yen. Their eyes widened in disbelief. Tsukauchi and Aizawa exchanged long glances, glimmers of hope burning the despair, before they practically sprinted out of the bar.

Sansa cursed under his breath as he struggled to keep up.

“Is everyone here?” Nezu asked as he tucked his hands behind his back.

“We’re missing Best Jeanist and Iida Tensei,” Tsuragamae said. “But this should suffice.”

“Couldn’t we talk about this upstairs?” Miruko snapped. “These places make me twitchy.”

“I agree.” Hawks fanned himself with a gloved hand. “It’s so stuffy.”

“You’ll just have to deal with it.” Ryukyu crossed her arms and glowered.

Gang Orca stared right at the empty chamber that once held Joker’s body. His heart wasn’t the only one that pounded out of anticipation.

Yagi, Aizawa, and Tsukauchi surrounded it, frowning.

“How the hell did this happen?” Aizawa asked as he stared at Nezu, before his eyes turned towards the person next to him. “And why is *he* here?”

“I’m here,” Ryoto said, his eyes glossed over Hawks, before he scanned the rest of the room. “Because Nezu trusts me. That can’t be said for the rest of the Commission, at the moment.”

“Indeed.” Nezu stated. “Right now, the Hero Commission plans to make an example of Kunikazu.”

“His previous actions against Joker were suddenly brought to light by an anonymous source. Even with a missing body, they can’t cover up his misdeeds. There are too many questions over Kunikazu’s actions to let it slide this time.” Ryoto said, Hawks didn’t even flinch. Instead, the feathered hero kept a blank expression as Ryoto continued. “They’ll do everything in their power to make him pay.”

“What, shoving him under the bus to make themselves look good?” Miruko snorted. “Though I’ll never forget his face as we dragged him off! Best arrest I ever made.”

“Quite.” Nezu nodded. “But we can discuss this topic later. Recovery Girl, everyone is antsy, and we can all guess why. Can you explain what happened?”

Recovery Girl tapped her cane, “Yes, but I trust all of you to keep this silent for the time being, until we can figure out how to deliver this to the public.”

“Deliver... what?” Hawks asked. “Did somebody move his body?”

Ryukyu snarled. “I swear if anybody did anything to dishonor that kid-”

“The boy is alive.” Recovery Girl said.

Their hearts collectively squeezed. Nobody could breathe as the atmosphere plunged into an odd blend of disbelief and dissipating vapors of grief.

“Wh-what... what did you just say?” Ryukyu whispered.

“But he can’t be...” Aizawa looked down at his hand, “Joker was, he was.... we saw him-”

“I overheard you say that Mona may have the same powers as Joker, isn’t that correct, Aizawa?” Recovery Girl asked.

Aizawa blinked. “You actually *heard* that? Well, yeah, it’s just a theory but-”

“Joker can revive the dead, and it just so happens that Mona can, as well.” Everyone, spare Nezu, gaped like fish out of water, “Let me explain....”

She retold her encounter with the strange nurse and Mona in explicit detail, then told them her theory on the young girl trapped in one of the Musutafu fires.

“Given Recovery Girl’s experience, we can say that Joker, while he may be ill, is certainly *alive* .” Nezu clasped his paws together to his their shakiness. “Joker is supposed to be dead, and yet he has pulled the wool over our eyes and escaped once again. It’s almost a pity that there’s no glitter this time.”

“Nezu!” Aizawa snapped.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Ryukyu turned an accusing eye on Recovery Girl. “If Joker is... is *sick* after being revived... then we have to be there for him!”

“Please don’t be angry, deary.” Recovery Girl squared her shoulders. “I’m not a combat hero. Everyone else was off doing their own duties, and I didn’t know for certain that Mona could revive Joker.”

“You could’ve at *least* let us know!!” Miruko shouted. “Now he’s out in the streets again and we don’t know where he is because you decided to keep your trap shut!”

“Which she had every right to do.” Ryoto spoke up as he stepped in between them. “If the Hero Commission knew that either of them could *revive the dead*, then Joker’s situation would only get worse. She did right in keeping it a secret until now.”

“You want to say that again, asshole!?”

“Miruko!” Hawks snatched Miruko’s arm before she could punch Ryoto.

“Enough. We cannot fight among ourselves.” Nezu commanded attention, and Miruko scowled at him. “Let’s use this chance to pull off something spectacular!”

“What’s your plan?” Gang Orca said, his blood red eyes sharpening. “The news of his survival will cause tidal waves after his death was leaked. Our society is more unstable than it has ever been, and if Joker doesn’t make his reappearance... then people will be upset for more reasons than one.”

“Talk about emotional whiplash.” Ryukyu muttered as she leaned against the wall.

“As for *finding* Joker, we shall do.....” Nezu held his words over them. Aizawa’s eyes twitched before Nezu threw up his arms and grinned brightly. “Absolutely nothing!!”

“*Whaaat!?*” Their collective screams might’ve woken the dead.

“What do you mean, nothing!?” Ryukyu asked.

“Nezu... doing nothing in this situation is a bad idea.” Toshinori spoke for the first time, putting his hand over his unmarred side. “After everything this boy did... you want to do *nothing* to locate him?”

“You know how Joker is. He will not appear if we force him.” Nezu circled the room, the tip of his tail wagging. “He won’t come to us unless he has a reason to.”

“Does he have one?” Tsukauchi asked.

“The USJ.”

“The USJ?” Tsuragamae muttered.

“Indeed. When I approached the boy about the Summer Camp, he vowed his services in exchange for a visit to the USJ. I don’t think it’s coincidental that the USJ happened to be his very first appearance... and perhaps, his way home.”

“His way home...?” Toshinori’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates. “Wait a moment, you’re not suggesting that what All For One said was true?”

“It’s only a theory.” Nezu grinned. “And an exciting one at that! Think of the possibilities if this one happens to be true!”

“Are you going to share with the rest of us?” Aizawa droned.

“Currently, I have no proof. I don’t wish to get your hopes up after my previous theories were wrong!” Nezu chuckled as the rest

collectively rolled their eyes, Toshinori began sweating profusely. "But know that Joker will come to us in due time. The USJ is too valuable of a location to him."

"Fine, keep your damn secrets." Miruko muttered.

"But the next question is, what do we do about..." Tsukauchi stared down at the empty chamber. "*This* ?"

"Why, Tsukauchi, what an excellent question!" Nezu chirped. "What a marvelous conundrum we have been thrown in! We're balancing on a double edged sword. We *must* do this right if we are to maintain said balance."

"Okay..." Tsukauchi said, his eyes squinting. "But how are we going to do that?"

"We both noticed a certain individual who had been present at either the scenes of Joker's stunts, or any press conference relating to him?"

"You're not talking about Demizu Mika?" Ryukyu asked.

"Although she will be pivotal to my plan, she is not the one I'm thinking about. Not quite." Nezu shook his head. "This man was present at Musutafu General, the Yaoyorozu press conference, *and* the one before Kamino Crisis. He was at our gates after the USJ incident, though I believe he had no connection to Joker at that point."

Tsukauchi startled. "I know who you're talking about. He stared me down at Musutafu General!"

"Please, just give us a name." Hawks massaged his temples. "I'm too tired to keep playing cat and mouse."

"T-san."

“You think he’s T-san!?” Tsukauchi shouted, his face paling. “But, wait... that could make sense...”

“He’s one of Joker’s allies, and he could help ramp up the public’s support when we announce *how* and *why* Joker had to escape. We have a face...” Nezu looked at Tsuragamae and steepled his paws together. “Now we just need T-san’s real name.”

“If we can get a clear picture, then we could run it through facial recognition software.” Tsukauchi said.

“You’re not going to *arrest* him, are you?” Hawks said as he ran a hand through his unkempt hair. “We’re already in one huge mess. Wouldn’t arresting *more* of Joker’s allies be taking a step backwards?”

“No, no, not arrest.” Nezu said, grinning. “Strike a deal. If we can offer an olive branch to T-san, then we could recover the trust that Kunikazu carelessly destroyed, both between Joker and with the public.”

“But we can’t just...” Miruko scratched the back of her head. “It would be bad if we just announced that Mona and Joker can revive dead people.”

“It can easily be spun into Joker faking his death after what Kunikazu put him through.” Aizawa muttered. “Announcing the truth would put him in even more danger.”

“I guess that makes sense...” Miruko said. “As long as people buy it.”

“What about the rest of us?” Gang Orca asked. His eyes never left the steel cot, his clenched fists shaking. “I need to do... *something* to help with this.”

“You shall! My plan is this,” Nezu faced the heroes head on. “We shall request an interview with Demizu Mika on live television. Yes, I will humbly ask for your presence. After all, you worked closely with

Joker. Toshinori, your words hold the most weight in regards to All For One's death."

Resolve thrummed through Toshinori. "I understand."

"And T-san?" Ryukyu asked.

"Another who has worked with Joker. His blog is inspired by the young vigilante. He's not a hero, but one who can act as a bridge between we heroes, Joker, and the public eye."

"If we announce that we worked with Joker in taking down those rings," Hawks said with fire in his eyes. "Then we might lose our hero licenses, our ranks, everything. Despite this, I'm going to go through with it. How about everyone else?"

"Hell yeah!" Miruko shouted.

"You don't even have to ask." Ryukyu said, smiling.

Gang Orca firmly nodded.

"Even so," Ryoto smirked. "The Hero Commission wouldn't dare touch you without Kunikazu. Most of them are spineless. You'll be perfectly fine."

"Indeed!" Nezu chuckled. "Besides, the public won't allow it. The Hero Commission will be forced to bow to them if they want to keep some semblance of sanity."

"I see what you're getting at." Miruko's grin turned feral. "I like it!"

"And we can show Joker that he has people on his side." Ryukyu shifted her weight. "Do you think he'll really come back to us?"

"Only time will tell, Ryukyu." Nezu said. "But we must try regardless."

"What about Jeanist and Iida?" Hawks asked. "Can nobody get in contact with them?"

“Jeanist hasn’t answered his phone.” Ryukyu sighed, “And Iida took a leave of absence to spend time with his family.”

“They will hear of this, one way or another.” Nezu chirped. “But with or without them, we best get to work. The faster we do this, the better we can ease the public’s fears.”

“I’ll contact Demizu Mika and set up the interview.” Ryukyu said as she got out her phone.

“Good!” Nezu turned towards Tsukauchi. “Shall we go, commissioner? Or is it still too early to call you that?”

Tsukauchi faced the door, ignoring Nezu. “Let’s just go .”

Nezu chuckled as he followed, leaving the morgue and the flabbergasted heroes behind.

“AAAAAGH!”

The table’s contents flew into the air from a single swipe. Papers, pens, notebooks, all of Taneo’s rough draft’s tumbled together in a chaotic heap on the floor. He stood there, his shadow draped over lines of messy handwriting.

Taneo collapsed on the floor and pulled at his hair.

Joker, hovering at the edge of the musty alley, turned his back on Taneo. “It might be nice to be remembered once we’re gone.”

“You... you knew, didn’t you? You knew you were going to *die* .” Tears dripped down and splotted on some of his papers, the ink smearing on a page with Joker’s name. “That’s..... that’s not fair, Joker.”

He cursed rapidly under his breath and wiped it away, but only made Joker’s name turn into an unintelligible smudge at the top of his first

page. He was drawn out of his thoughts by a loud knock on his door. Any strength drained out of him, he didn't want to move.

His phone, unrelenting with new messages from his co-workers, went ignored all night. He glanced blearily at the clock. 7:30 am. He scoffed as the pounding on the door grew more frantic, the noise beating against his body like a drum.

"Fine.... fine!!" His footsteps crinkled the paper as he dragged himself to his feet. "I'm coming. Just hold your horses for Christ's sake."

He swung open the door with a scowl. His annoyance curled into a tiny ball and died on the spot as he took in the figures before him. Principal Nezu stood primly at his doorstep. At Nezu's side was a familiar detective, his eyes riddled with dark circles and face stained with a light five o'clock shadow, in his hand he clutched a small briefcase. A gust of wind could knock the poor sap over.

Sweat prickled on Taneo's neck as he threw on a false smile. "Sorry fellas, I'm not in the mood for visitors."

Nezu's foot caught the door as he tried closing it.

"Actually, we'd be very interested in having a chat with *you*, T-san." Nezu stated as the door gently swung back open. "Our chat shouldn't be all too long!"

Taneo froze, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Damn," He chuckled dryly. "You know my boss said not to get too careless, and yet here we are. Am I under arrest?"

"No, Tokuda-san." The exhausted detective smiled at him. "You're not under arrest, but we should have this conversation in private. It's important. If you would...?"

“Yeah, sure.” Taneo whisked them inside, casting a cursory glance at the open door. The detective raised a brow at him. He closed the door with a shrug. “Sorry, my place is a bit of a mess at the moment.” He hastily piled together the papers on the floor as they sat at the dusty table. “Er, I don’t have any tea, but I have some instant coffee or juice, if you wanted any?”

The detective shook his head.

“No, but thanks for the offer.” Nezu wiped the dust off the table in front of him and placed his paws on it, still smiling. “Please, sit.”

“I’ll stand.” Taneo smirked with the hoard of papers hugged to his chest. “Spit it out already, and don’t boss me around in my own home.”

“Apologies, I meant no offence! We’ll get right to the point.” Nezu’s eyes poked Taneo’s skin with a thousand icy needles. “T-san, I would like to employ your services for the good of society.”

Taneo blinked rapidly. “Say again? You want me to *what* ?”

“I would like to employ your services. We have set up an interview with Demizu Mika and the pros that worked alongside Joker. We would like you to be a part of it. We would talk about Joker and the good he’s done, and then afterwards-”

“Wait, wait, wait! What the hell are you-” Taneo stopped, his mouth gaping. Then, a grin stretched from ear to ear. “Oh, I *get it* . You want me to be the bridge between the heroes and the public that just lost their star vigilante. Do you really think I would turn my back on Joker’s memory, and for what, so you can try and repair the damage before society implodes? With Joker dead and All Might retiring, that’s exactly what’s going to happen, isn’t it?”

“On the contrary, Joker is very much alive.”

Taneo’s heart flew into his throat. “... What?”

"He *is* alive." Tsukauchi reiterated.

Taneo's arms dropped. Paper drowned his floor and spread all the way under the table.

"*How ?*" Taneo pushed out.

"Mona." Nezu leaned forward. "We have seen first hand what Joker's miraculous healing powers have done, but we completely neglected to consider that Mona could have the exact same abilities, or to what true depths their powers can reach."

"Recovery Girl was the witness." Tsukauchi said, but the air of disbelief put Taneo off kilter. "I have a lie detector quirk, so although the cameras were hacked, we know she was telling the truth. His comrades escaped with him afterwards."

"You... you're not...." Taneo's eyes flicked in between them. "You're not trying to trick me, are you?"

"No." Nezu cocked his head to the side. "You care about the boy a lot, don't you?"

"... Yeah, I do." Taneo placed his hands against the table as a wave of dizziness washed over him. "Enough to where I'm not going to back stab the kid to get what you want."

"You misunderstand." Nezu stated. "We wish to extend our aid to Joker, wherever he may be, and at the same time, calm people's fears."

Taneo narrowed his eyes, unsatisfied. "Why the hell do you think Joker would trust any of you again? Everyone knows what Kunikazu did to him."

"Indeed, and that man will pay dearly." Nezu's tail flicked eagerly. "But I have learned, through Joker, that he is interested in U.A. itself. I wish to make it known that he can come to the school whenever he

wishes, granted that I get my program approved, and that no harm will befall him. But... before I say any more, I have to know that you agree to come with us.”

“... Okay.” Taneo moved a piled of paper with the side of his foot, then collapsed in the closest chair. “But there’s one little problem here. What will the public think? I broke the law by working with Joker, and I’m not protected by a fancy hero license.”

“Tsukauchi.”

“Right.” Tsukauchi opened his briefcase and put a folder in the middle of the table. “With Nezu’s backing, you could easily get amnesty for working alongside a vigilante. The process is more a boring formality than terrifying. It’s not like you murdered anybody.”

“Aside from that, if you were employed under me, then you and your co-workers would get first dibs on any stories or interviews that arise from my school.”

Taneo’s eyes brightened. “And if Joker decides to reveal himself to you?”

“Then of course, I’d let you know! Besides...” Nezu grinned as he leaned forward, whispering. “I have a feeling that what’s happening at U.A. would be the story of the century!”

“What’s happening at U.A. that would have Joker so interested? How are you so certain that he’ll come back?” Nezu simply grinned. The two stared at one another, but Nezu would not relent. “Alright. Fine. If this is for Joker’s well-being then.... I guess I can do it.”

“Excellent!!” Nezu threw his paws up. “The others have set up a time with Demizu Mika tomorrow morning, but there’s much preparation to do before then. We should have enough time to have your situation squared away before the big event! Shall we go?”

Taneo looked down at himself. “Uh, I better clean up first.”

“By all means!”

Tsukauchi shrunk in his seat as Taneo raced off to the bathroom.

More sleepless nights lingered on the horizon, but as long as Joker was alive and well and *knew* he had a place to go, then it would all be worth it.

“All Might!!” Sand cascaded from Izuku’s frantic footsteps.

Toshinori turned with a smile. White bandages wrapped the boy’s arms, a reminder of what *his successor* pulled off during the Summer Camp and Kamino. An event that he never witnessed in person.

“Texas....”

Izuku raced towards Toshinori, the famed Midoriya waterworks turned as high as the tide.

“SMAAASH!!”

Guilt thrashed his heart as the punch threw Izuku to his backside. Izuku blinked several times, unscathed by the powerless punch.

“You really don’t keep your word, do you?” Toshinori said, the starry waves rolling with his words. Izuku’s eyes widened as his hand went to his cheek, but Toshinori pushed on. “Everything was almost in vain, you know. Jeez, you take after me a little too much, don’t you think?”

Izuku shrunk in on himself and stared into the sand.

“Young Midoriya, I...”

“I... I know.” Izuku’s eyes watered. “You’re retiring, right?”

“Yes.” Toshinori held out his arms. “The last embers of One For All went out faster than I anticipated, and I cannot fight as the number

one hero anymore. I... it was a miracle we made it through Kamino.”

“All Might...”

“However...” Toshinori stared down at Izuku with a scowl, shadows fell over his gaunt eyes. “You threw yourself into danger again! It doesn’t matter how many times I tell you, you keep breaking your body! That’s why, this time...” Izuku ducked his head as Toshinori’s hands raised. Fearing another strike, he clenched his eyes closed and braced. “This time... when you came out unscathed for the first time to rescue somebody...”

Toshinori knelt down and wrapped the boy in his arms. Izuku stiffened.

“I was so happy.” Toshinori said as traitorous tears came into his own eyes. He pulled back and stared into Izuku’s quivering gaze. “From here on out, let’s work together, okay? I’m going to work on raising you to be the best hero that you can be.”

Izuku wrapped his arms around Toshinori, who smiled as he held the sniffling boy. They stayed like that for a tiny eternity, their breaths weaving along side the waves as they cried. Just holding each other, evidence of them truly *being alive*, stoked a warm, comfortable flame in their hearts. Eventually, they pulled apart. Izuku wiped his tear stained face and gathered his thoughts.

“You look like you want to ask something.” Toshinori said softly.

“Y-you’re injuries... Joker...” Izuku cut himself off as a lump formed in his throat. He took a moment to breathe before speaking again.

“What did he do to you at Kamino?”

Toshinori leaned back, and the two of them sat across from each other on the cool sand. He carefully lifted his shirt. Izuku gaped at the unblemished side.

“You know what this means.” Toshinori let his shirt fall as he turned to the sparkling waves. “That boy gave back everything I lost because of All For One. I never expected One For All’s duty would be fulfilled by somebody else. But now, you can learn and grow without having that weight over your head. Has he... did that boy ever say anything strange to you about having multiple souls?”

Izuku’s eyes widened. “N-no. Why?”

“‘I must do what the remnants of seven souls failed to do!’ is what Sraosha said before All For One...” Toshinori shook his head as he stared up at the moon. “I wonder how long Joker knew about our quirk, if he could sense all of the remnants of One For All.”

“He never said anything... A-Akira...” Hot tears flooded Izuku’s eyes once more, streaming down onto the sand. He clutched onto his shirt with white knuckles. “I... he was like a big brother to me, and he... h-he... I’ll never get to see him again... To get the *truth* from him...”

“It’s alright, Young Midoriya.” Toshinori sobered. “He’s alive.”

“... What?” Izuku’s world tilted as he registered Toshinori’s words. “He’s... Akira’s *alive* ?”

“Yes. It turns out that he still has aces up his sleeve.” Toshinori reached for his phone and opened to a certain news station. “I cannot explain the full story right now, but watch this news channel tomorrow morning. All will be revealed then.”

Izuku, his eyes wide and jaw hanging open, nodded.

Toshinori smiled and pulled the boy into his arms. He held Izuku as the boy’s sobs echoed among the stars.

“Are you sure we have everything packed?” Kaito asked. “We won’t be able to return.”

“Yeah, Atsuhiro’s quirk works wonders for a quick move.”

“Thank you, Mona.”

“But... are we really sure we can trust your buddy’s word?”

“Hey!” Atsuhiro put a hand over his heart. “I’ll have you know that my friend has the perfect place we need to hunker down and ride this out! It’s.... not the most respectable establishment, but it’s hidden away perfectly. Even the best of actors need a rest, and beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I have to admit... my apartment would be far too small for this many people. For now, I’ll put my trust in him.”

“Thank you, Gentle! At least somebody is smart enough to-”

“Guys!” Manami cried. “The news! I think they’re talking about Joker!”

Morgana grumbled. “We can worry about that after we get Joker hidden away.”

“O-Okay...” Manami tucked away her phone and looked between Atsuhiro and Kaito. “How was he... the last time you checked on him?”

“He’s...” Kaito sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not good. His fever spiked again, and it looked like he was having a nightmare.”

“Mercurius and I keep healing him, but it hasn’t worked.”

“Yes... perhaps he is suffering from a malady of the mind and soul, not the body. He was in that morgue for several hours.” Atsuhiro shook his head. “In any case, the sooner we move, the sooner we can take care of him without unwanted meddlers. Capiche?”

“He’s right.” Morgana stated. “If everything is packed and ready to go, then we must leave. Hitoshi’s warning is too dire to ignore. Kaito... are you sure you want to come with us? It might be dangerous for you.”

“Right now, my place is with Akira.” Kaito muttered.

“Merp!”

“Lady Stubbs agrees, and so do I!”

Kaito turned to Manami. “Do you still have the flash drive with U.A.’s info on it?”

“Y-yeah? Why?”

“It has a virus that could wipe out a network, right?”

“Right. The flash drive itself is only compatible with mine and Akira’s computers in our cubicles, but I’ve taken care of.... wait, why are you even asking?”

“I want to use it on the main computer at the front desk. It’s safer to wipe everything, just in case.”

“But...” Gentle Criminal whispered. “You staked everything into this place, it means a lot to you. Are you certain you want to erase it all?”

“I started over once, I can do it again.” Kaito shrugged. “You guys are more important.”

La Brava dug into her pack until she found it, and handed it over to Kaito. He looked at it was an indescribable expression, before he went to his computer. With a sigh, he jabbed it into the main tower.

“Kaito...” Morgana watched as Kaito’s computer blue screened, and then went dark.

“It’s done.” Kaito muttered. “Shall we go?”

“Alright, then.” Morgana glanced around the Raven’s Nest for the last time. “Let’s go to our new hideout!”

Mementos

Chapter 64: Mementos

Memento: An object or item that serves to remind one of a person or past event.

Totally taking advantage of the fact that Royal has several Mementos soundtracks :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

A sorrowful tune squirmed around Ren's soul. Warped in muffled static, shattered and distorted as if it played on a broken record.

"-venza, you ha-him go."

"No! He-"

"He's figh- you're doing-arm than good."

"But-"

"-sten to Margar-"

"My dear, you must let him go." Igor's was the only voice that rang clear. "We'll see him again when the time is right, but we may be hurting his soul by forcing it. We must let him heal."

"I... okay."

"-stop cr- 're not a baby-"

“Elizabeth!”

“Oh, do-uch a-arty-poooper, Theo!”

Ren’s listless soul fell back into the tumultuous Sea, tossing and turning in undulating waves. He sank into the black depths, until a pair of arms pulled him from the current.

“It’s alright, kid.” Ayumu whispered. “I have you. You’re safe with me, so just rest up, okay?”

Ren knew no more.

“Katsuki!” Mitsuki pounded on the door. “Katsuki, I know you’re in there! Stop being a sap and open this right now!”

“Shut it, old hag!” The door flew open and revealed her boy.

Saggy hair, bloodshot eyes. Burn marks littered his floor. The thick aroma of caramel wafted from her son and his room, and she was thankful that he didn’t stink of normal sweat, for he hadn’t showered or eaten since the news broke on Joker’s death.

“Katsuki...” Mitsuki placed her hands on her hips, her tone softer. “Did you sleep last night?”

“No. Now leave me alone.”

“Brat, come downstairs. Now.”

He scowled. “Why should I?”

“They’re doing a special about Joker on the news. Inko sent me a text insisting we should watch it. I think you *need* to.” Mitsuki’s heart sank when he flinched. “Come on, your father made breakfast and *you will eat* while we watch! Got it!? I’ll drag you down myself if I have to!”

“Fine!” He stomped out of his room and down the stairs. “Well!? You comin’ or not you old hag!?”

“Don’t call me a hag, you brat!” She screamed as she raced after him.

“Has father left the gym since...?”

“Nope.” Natsuo sagged on the couch and glared at the television. “It’s been awfully quiet in there, too. I wonder why he’s moping. Joker is dead and he’s the number one hero for crying out loud! He got what he wanted, so why isn’t he as happy as a clam!?”

“Natsuo.” Fuyumi glared at him. “Please.”

Natsuo wrinkled his nose and jumped up from the couch. “I’m gonna make food. Anybody else hungry?”

“No, but thank you.” Momo said as she looked up from her book.

“Wait, Natsuo.” Shoto glanced up from his phone and nabbed the remote. “Iida said they’re going to talk about Joker on the news.”

“Wait, really?” Natsuo grasped his red and black shirt. “Why would they...?”

Shoto turned on the tv, and they were greeted by a familiar smile.

“*Welcome!*” Demizu Mika sat in the middle of a round table. Half of the top ten heroes, a skeletal All Might, Principal Nezu, and a man who’s identity was hidden behind an opaque screen, sat around her. “*As you can see, our studio is packed full of familiar faces, except for T-san, who requested that we keep his real identity a secret. Well, let’s get started! How are you all feeling, given today’s circumstances?*”

"It's been... quite a whirlwind, to be honest." Ryukyu started off, placing her hands on the table.

"That's an understatement." T-san's warbled voice said.

"I'm sure you're all upset about the way things turned out in Kamino?" Demizu Mika's voice sobered. *"Everyone, be it in the streets or on social media, is expressing their grief over what happened to Joker."*

"Indeed." Nezu, despite the mood of the room, bore a small smile, *"And while the responsible parties are being dealt with, I believe that this is only a new beginning for Joker."*

"Wh... what?" Demizu Mika stuttered. *"Oh, are you talking about the memorial that the mayor of Kamino wants to set up? A statue depicting Joker and All Might in their final battle could be a new start for some."*

"Ah, yes. A memorial." Nezu's tail flicked. *"A statue sounds quite nice, but a memorial would only be effective if those it depicted were truly dead."*

"Yeah," She glanced at the skeletal man, *"All Might made it out and announced his retirement, but-"*

"Joker is alive." Hawks blurted.

The other heroes gave Hawks the side-eye, but they didn't argue. Miruko, who sat beside Hawks, cackled as she clapped him on the back.

Momo's book dropped to the floor. Nobody heard the soft *thud*, nor did Momo attempt to pick it up. It's as if their collective hearts just stopped, eyes unable to turn away from the television. Shoto felt ice creep through his veins.

"I'm sorry?" Demizu Mika blinked rapidly. "I think I misunderstood you. Did you say that Joker is... alive?"

"Damn right he is!" Miruko grinned at the camera. "Alive and kicking!!"

"Yes," Gang Orca leaned forward, his creaking chair as loud as a bomb. "The Hero Commission President threatened Joker's safety, we all know that. What other way would there be to escape one of the top guarded hospitals in the country?"

Demizu Mika froze like a deer in the headlights.

"He faked his death." T-san stated. "He used the ultimate ace in his sleeve to escape a possible prison sentence in Tartarus."

"But... b-but..." Demizu cleared her throat and straightened her hair. "Surely, one of the top hero hospitals would have the best experts of their field. How could Joker fake his death!?"

"That is a question we have no answer to." Nezu said. "But Recovery Girl confirmed that Joker was breathing and had a heart beat before he was whisked away by his teammates."

"She did!? But why didn't she stop them!?"

"She's not a combat hero," Ryukyu stated. An odd glimmer appeared in her eyes as she rubbed the back of her neck. "The rest of us were off dealing with the situation over former Hero Commission President Kunikazu Hiroto. Others returned to their stations after his death. We let our guard down."

"I-I see...."

"Joker's miraculous powers extend beyond what we can imagine." Nezu said, grinning. "Look at Kamino. Look at Musutafu General or any number of his other exploits. For someone like Joker, faking his death is child's play."

Shoto's heart pounded. He witnessed Joker revive Native from the dead. If... If Joker is actually alive then... he must have revived himself, or maybe it was Mona that did it. There was no other explanation. But why would these heroes and U.A.'s principal jump into the news so fast? Why not break the news another way? Were they trying to cover something up? Unless...

Shoto's vision tunneled on Nezu's subtle smirk, the chill in his spine turned glacial. "They *know*."

"Shoto?" Fuyumi's wide eyes met his. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing... it's nothing..." He ducked his head. "Don't worry about it."

Momo and Fuyumi exchanged glances, but their attention turned back to the interview.

"Manami says they got out safely." Hitoshi said from the armchair. "Obviously, from what they're saying on the news."

Risumi breathed a sigh of relief as she sank into the couch. "Do you know where they are? They could stay here."

"Not likely." Ayumu clasped his hands together, the images and disembodied voices he'd heard from Akira's shattered psyche still fresh in his mind. "Police and heroes are crawling all over our front door. It's not safe for them here."

"... Yeah." Risumi's expression fell, and Ayumu grasped her hand. "I guess you're right."

Hitoshi set his encrypted phone on the table and tuned back into the interview.

"Is there a calling card at the hospital?" Demizu asked next, "Usually he leaves one and then there's a big spectacle around it's message."

"No." Gang Orca shook his head, "But there was a trace of one in Kunikazu's office."

"It was torn to shreds though," Hawks chirped. His wings twitched and there was a sharpness in his eyes covered by his visor. "So we couldn't make out the message. We have no idea who left it there, either."

The camera panned over Miruko, who gave Hawks an odd stare. She remained silent.

"Is it possible that the Hero Commission could have been Joker's target all along?" Demizu asked. "He's taken down heroes and villains alike."

"We don't know that for certain!" Nezu said with a wave of his paw. "But we know that Joker would never target innocent people. All of the people he's taken down have done nefarious deeds, and the recent investigations into Kunikazu's actions prove that even the highest in society has skeletons in their closet."

"I... I see..." Demizu stared at the camera for a moment, before her eyes turned towards the heroes. "So, the next question is: If he is alive, then where is he now? Do you think he'll go back to his quirkless life as a barista? A dashing vigilante on the streets?"

The Shinsous' frowned at that.

"It's unlikely." Nezu stated. "With his identity compromised, he might seek safety elsewhere until things cool down."

"Speaking of which..." Demizu eagerly leaned forward. "Many people are flabbergasted at how Joker could masquerade as a quirkless person. Some are saying they feel betrayed, others say that it was a genius ruse to cover his tracks. What are your opinions on it?"

"It was... quite clever." Gang Orca said.

"The perfect disguise!" Miruko howled with laughter. "Not many would suspect a quirkless person being an all powerful vigilante!"

"But Joker only wore a domino mask to keep his identity a secret!" Demizu said. "Looking back, its almost astonishing that more people didn't recognize him, given how the Blue Lotus exploded in popularity."

"It's not really that surprising. Things like this happen a lot more than you think." Hawks tilted his head. "Popular heroes in civilian attire don't get recognized on the streets. There are several cases where famous people lose their own lookalike contest. If people didn't want to see a quirkless person as this powerful vigilante, they would never make the connection in the first place. Joker must've known that."

"I suppose that makes sense..."

"His quirkless status did eventually come in handy for another reason."

"Oh? And what reason is that, Ryukyu?"

The dragon hero looked between her comrades, who nodded.

"It was several weeks ago now, but I'm sure everyone remembers how multiple smuggling rings were taken down simultaneously?"

"Ah, yes! Now that you mention it..." Demizu's head swiveled to look around the table. "Aren't you the heroes responsible? Aside from a few other heroes in Sapporo, it was mostly this group that took them down, right? What's the connection to Joker?"

"Joker gathered all of the intel for those raids." Gang Orca nodded when Demizu's mouth dropped open, "He risked everything, and in the end, decided to use himself as bait to rescue even more people, those who were quirkless and had been missing for months. He searched for them when no one else did."

"How did your first meeting go? I bet it was a shock to get a call from the vigilante himself! Especially for you, Ryukyu!"

"Joker didn't reach out to us first," Gang Orca said. "He convinced the former Ingenium to contact us."

"Ingenium!? Joker healed him after he was injured by Stain, right? Where is he?"

"After Joker faked his death, he decided to spend time with his family . Best Jeanist also took a personal leave from hero work. " Nezu stated. "Understandable, given how stressful it's been for everyone involved."

Demizu Mika nodded.

"Anyway, back to our first meeting with Joker!! It was tense at first, none of us knew how to react!!" Miruko cackled and punched Gang Orca's arm. "This one had the gall to approach Joker and ask to ruffle his hair! I was so jealous! Aaand Ryukyu tried mothering him!"

"Miruko!!" Ryukyu blushed.

"What!? It's true!"

"He..." Hawks' wings drooped and he clasped his hands together. "Joker had this air about him. He was like... a friend that you could trust everything to. But for me, he... he was kinda like a little brother."

Hawks sunk into his fluffy coat when there was a collective 'awww'.

"T-san, you haven't really talked much. Your live interview with Joker went viral, and your blog received the same treatment. You met Joker on friendly terms long before these heroes, correct?"

"Yes."

“What are your thoughts? Why didn’t Joker take credit for those smuggling rings like he did with his other feats?”

“I asked him that myself. His main goal is to help people, and he felt that taking credit for that would lessen the impact of what those people went through. He chose to remain anonymous. Secondly, Joker is a smart kid.” T-san chuckled. *“He predicted the fall of All Might months before it literally happened.”*

The skeletal All Might gravely nodded.

“Yes... he did, didn’t he? What was it he said, exactly?”

“Heh, I’ll never forget it.” T-san’s smile oozed from behind the privacy screen. *“You should have seen the look on his face. He was irritated when he talked about our society being supported by only a single pillar, but then....”*

“Then... what?”

Kirishima wiped his eyes and threw the damp tissue into the stuffed trash can. It bounced off the top of the pile and onto the floor, but he didn’t have the energy to move from his chair. He hadn’t left his room since he got home, and his parents decided to give him some space after the world basically fell from underneath their feet.

But... but at least Joker *was alive* .

Akira was alive!!

The hole blown through his heart healed a tiny bit, but it was like putting a band-aid on a bullet wound. If he could just... just see *Akira again*, no matter how long it took, then maybe Kirishima could learn to forgive Akira for everything.

But wasn’t that another kick to the face?

The whole world heard Akira's screams in Kamino, and then again when the video with Kunikazu came out. He heard those horrible noises in his dreams. Is that how people treated Akira his whole life? If so, then his backstory... his... *everything*, made so much sense.

It was so unmanly to demand anything from him! They didn't know each other for very long, and demanding answers just left a sour feeling wriggling in his gut. The dawning realization came like a slap to the face. Still, it didn't help the ache in his heart.

Right now, the only thing he craved more than anything was to see Akira smile again. *Safe* . Alive and happy.

"Aniki..." Tears blurred his vision as he stared at his computer screen.

"-as irritated when he talked about our society being supported by only a single pillar, but then...."

"Then... what?"

"He smiled when he talked about the kids in 1-A and 1-B, how there should be multiple pillars in society. I think it's easy to say that those kids proved themselves worthy. If Joker believed in the U.A. students, the students from other hero schools, and these heroes sitting beside me, then I think it's safe to say that the future is in good hands. We'll be in a rough patch as society shifts, but I believe Joker was right to place his faith in them."

Nezu beamed.

"U.A. has been a heated topic as of late." Demizu Mika turned her attention towards Nezu. *"What are the school's plans from here on out? There are several concerns about some of your students, mainly Bakugo Katsuki and Yaoyorozu Momo. Bakugo was captured by villains to get him to turn, and Yaoyorozu's parents will be on trial for fraud."*

"Anybody who doubts them can put their fears to rest. Bakugo held true to his ideals while he was in captivity. Yaoyorozu is not 1-A's Vice Representative for nothing. Yes, they went through hardships, but that will make them better in the future. They shall make fine heroes!" Demizu opened her mouth to speak, but Nezu cut her off, "As for the school's plans, I want to turn it into a boarding school."

"A boarding school? So you're going to build dorms?"

"Indeed! We wish to keep the students safe during society's current transition. Of course, we will need to get parents' permission, but the dorms will be state of the art!"

"Where would Joker fit into all of this? There are many rumors swirling about your program, Nezu."

"My Vigilante Program has not been approved yet. Right now, one of our goals is to get legal custody of Joker. Once I have that, then there would be no need to send him to a place like Tartarus." Nezu looked directly into the camera. "Now, I don't want anybody thinking that Joker will be dragged to U.A. in chains. In fact, I wish to welcome Joker, and any of his allies, with open arms when the time is right. Whenever he wishes to find his home, he can come to U.A.!"

"We'll be there to support him, no matter what." Ryukyu said.

"Hell yeah!" Miruko cackled. "The kid promised me a sparring match, and I won't forgive him if he thinks he can chicken out!"

"You know how to get in contact with us, Birdie." Hawks said with a tiny smirk.

"I'm sure Jeanist and Ingenium would agree with all of us." Gang Orca grumbled. "Whatever you need, wherever you are, the others and I are only a call away. We'll be there for you."

"Damn, it's hard to come up with something cool after all of that." T-san said.

"How touching! But there is one glaring little detail on everyone's minds." Demizu looked around the table. "The villain responsible for the Kamino Crisis died from one of Joker's attacks. Public opinion on Joker is currently split because of that."

"It's not Joker's fault." Skeletal All Might said. "I have something to say in regards to what happened in Kamino."

"All Might..." Demizu looked at him with new interest. "We would be happy to hear your opinion about it! Why do you think it's not his fault?"

"Why do you think it's not his fault?"

Tokoyami grit his teeth together. Dark Shadow draped himself over Tokoyami's head, his arms dangling limply over Tokoyami's chest. They lounged in front of the computer, sweet darkness clinging to every corner of their room save for the light from his screen.

"It could be ruled as self defence after all of the torture All For One inflicted on that poor boy. Despite this, Joker... did not want to kill him. He begged Sraosha not to do it."

"What, really?"

"Those with sentient quirks would understand more than most." Nezu stated. "Joker's companions are gods and beings of myth with their own wills and morals. I don't doubt that such individuals are not easily controlled. Besides, I think it was in Sraosha's nature to do what he did."

"He had no troubles dealing with your antics back at the cafe, Dark Shadow. Almost as if he had plenty of practice." A stone fell into Tokoyami's stomach as his eyes widened. "No other soul truly knows what it's like. We'll have to get that point across to our wayward classmates."

Dark Shadow warbled.

"What do you mean?" Demizu asked. "Who is Sraosha? It's not a name I'm familiar with."

"An angel in the Zoroastrian faith. One who protects the material realm, who also bears the title of 'Scourge Of Evil', and for good reason. In that faith, Sraosha is one of three judges who decides the fate of human souls in the afterlife." Nezu said, "It was quite fascinating to read up on this individual!"

"Human... souls?" Demizu paled. "Is that what Sraosha pulled out of the villain? There are rumors going around that some people are suddenly regaining their quirk after previously being quirkless. Could these 'souls' actually be quirks!?"

"Those are under investigation." Ryukyu said. "Currently, we have no idea if these events are correlated."

"I..."

"What's wrong, All Might?" Demizu frowned.

"Joker should not take the blame. Sraosha may have dealt the final blow to All For One, but it is truly my fault." All Might stared directly into the camera, a shadow befalling his blazing cerulean eyes. A challenge to the swarm of naysayers. "I thought I killed All For One years ago. He was the villain who gave me an injury that hampered my power. An injury that Joker healed during the Kamino Crisis. I take full responsibility for All For One's death. It should not be placed on a young man's shoulders simply because I failed to act accordingly."

"That's... a heavy responsibility to take on." Demizu tilted her head. "But if Joker healed you, then why retire? Why place the burden of being Number 1 onto Endeavor?"

“My powers have been spent, and I cannot fight like I used to.” All Might’s gaze sharpened, and Tokoyami and Dark Shadow felt chills go up their spine as he pointed into the camera. “I’m leaving society in the hands of the next generation of aspiring heroes. You’re next. Be the pillars of society that I failed to be!”

The entire world froze on All Might’s words. Embers of hope and determination sparked within the nation’s hearts, flourishing together into bright flames. The momentary silence sat heavy in the news station until Demizu snapped out of it. She stared right into the camera.

“Er... and with that, it seems like we are out of time.” Demizu Mika sat straight. “I’m sure this comes as a shock to all of us, but I hope Joker is okay, wherever he is. This is Demizu Mika, signing off!”

Tokoyami released a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“Fumi...”

“What is it?”

“I miss Akira. When do you think we’ll be able to see him again? I want him to make us more apple desserts!”

“I... don’t know. Gods, demons, devils, human souls... I pegged him all wrong.” Tokoyami leaned back as his phone vibrated nonstop on his desk. Some of his classmates had... mixed opinions on the interview. A few, like Kirishima, Midoriya, and surprisingly, Bakugo, stuck up for Joker. “It will take time for the others to come to terms with it. My only hope is that it doesn’t cause a rift in our class.”

“Yeah...” Dark Shadow peered into his partner, his head tilting while upside-down. “Do you think we could ask Hawks-sensei about him!?”

Tokoyami snorted. “Maybe. We learned much from Hawks on our internship. It wouldn’t hurt to inquire about it.”

Dark Shadow prummed happily as Tokoyami reached for his phone.

“YOU!!!”

Taneo yelped as he dodged a stapler, which crashed into the wall and exploded with sharp metal bits.

“Mitsuo, let me explain!!”

Yuma and Minato had their backs to either wall to avoid the fallout.

“NO!!!” Mitsuo swiped a hefty binder next and flung it with the strength of an angry goddess. “First, you neglect my warning to be careful. Second! You ghost us after Joker died and worried us so much that Minato actually got *sick*-”

“Hey...”

“And NOW we don’t even see you until that freaking *interview*!? An interview which you didn’t even let us know about before hand!? You didn’t tell us that the kid was *ALIVE*!?”

“M-Mitsuo, calm down!” Taneo waved his hands as she swiped her mug as ammunition, which was half filled with *scalding hot* coffee. His voiced raised by several octaves. “I admit that I wasn’t as careful as I should’ve been! I’m sorry! But the most important thing is he’s alive *and* we get first dibs on any exclusives from U.A.!! Isn’t that enough to-”

He ducked, the ceramic brushing the top of his hair. Shattered remains flew across the room as the coffee oozed down the wall and puddled on the floor, drowning the murdered stapler and binder.

“Idiot.” Mitsuo sighed sharply as she planted herself back into her chair, leveling him with a pointed glare. “I’ll only forgive you if you *let us know* when Joker comes back. I won’t accept anything less. Am I understood?”

Taneo peeked over the edge of a desk, “Y-yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Her smirk returned with devilish delight. “Now, we have work to do. Other stations are already capitalizing on Joker faking his death and All Might’s retirement, but there’s been a severe lack in media discussing the Hero Commission’s glaring failures. As Joker’s comrades in the media, we must pick up the slack. We won’t fall behind!!”

“Yes, ma’am!!” All three men called out in unison.

“How the hell is he alive?” Shigaraki muttered as he paced back and forth. “Damn secret boss is like a cockroach. I’ll just have to kill him myself for what he did...”

“Aki-chan must’ve pulled the wool over their eyes real good this time!” Toga giggled.

“What did you call him?” Toga flinched as Shigaraki invaded her personal space, his fingers twitching. “Don’t give the enemy cute nicknames!”

“Hey, lay off of her.” Dabi snapped. He stood from the peeling drywall and pulled Toga behind him. “I get it, your precious *sensei* got killed, but that doesn’t mean you get to treat the rest of us like garbage.”

Shigaraki’s eyes glinted with rage as he grabbed Dabi’s shirt. “Don’t you dare say anything about Sensei!”

“Why not?” Dabi grinned when the dusty flakes fell from his shirt to reveal charred skin. “Are you going to kill me like Compress? Look around you, asshole! We’re fugitives hiding in a dilapidated building. The League, once again, is nothing more than the butt of a joke! You’ll be in for *real* trouble if you don’t pull your head out of your ass and get your shit together!”

Shigaraki scratched at his neck. “How *dare* you.”

“H-hey, knock it off! Fight, FIGHT!!” Twice separated them, his arms waving. “Where’s Kurogiri when you need him!?”

“Right, because Shigaraki can’t do anything without his precious babysitter.” Dabi scoffed as he turned around and marched away. “Some leader you turned out to be.”

Shigaraki snarled.

“Dabi!” Toga called. “Where are you going?”

“Out. I need some air.” Dabi threw open the front door. “It’s too *dusty* in here for my liking.”

Dust rained down from the ceiling when the door slammed. Toga and Twice stared at Shigaraki as he glared at the front door, an unknowable sea of emotion filtering through his eyes. He looked in between them.

“What?” Shigaraki snapped.

“Nothing.” Toga smirked as she skipped away towards her room. “I’m tired, gonna take a nap!”

“Whatever.”

“Sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite!” Twice called.

She reached her quarters, nothing more than a shabby room with a bare futon. The carpets smelled like urine and the cracked windows let in streams of sunlight and overgrown vines. She sank on her futon with a long sigh, hugging her knees to her chest.

Whatever the League was, it didn’t feel like a good place anymore.

“You were working with Joker this whole time!?”

“Tenya, please.” Mother chastised. “Let him explain.”

“It’s okay.” Tensei said as he rubbed his eyes. “Tenya, Mother, you *know* how much our family owes him. How could I say no when Joker, and other people, needed my help?” Tensei reached over the dining room table and patted his brother’s hand. “I never expected Joker to be the same person you and your class looked up to. That’s a crazy coincidence.”

“I...” Tenya shook his head. He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with the ends of his sleeve. “Why did he lie to us? Just... *why*?”

Tensei exchanged a long glance with his mother. “I think there’s more to his story than any one of us know.”

Tenya’s brows pinched together. “What do you mean?”

“Look at his powers, look at what happened at Hosu and Kamino. Look at what Kunikazu *did to him* . He appeared at the USJ as if he popped up out of thin air. He... the others and I *watched* him decline in the ICU and he...” Tensei ran a hand through his hair as his little brother paled. “There just has to be *more* . I don’t want to make excuses for Joker, but I think he was just lost... and maybe he found it hard to trust the right people. Please don’t judge him until we get his full story, okay? He didn’t want to hurt you intentionally.”

Tenya stared at the table. They spent a full minute in silence as he worked it over in that brain of his, until his shoulders relaxed and he released a long sigh.

“Alright...” Tenya glanced over to the living room, where Demizu Mika’s interview was being replayed on another news channel. “If.... if Joker returns and goes to U.A. like Nezu wants, then... as Class Representative, I will do my best. It’s the least I can do to repay our debt.”

Tensei smiled. “Thank you. I’m sure Joker would appreciate it.”

Their mother looked in between them as another silence rolled through the room.

“How about we go out, just the three of us?” Mother stood and ruffled both of their hair. “We need to clear our heads after everything that’s happened. Does a day at the park sound good? We could pack lunches and have a family picnic!”

Tenya nodded. He got up from his chair and went to his room to change.

Tensei hid his face in his hands. His mother’s soft touch graced his shoulder.

“I know.” Mother’s smile softened. “This will take time.”

“Yeah, Tenya looked up to Kurusu.” Tensei said as his expression crumpled.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was in the same room where the doctor told us he would *die*, she confirmed that the damage was fatal. I saw the hemorrhaging brain scans myself! Miruko called me *sobbing* after Recovery Girl called his time of death.” Tensei’s haunted eyes landed on the television. “So how the hell is he *alive* ? I should’ve stayed at the hospital with everyone...”

“Don’t say that, dear. You said it yourself. Joker is mysterious in many ways.”

“You have no idea...” Tensei muttered.

Such incredible powers and *no quirk factor* ? How does that even make sense? Life and death, gods and demons, natural and supernatural. Joker held mastery over all of these extremes.

Mother pursed her lips. “You were part of this hero team, correct? It wouldn’t hurt to ask them.” She pulled him into her arms. “Besides,

I'm glad you came home. Tenya really needed you here."

"... You're right." Tensei stood as his mother released him. He walked into the living room and shut off the television. "I just hope he won't be gone for too long."

Unbeknownst to them, Tenya hovered at the edge of the hallway, horrified to his core.

He heard everything.

"So Joker is actually alive?"

"I hope so. Have you seen that video with Kunikazu? The seizure that Joker had.... it didn't look fake to me. What if..."

"What? What!? Don't leave me in suspense!"

"N-nothing. It's nothing. Forget I said anything. It would be impossible anyway."

"I heard that Joker merch is selling out everywhere. Can you believe that?"

"It's not surprising. I mean... you saw what he did at Kamino! Those powers of his go beyond quirks."

"He's more powerful than All Might, but that doesn't make him a god.... right?"

"I don't know. Rumors say that he didn't 'fake' his death at all. No wonder he hasn't come out of hiding. The heroes in that interview were sure quick to announce it. Something doesn't feel right, almost like they're hiding something."

"You're.... not implying that he actually died and came back to life, right? Er... right??"

“Grandpa, what are you doing?”

“Showing my support. Joker saved our bakery from Silver Falcon, it’s the least I can do.”

“It looks nice. Oh, I have an idea! I can take a photo and post it, maybe other people will do the same?”

“You kids and your social media. Sure, maybe Joker will show himself if he sees how many people want to see him safe and sound.”

“Okay!”

A knock reverberated on Nezu’s door.

“Come in!”

Cementoss stepped inside with a small bundle of folders under his arm.

“Have you come across any problems?”

“No, I just wanted to double check something.” Cementoss plopped in one of the chairs in front of Nezu’s desk, ignoring Admiral Feesh propped up in the other one. He set one of the folders on Nezu’s desk, blueprints for the teacher’s dorms. “No faculty member claimed any of those extra rooms on the first floor. What are they for?”

“Ah,” Nezu peeked at them with a smile. “Those rooms are not for the teachers. After all, it would be unwise to house Joker or his companions with any of the student body!”

“You say that like you already gained approval for your program.”

“I have sent an appeal to the court.” Said Nezu, nodding. “It’s only a matter of time. With Kunikazu out of the way, and with the roaring

success of our interview, they will *have* to agree to it.”

Cementoss frowned. “I see.”

“What’s wrong, Cementoss?”

“It’s been a week since your interview and Joker hasn’t shown up yet. People are unsure about the school as a whole. What if parents don’t want their children to attend?”

Nezu leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “The permission slips were sent out, and homeroom teachers will meet with the families personally within the next week. I have every confidence that a majority of the student body will still be enrolled by the time the new semester starts.”

“And Joker?”

“He will come forward in time. He has no other choice.”

“But you won’t share Joker’s reason why he would turn himself in to U.A. It has to do with the USJ, doesn’t it? You upped security around it and put it under lockdown.”

“I was wrong about him being All For One’s test subject. I admit to that fault.” Nezu stared out the window. A little mask charm hung on it, a sudden craze that has taken social media by storm. “But I’m afraid I have to keep it under wrap until I get solid proof. After all, this new theory is completely out of this world! I hope you understand?”

Cementoss sighed. “I do.” He grabbed the folder and stood. “Thanks for clearing that up. The dorms should be finished within the next day or so.”

“Excellent! I’m looking forward to seeing them completed!”

Cementoss nodded, and he trailed out the door.

Nezu sighed as his office was doused in peaceful silence. He filed the oodles and oodles of building paperwork. So much to do, and little time to do it!

Change would come in due time. Ryoto, as young as he was to the Hero Commission, was far more clever than Kunikazu gave him credit for. With a gentle nudge here and there, he convinced the rest of the Commission to do a full inquiry over Kunikazu's time as President. With more evidence of Kunikazu's wrongdoing's coming to light, and with how much they wanted to save their own skin, it appears that the former President would not leave his tiny little cell any time soon.

Not if Nezu had a say about it!

Still, he would have to be careful. Confidence and sharp wit like Ryoto's would devolve into brutal arrogance without the right hand to keep him steady and level headed. Ah well, he did like taking on challenges, and new students were a rarity these days.

Nezu became lost in these thoughts for another hour before a second knock came at the door, far more delicate this time.

"Ah, another visitor!" Nezu chirped. "Come in!"

The door opened, and in walked Yaoyorozu Momo. She placed her hands over her stomach and bowed politely.

"My dear, please take a seat!" Nezu said as he gestured to one of the chairs. "I've been expecting your visit. This is about your current guardianship?"

"Yes..." She sat primly in the chair, her eyes falling to the plush. "Oh, who is this?"

"Admiral Feesh!" Nezu chuckled. "A handsome prize, no?"

“I see.” She offered a small, polite smile. “And you would be correct, Principal Nezu. With my parents being where they are, a-and with temporary custody with the Todoroki family... I was wondering if there would be any complications in getting permission to settle in the dorms.”

“Ah, yes.” Nezu nodded. “Your situation is unique. Does Endeavor know that you came here?”

“He does.” Yaoyorozu’s eyes turned down. “He has been... rather busy since All Might’s retirement.”

“Understandable.” Nezu leaned forward. “There shouldn’t be any problems, but I suspect you didn’t come here for me to answer a simple question. What do *you* want to do, Miss Yaoyorozu?”

“Me?” She tucked some hair behind her ear, before her hands fell into her lap. “I would like to stand on my own two feet. I appreciate Endeavor and his family for everything they’ve done for me, but I cannot burden them forever. I was looking into going out on my own, if that is possible.”

“I see.” Nezu tilted his head. “Why not become a ward of U.A. itself?”

She blinked. “A ward of U.A.?”

“Becoming a ward of U.A. would place you directly under my care. We will have to get permission from the court, and from Endeavor himself, but I don’t see any problem if you choose to go this route. If you became my ward, then I will provide you with everything you need until you graduate, or even past that, should you need it.” He sat back as she seemed to think it over. “There are a few others who have chosen to become U.A.’s wards, so you would not be alone in this regard.”

“I...” She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes, her own sparkling with new determination. “Yes. I feel as if this is the path I have to take.”

“Very well!” Nezu beamed as he reached into his drawer. “If you have any concerns or questions, then please call the number on this card. It’s my personal cell number. I only give this card to potential wards of U.A. I’m sure you understand what that means?”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled as she took the card with both hands. “I’ll make sure to take care of it.”

“Excellent. You can leave everything to me, my dear.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.” She bowed again, and after a few more pleasantries, she left his office with a smile.

Satisfaction curled around Nezu’s heart.

“I dearly love seeing children flourish.” He said as he glanced at the mask charm in the window. “I wonder how you will continue to grow, my boy. Are you really from another world?” Nezu whispered as he looked to Admiral Feesh. “I suppose we will know the truth, in due time.”

Manami kept the tears at bay as she dabbed Akira’s forehead with a damp cloth. His ragged breathing tugged at her heartstrings. Her nose wrinkled as she looked around the dusty attic. The unused crates had been stacked against the walls to give them all room enough to sleep. This place didn’t have the warm softness of the Shinsous’ apartment, nor the static peace of the Raven’s Nest. The acrid aroma of cigarettes and alcohol seeped into the wood, and more often than not rambunctious, drunken cheers boomed through the floor at night.

But it was safe.

Hidden.

It wasn’t an area where people could ask questions without scorn, or worse yet, a knife to the throat. Her ears pricked at the creaky stairs.

There was a *thump* followed by muttered curses.

Atsuhiro, with Morgana on his shoulder, rubbed his head as he emerged from the stairwell.

“I keep telling you to be careful with that beam.” Morgana snarked.

“Hush! Magne should put up a warning sign or something!”

Morgana rolled his eyes as he hopped off the man’s shoulder and pranced over to them. Morgana put his nose on Akira’s cheek, and the boy’s clenched jaw relaxed, as did the knots in his brow.

“How is he?” Morgana asked softly.

“His fever went down, but nothing else has changed.” She said as she wrung the cloth in her hands. “Why hasn’t he woken up yet?”

“I... I don’t know.” Morgana huddled into the crook of Akira’s neck. “Using our powers for an extended time is *exhausting*, n-not to mention how he summoned all of them at once or let Arsene evolve. A-and... his mental shutdown... This is a lot worse than what happened during the Musutafu Raid.”

“*Dying* has to be incredibly taxing on the body alone, if not the mind and soul as well.” Atsuhiro shrugged as he plopped down on the other side of Akira’s futon, “Do you know how many people came back from the dead? I’ve personally only seen *one*, and he’s laying in front of me.”

“I already told you about Native and that little girl.” Morgana said.

“True, but they weren’t unconscious for days on end.” Manami whispered. “The girl recovered after a day or so in the hospital, and Native was disoriented, but he made a full recovery.”

“... Yeah.” Morgana’s ears drooped as Akira took a deep, ragged breath. “I’m getting antsy. With all of the media attention, are you

sure your friend can keep this a secret, Atsuhiro? I feel bad for intruding on them while our Leader is sick.”

“Who, Magne?” Atsuhiro chuckled as he waved his hand in dismissal. “Don’t worry about it. She owes me big time.”

“Why?” Manami asked. “It must be a pretty deep debt for her to go along with this.”

“Well, that’s...” He sighed sharply and ran a hand through his curly hair. “She and I go way back. She wanted to join the League Of Villains, but I warned her against it after my first initial meeting with All For One set off all sorts of red flags. We set up this little nest egg in case things went south and we needed a place to lay low.” He scoffed as they pinned him with wide eyes. “Please don’t look at me like that. Aren’t we all criminals in one form or another? That makes us all comrades in arms!”

Morgana and Manami exchanged glances, the latter shrugging.

“In any case,” Manami continued dabbing Akira’s forehead. “It’s not like we can keep moving him. Our best option is to stay in one place so he can rest.”

“Yeah.” Atsuhiro smirked as cheers roared from downstairs.

“Besides, I think Magne loves having help around the bar. Shuichi makes mean cocktails, and even Tobita’s cooking has been a hit. As long as nobody snoops around, then we shouldn’t get recognized.”

“Where is Kaito, anyway?” Manami asked. “He was up here earlier.”

“I didn’t see him when we came up.” Morgana stated.

“He was helping Tobita in the kitchen the last time I-”

“*NO!!*”

Atsuhiro blinked rapidly as the two of them raced downstairs. He grabbed the wash cloth Manami dropped. Atsuhiro looked over to a

bucket of water in the corner and, with an exaggerated sigh, got up and wrung it out with clean water. He planted himself at the boy's side and gently lay the washcloth on his forehead.

"I can see why you mean so much to them, Joker, and vice versa." Atsuhiro whispered as he clasped his hands together. "You're like a little family. A bit dysfunctional perhaps, but closely knit at its core. Although... Morgana was quick to dismiss that interview, and the others haven't said much either. I wonder what you'll have to say about it."

"-I already told you I wasn't anywhere near the stove!" Kaito's voice echoed into the attic.

He chuckled. There was a lingering flame in Atsuhiro's heart that maybe, even if for a little bit, he could be part of this, too.

"I see you wearing that pin! Are you seriously supporting Joker after what he did!?"

"Duh. Do you not realize how many lives Joker saved!?" A mingling crowd stopped to stare at a young girl shouting in the streets, her pink dread locks popping against the dreary day. Joker merch decked out most of her attire. "All For One could've easily killed off most of our top 10 heroes and would've gone on his merry way! Joker did what All Might failed to do! The former number 1 is taking responsibility for his failure! I ask this, why are you turning your back on Joker when he needs our support the most!?"

The man backed down as other people cheered her on.

She wildly grinned at the first camera pointed in her direction, her arms flying up into the air.

"Who's with me!?" She shouted. "HEEE HOO!!"

Various forms of 'hee ho!' echoed throughout the street.

It didn't take long for the video to go viral.

[Cyn.der]

I don't think Joker is human.

[KuroNeko]

not this again

[Liz]

I mean, Cyn does have a point?

If anybody does any good research on the gods Joker controls....

You'd know what I mean.

[Cyn.der]

Exactly!!

You all heard him. The big guy he summoned at Kamino was SATANAEL, the angel who rebelled against Yaldabaoth and bestowed free will and chaos upon humanity!! Not to mention Sraosha, who Nezu talked about on the interview.

AND NOW JOKER APPARENTLY 'FAKED' HIS DEATH??

I don't buy it. I think he really died and something brought him back to life.

[Liz]

Huh.... why does the name Yaldabaoth make me shiver??

[Sharky2194]

What a broken quirk, its almost not fair

[JokerRulez]

*How do we know that Joker actually died? It has to be faked, right?
That's what they said!!*

[Cyn.der]

A ton of people have seen that video with Kunikazu and Joker's seizures.

It's not the sort of thing you can just fake.

[Liz]

...

[JokerRulez]

I mean, I guess that's true?

I really don't know what to believe...

[Liz]

How much willpower does one person need to be able to control gods and mythological beings? Anybody on here have a sentient quirk to back it up??

[Cyn.der]

RIGHT!?

I wonder if he's not some sort of messiah or something

[Sharky2194]

Okay, now that's reaaaaally stretching it

Just because he controls some cool looking monsters doesn't mean he's some savior

That's bs

[JokerRulez]

Is it, though?

[Cyn.der]

No listen! Like Yatagarasu represents the will of heaven, a divine messenger of Amaterasu herself!!

SETH - EGYPTIAN GOD (Which we actually didn't see in Kamino, what happened to him???)

SRAOSHA - ZOROASTRIAN JUDGE OF HUMAN SOULS AND SCOURGE OF EVIL BEINGS

SATANAEL!!!!

Not to mention all of the other gods/demons that showed up in Kamino.

I think that's a clear sign.

[Liz]

You know, instead of a messiah he could just as easily be a chaotic devil. A Prince Of Hell.

Perfect for the master of Satanael =)

[Cyn.der]

I'm sure the HC sees him that way :D

It's funny how hard they are trying to cover their asses after Kunikazu fell from grace.

[Sharky2194]

Okay. You guys are either high or drunk.

There's no way any of that is possible, he's just a vigilante with a really powerful quirk.

That's it.

[Cyn.der]

**Sigh* Then how about this?*

Joker could have easily killed thousands in Musutafu and leveled the entire city with that golden dragon.

But he didn't. THERE WASN'T A SINGLE FATALITY! Sure, there are a lot people who have been hospitalized (some heroes and police with bigger injuries, but they deserved it) with some building damage and flooding.

SAME THING FOR KAMNIO!! All For One caused all of that damage, not Joker!

It could have been so much worse.

[Fernin]

Kamnio

[Sharky2194]

Kamnio

[Liz]

Kamnio??

[Cyn.der]

**KAMINO*

GUYS I'M TRYING TO MAKE A POINT!!

[Sharky2194]

Which is what again?

[Cyn.der]

MY POINT IS

That Joker really didn't want to hurt anyone, nor did he want to kill that villain. They pushed him into a corner in both situations, and that's the end result.

Take for example the villain Muscular. He has a far weaker quirk than Joker's, but he went on a rampage, killed a hero duo and over a dozen people, completely destroyed a historic part of that town. Do I need to go on?

[Sharky2194]

I still don't see your point.

All of that doesn't make him a 'savior'.

[KuroNeko]

Im with sharky

I still think Joker is pretty cool, even after everything that's happened

But thats too out there for me :/

[Liz]

Some people just can't be convinced ._.

[JokerRulez]

I am totally in on this!

I even hung one of the mask charms in my window!!

WE SUPPORT YOU JOKER!! <3

[Sharky2194]

Whatever floats your boat I guess, just keep me out of it.

[Cyn.der]

Siiiigh

@CoffeeAddict2.0 Where have you been, dude!? We need our admin's opinion to settle this!!

“Oh, sure!” Mitsuki said as she whapped her son on the head and smiled brightly at the men sitting across from her. “I’m counting on you!”

“Don’t hit me, you hag!!”

“Shut up!” Mitsuki shouted, “It’s your fault for being so weak, and now you’re causing trouble for everyone!”

Masaru, a much milder force of nature compared to his wife and son, bowed his head towards Yagi and Aizawa. “I’m sorry. They’re always like this.”

“Shut up, old man!!”

“You’re the one who should shut up, Katsuki!!”

Aizawa’s eyes fell towards his student as their argument continued.

Bakugo shirked under his mother’s touch, and he would recognize the weight bearing down on the boy’s shoulders. Bakugo growled like a feral dog as his mother sighed and turned back towards them.

Yagi cleared his throat. “Are you... really okay with this?”

“Hmm? Oh, the dorms!” Mitsuki beamed. “Of course! We’d actually be grateful. Katsuki is rather reckless and good at everything, and he was blessed with a good quirk, so he had people fawning over him and got praised for shallow things.”

Bakugo had a bead of sweat on his forehead as he glared at his mother. His mouth became twisted into a scowl of suppressed rage... and perhaps, *hurt* .

Aizawa held his tongue.

Mitsuki frowned and turned her eyes downwards. "I'm honestly happy that U.A. decided to do this. No matter what, your school always stuck up for my kid, even when he got a lot of hate or doubt from the media." She looked at her son, her expression softening as she gently ruffled his hair. "And he's back safe and sound. U.A. might face some harsh criticism for all the shit that's gone down, but I trust you guys and leave him to you."

Mitsuki and Masaru bowed deeply. Their son hesitated a moment, but he bowed, too.

Yagi and Aizawa exchanged a long glance, before Aizawa spoke. "Thank you. We'll be sure to take good care of him. He has the potential to be a great hero."

They went outside after a clipped goodbye.

"Shall I buy you a drink after all of this, Aizawa?" Yagi asked.

"Maybe, but I-"

"Aizawa-Sensei!!"

They looked over their shoulders as Bakugo raced through his yard. Bakugo kept his eyes to the ground. He hasn't so much as *looked* at him or Yagi this entire time.

"I want to talk to you." Bakugo scuffed his shoe on the pavement. "... Alone."

Yagi nodded. Without a word, Yagi went through the gate and into the car the school provided for them. Bakugo waited for the slam of a

car door, his blood red eyes meeting Aizawa's for the first time that evening.

"What is it, Bakugo?" Aizawa frowned at the extended silence.
"Bakugo?"

"Give me a minute, damnit! I'm not good with this emotional shit." Bakugo scrubbed at his eyes as sudden tears pricked at them. "I don't know if it's *my* fault, or yours, or even U.A.'s, for all of the shit that happened..." He tore his hands away from his face and gripped his shirt. "But when Akira shows his face again, you'll help him out, right?"

"That's the plan." Confusion swirled in Aizawa's mind. "Are you concerned about him?"

"Damn right I'm concerned!" Bakugo stared down at his palm, a ghost of a memory replaying in his eyes. "In case nobody noticed back in Kamino, when Akira summoned *every one* of his monsters, one was missing. Seth."

Aizawa's eyes widened. "Seth...?"

"All of the extras in class are so broken up about what happened in Kamino. But I saw Joker first hand before he... he coughed up a lot of black... and even so he forced himself to fight against all the odds." Bakugo shook his head. "So when that asshole decides to come out of hiding, we'll be with him, right!? He'll try to shoulder it all by himself if we don't."

"... I made a lot of mistakes when it comes to Joker, but yeah." Aizawa's eyes hardened as he faced Bakugo head on. "We'll make sure he won't be alone."

"Good."

Bakugo turned on his heel and stomped back into his house, the door slamming behind him.

"Katsuki, don't slam the door!!"

Aizawa shook his head. Out of all his students, he figured Bakugo would be the *last* one to be concerned over Akira. He turned around and ventured into the car. With a nod to the driver, they were off to their final stops for the day.

Yagi didn't inquire about the talk he had with Bakugo, so he spoke first.

"I'm surprised we're getting so many parents to agree to the dorms. Maybe that interview worked wonders after all." Aizawa said.

"Perhaps." Yagi sank back into the seat and closed his eyes.
"Though both crime rates and vigilante incidents have skyrocketed across the country."

"That's not your fault though." Aizawa droned. He sighed when Yagi didn't answer. "Are you sure you can handle Midoriya by yourself?"

"Yes, I wish to talk to them personally." Yagi opened his eyes and stared at him. "How about you? You wanted to split up from here anyway. Where are you headed?"

"The Blue Lotus." Aizawa glanced into the rear view mirror and fixed his bun, and wiped some nonexistent dirt from his suit. "I want to take Shinsou as my personal student, and with everything that's happened with Joker..." Aizawa frowned. "I think it would be best for me to do it."

"I've been wondering," Yagi blinked at the rectangular black box sitting in between them. "What this was for?"

Aizawa grabbed the box and set it in his lap. "It's something for the Shinsou family. Nezu and Tsuragamae got it out of evidence."

Yagi frowned as the car pulled right in front of the Blue Lotus.

Aizawa, tucking the box under his arm, got out and closed the door. The car drove off. Aizawa straightened his tie for the third time as he looked at the packed store front. Not with people, but gifts. Bouquets of vibrant flowers, Joker merch, candles, and heartwarming messages were all arranged around the tables outside.

Police vehicles were parked on either ends of the street. Akane waved from one of them. Aizawa nodded at him before he went to the door.

He eyed the Joker mask hanging front and center in one of the windows. They knew he was coming, so he ventured inside despite the 'closed' sign hanging on the door.

Three pairs of eyes pinned him to the spot as the happy chime rang over his head.

"Please, sit." Risumi said from behind the counter. "We have some coffee ready for you."

"... Thank you."

He chose a booth close to the counter and put the box aside. The stilted silence ground into Aizawa's bones as the aroma of coffee wafted through the barren cafe. This place always had a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere. A cafe where you could put your feet up and forget your worries for a bit, but this...

It felt as if a vital flame had been extinguished, leaving others lost and gasping for breath. The charms on the walls seemed deadened in the aftermath. The whole of the cafe had a grayer tone to it, sapped of emotion.

A cup of coffee planted in front of him drew him from his thoughts. He looked up as Hitoshi sat in the opposite booth, his mother right beside him. Ayumu leaned against the booth, next to his wife. To say they looked exhausted would be an understatement.

Haggard, sleep deprived. Worn. The Shinsou family weren't large by any meaning of the word, but their near emaciated composure sparked concern. He cleared his throat when he realized he had been staring at them in a prolonged silence.

"Thank you for meeting with me today." Aizawa said, "You know what it's about."

"Yes," Risumi looked at Hitoshi. "It's about the U.A. dorms, and how you want to train my son to be a hero."

"That's correct-"

"However, I have my doubts about your school."

Hitoshi's eyes widened. "Mom?"

"Something happened with Akira on his last day of work, right before your Summer Camp." Risumi narrowed her eyes. "Somebody came into the cafe while I was distracted with a mismanaged shipment. Akira wouldn't tell me what happened. I have a feeling that U.A. was somehow involved."

"It was Nezu." Hitoshi stated. His parents stared at him with wide eyes, and he shrugged. "Akira told me about it afterwards."

"Nezu..." Aizawa sighed deeply, "He invited Akira to the Summer Camp."

"He what!?" Ayumu scowled. "Why the hell would he do that? Why do it in *our* cafe, right under our noses?"

"The USJ..." Hitoshi sulked as their eyes landed on him. "Akira did it after Nezu promised he would get to investigate the USJ."

"That's right." Aizawa sat ramrod straight. "Nezu and All Might figured something out after the Kamino Crisis, but they won't tell anybody what it is. Do you know why Kurusu wanted to go to the USJ?"

“Yeah, I do.” Hitoshi pursed his lips. “But don’t think you can get it out of me. It’s not my secret to share.”

“That’s... fair.” Aizawa deflated.

“Mom, if you have doubts about U.A., please don’t.” Determination glinted in Hitoshi’s eyes as he looked in between his parents. “Akira would’ve found a way there somehow, it wouldn’t matter if Nezu invited him or not. You know it’s true.”

“... I know.” Risumi sagged into the booth.

“I have a question.” Aizawa said as he stared at Hitoshi. “You and Kurusu shared a lot, and I can see you took my exercise routine seriously just by looking at you.”

Hitoshi narrowed his eyes. “What about it?”

“Did he give you any additional training?”

“What is this, an interrogation?” Risumi snapped. “If you think you can walk in here and-”

“Yeah, he did.”

“Hitoshi!” Risumi cried.

“What?” Hitoshi deadpanned. “People are going to suspect us colluding with Joker no matter what we do. Yeah, he trained me and was a damn good teacher. I learned how to make lock picks, smoke bombs, and other things. He taught me hand to hand skills, how to properly wield a gun without hurting myself, and he was going to teach me how to fight with a dagger. I hacked into the villain’s network and gave you Joker’s, *and* the missing Wild Wild Pussy Cats’, location during the Kamino Crisis. You’re *welcome* by the way.” Hitoshi stared Aizawa dead in the eye with the sort of confidence that would only be passed down by someone like Joker. “What are you going to do about it?”

His parents' jaws dropped.

Aizawa sat there, stupefied. A strangled laugh bubbled in his throat as a wide grin stretched across his face.

"Kid, you're going to be a fantastic hero. Nezu is going to love you."

"I-I'm sorry, *what*?" Risumi stuttered. "You're not going to arrest us?"

"Arrest you? Never. Nezu would never allow it." Aizawa sobered.

"Hitoshi has a point, though. There is another reason why you should allow him to live in the dorms."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ayumu said.

"I saw what's outside your door." Aizawa looked over his shoulder.

"Gifts from people who support Joker, and in turn, support you. But that might not always be the case."

Hitoshi jolted. "You think we'd be targeted by villains?"

"It's a possibility." Aizawa said as he turned towards them, his eyes falling on the lukewarm cup of coffee. "If it's clear that you're under U.A.'s protection, then it might ward off those who want to hurt you because of your relations with Joker. I'm sure some of the staff will make frequent visits to make sure that you're okay. We can tighten the security detail if need be. These are just precautions. We can never be too careful."

"... He has a point." Ayumu said.

"I never thought it would come to this." Risumi clasped her hands together on the table, her brow knotted. "After Silver Falcon... With everything Joker did for us..."

Aizawa's stomach churned.

Ayumu grasped Risumi's shoulder. "We can visit our son in the dorms, right?"

“Of course.” Aizawa nodded. “We aren’t going to bar parents from seeing their children.”

“And if Akira goes to the school like I think he will,” Hitoshi smiled at his parents. “Then you can see him again, too. I want to be there to support him when he returns.”

Risumi sucked in a breath. She wrapped her arms around Hitoshi and pulled him close. Hitoshi snorted as he hugged her back.

Aizawa scratched at his stubble when Risumi let go and pulled herself together, her son and husband rubbing her back soothingly.

“I know that things will be difficult from here on out, but I hope this memento will hold you off.” Aizawa grabbed the rectangular box and set it front of Hitoshi. “You haven’t turned in your costume designs yet, but Nezu and I already approved this as one of your potential weapons in the field... if you wanted it. You’d need training for it, but that shouldn’t be too much of a problem. Or you could keep it here. Whatever you want to do, it’s yours now.”

Hitoshi gulped as he popped off the top of the box. The lid fell from his grasp as he and his parents gasped. Inside, laying on a bed of red velvet, was Joker’s dagger. The ebony hilt glimmered and the pure white blade seemed to glow with an otherworldly light.

Goosebumps broke out on Hitoshi’s arms as he took it out of the box, the hilt bleeding ice into his palm. The blade itself sang as he held it up into the light.

“We found it in Kamino.” Aizawa whispered as they all stared at it in reverence. “Nezu pulled some serious strings to get it into your hands, Hitoshi. I think it’s his way of apologizing for everything that happened to your family. I know Joker would want you to have it, rather than it wasting away in an evidence locker somewhere.”

“This is...” Hitoshi blinked rapidly to stave off tears. He squared his shoulder and sat tall, his resolute violet eyes reflecting in Joker’s

dagger. "I'll use it well. I promise."

He wasn't saying it to Aizawa or his parents, rather like it was a prayer to Joker himself.

"I know you will." Aizawa said. He looked at his watch, frowning. "It's starting to get late, and you all look tired. We can finish up the paperwork and I can get out of your hair."

"... Okay." Risumi smiled at her son. "Where do we sign?"

After another twenty minutes of paperwork, he left them in peace.

"Eraser."

He stopped with his foot hanging out the door and turned to Risumi.

"... Feel free to come by whenever you like." She said as she stared at his untouched mug of coffee. "We... Akira wrote down all of his recipes for us. Next time I'll serve you his favorite curry and coffee combo on the house."

"Thank you." He bowed. "I'll be sure to do that."

He walked out.

The night sky stretched out overhead.

"When did it get this late already?" He muttered as he got out his phone and dialed Yagi. "Hey, it's me. How did it go with Midoriya?"

"Midoriya's mother is truly a terrifying woman..."

Aizawa blinked. "Do I want to know?"

"M-maybe not, but at least she agreed to let the boy stay in U.A."

"... Okay." He shook his head and walked down the street, nodding to Akane, who still sat in a police cruiser. "I finished up at the Blue

Lotus. Are you up for that drink? Midnight and Mic are coming along, too.”

“Sure, one or two drinks should be alright. Just don’t tell Recovery Girl? She’s been very adamant about my new diet.”

Aizawa chuckled. “Sure. I’ll send you the meeting location.”

He hung up and did just that. Aizawa put his phone away and just walked through Musutafu’s darkened streets, his thoughts wandering to Joker.

Little did he know, in a town an hour away by train from Musutafu, Amamiya Ren opened his eyes.

Hitoshi made me really proud in this chapter.

I would really like to thank you guys for sticking with me this far. 64 chapters and 450k words into this ABSOLUTE MONSTER of a story, and it still gets to me every time that people are still excited for the next chapter. <3 There are no words to describe how much everyone's support invigorates me to continue on through the hardest of days. Ironical for a writer, huh? xD

Here's the update schedule for the next 3 chapters:

New Beginning - February 5th

Counterfeit Phantom - February 19th

Sweatshop - March 5th

We won't really be spending too much time with the whole dorms and provisional license exam arc, for I would like to get to the work studies (what would be the start of season 4 in the anime) and focus on deeper character interactions as the class and Akiren and co try

to recoup from the Kamino tragedy. I'm seriously excited for what's in store!

Lastly, while the next 3 chapters are planned and scheduled, I've been experiencing some seriously heavy brain fog that's been making it hard to write or even go about any normal day. So if the chapters after that take another week to write and ensure quality, then it will be as such. I want to give out the best story possible, and quality is hard to keep up when a word document turns into an amalgamated garble because your brain is tired and can't concentrate. Who knows? Maybe by February/March it will be gone, and we can keep the schedule as normal.

Anywho, apologies for the extremely long end note. I hope you all have a wonderful day! <3

New Beginning

Chapter 65: New Beginning

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

FANART!

[Aria](#) on Twitter!

Ren opened his eyes to a wooden ceiling. For a single moment, he was thrown back in Leblanc. One second locked in bliss, an alternate reality where he and his friends weren't thrown into separate worlds by Yaldabaoth.

Oh, how he wished it were true.

Then reality crashed into him in an agonizing wave.

His skull buzzed and his ears rang with a deep, resonating tune. Ren squeezed his eyes shut against the pounding in his head, and the wrenching pain clawing at his heart. The softness of the blankets did nothing for the pins and needles dancing across his skin, the feeling akin to sandpaper as he pushed off the covers.

Shivering, he pulled himself into a sitting position, nearly jumping out of his skin as a cool washcloth dropped from his forehead and onto his hands. He set it aside as the ringing in his ears intensified. Sitting up was easier than standing, his legs wobbling when he took his first step, his hand stabilizing against some worn crates as the world wavered around him. He took a moment to breathe through clenched teeth before he took in his surroundings.

The attic back home dwarfed this one. The crates pushed against the wall left only enough room for a small handful of people to roll out

their futon. Signs of life dotted the attic. From the mishmash of supplies arranged in neat piles, to random snacks and tightly rolled futons. Bags and familiar gadgets were stuffed into the far corner. Evidence that people lived here, and not for a short length of time.

He hobbled towards the staircase. Noises echoed from down the stairs; loud voices, music, the sharp *clacks* of a game of pool. Familiar scents mingled with the dry air, sharp and acrid. A smokey tinge that reminded him of Lala-chan's bar.

The rest of the noise covered the groan of wood as he settled his weight on the first step. Ren dragged his body down a few more stairs, stopping to catch his breath as black spots stained his vision. But his luck didn't last. His knees gave out at the second to last step, his stomach flew up to his throat as the floor reached up and caught his graceless fall.

His vision blacked out as he banged his head against the ground.

"Oh, honey!" An unfamiliar voice cried out as footsteps rushed to Ren's side. A calloused hand touched his back, sending fire through his blood. "You shouldn't have come down the stairs in your condition! What were you thinking?"

Ren pushed them away and scuttled back into the stairs. He caught a flash of red hair as the person held up their hands. His blurry vision couldn't differentiate if it was a man or a woman, but what did that matter when he was in alien surroundings?

He reached for a familiar power; a beat of Yatagarasu's wind, the crackling chill of Byakko's ice, the caustic poison on Vasuki's breath. Nothing happened. His soul rang hollow. A dismal, lonely tune that only summoned crippling despair.

"It's okay, I'm not hostile!" The person said when he began hyperventilating. "I'll get the others."

They zipped away and returned with familiar faces. Ren's eyes watered as he zeroed in on black and white fur.

"Mo... na..."

"Akira!!" Morgana launched himself from Kaito's shoulder and crashed into Ren's chest. "I thought... I thought you would never..."

That name, Akira, sounded wrong to Ren's ears, but the cotton blanketing his mind didn't let him think clearly. He pushed all thoughts aside as he curled around Morgana, the burning tears falling freely from both as they clung to one another. Morgana's fur tickled his face.

"Y-you... you *idiot*..." Morgana, despite his sobbing, pushed every ounce of love for his partner in his voice. "I was so worried! After what happened... you..."

"I-I'm sorry." Ren's dry throat burned and made his voice raspy. "I-I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay! *We're okay*. I'm just glad you're finally awake!"

"Hey..."

They looked up as Kaito approached, the others backed up to give them space. Kaito knelt in front of them, his eyes searching Ren's face. He planted a warm hand on Ren's shoulder, the silvery band on Kaito's wrist twinkled in the low light.

"Let's get you back upstairs, okay?" Kaito looked over his shoulder. "Tobita, can you make some broth? He needs something that won't upset his stomach."

"Of course!" Tobita smiled, relief evident in his face. Ren's desolate heart fluttered with warmth when his kind eyes locked onto Ren's. "Leave it to me."

Morgana uncurled from Ren's chest and hopped to his shoulder. Kaito put Ren's arm over his shoulder and helped him stand, with Kaito frowning at how... easy it was.

"Do you need any assistance up the stairs?" A man with slanted brown eyes asked.

Ren's eyes widened. He *knew* that voice.

"Mr. Compress?"

"Indeed!" Mr. Compress grinned. "I know our reunion isn't a dramatic moonlight rendezvous, but I'm glad we could meet again."

Kaito snorted at Ren's blatant confusion. "Leave us alone for a few minutes, okay? Give him time to adjust."

"Right. Magne," Mr. Compress glanced over to the muscular, red haired woman, "Do you think you can...?"

"Yep, I'll close the bar." Magne waved her hand. "You're lucky it's a weekday. My patrons would get pissed at me if I closed on a weekend."

Kaito sighed as they journeyed upstairs.

"It was your turn to watch him, Shuichi!" Manami snapped.

"I'm sorry! I didn't know he would wake up on my bathroom break!" *Thwack* . "OW! What was that for!?"

"Merp."

"You're not helping!"

"Some things never change." Morgana said when they reached the top of the steps.

"You could say that again." Kaito looked directly into Ren's eyes.

Ren stared at the floor as Kaito lowered him back on the futon, Morgana hopping onto Ren's lap after they adjusted the comforter. Guilt clawed at Ren's painfully empty stomach. He couldn't stand Morgana's keen stare, so he ran a hand down the not-cat's silken fur to distract himself.

Kaito fidgeted with his band as silence weighed them down, until the man sighed and took off his glasses to rub his eyes. He put them back on and locked Ren with an unreadable expression.

"Do you remember what I said when you two first wandered into my internet cafe, completely lost and terrified?" Kaito asked.

"How you'd kick us out if we caused any trouble?" Ren said, his fingers stilled over Morgana's fur.

"Yep." Kaito chuckled dryly as he glanced around the attic. "Now look at me. I turned into a complete hypocrite."

Ren stiffened. "What happened to the Raven's Nest?"

"For now, it's closed." Kaito stated.

"What?" Ren's eyes widened.

"Hitoshi warned us that it might not be safe after... you know." Morgana suppressed a purr as Ren resumed petting him. "So we found a new hideout thanks to Compress! Hopefully it's just... temporary."

"I'm sorry, Kaito." Ren's lips soured and he couldn't bare looking at either of them. "I never thought it would be taken that far. If only I-"

"Hey, none of that." Ren froze as Kaito ruffled his curls, soft and almost playful. An honest smile curled Kaito's lips. "Honestly? I have no regrets. The Raven's Nest can always be reopened somewhere else. I've started over many times in my life, doing it again is no trouble for me. I'm just... glad that you two came along when you

did. My life..." Kaito sighed as he retracted his hand. Ren and Morgana stared at him as he traced his silvery band. "I wasn't really *living* until you two darkened my doorstep. Locking yourself away, too afraid to go outside and interact with people, it's no way to live. That's a sorry existence where you just haven't died."

Ren and Morgana held their breath. Kaito didn't feel their stares, his eyes too focused on the suppressant on his wrist. But Ren knew, despite the endless void coiling inside him, Kaito was his Hermit of this world. Ren no longer felt the sacred bond that tied him to others, the soothing threads that empowered him were gone, leaving him weak and destitute.

Kaito snapped out of it, his eyes flicking up to Ren. "I'm glad you're awake, Akira. We were worried."

That name again. *Akira* . It wronged him as if it was a deformed puzzle piece being jammed into a space where it *didn't belong* . He just couldn't put his finger on why.

"Akira...?" Morgana looked up at him in concern. "Are you still tired?"

"I-it's nothing." Ren shook his head. "How long have I been out?"

"Three weeks, give or take." Kaito said.

Ren's throat tightened. "Three... *three weeks* ?"

"Ah, is this a bad time?"

Tobita stood at the top of the stairs, holding a tray. The tantalizing smell of chicken broth made Ren's mouth water, but he didn't even hear the man walk up the steps.

"Of course not." Kaito waved Tobita closer.

Tobita gracefully sat next to Kaito. He set the tray to his side and gently pushed the mug into Ren's hands. Heat seeped into his clammy hands. He took a sip, sighing in relief as the broth soothed

his throat and the chills bled out by the warmth spreading through his body.

"It... hasn't been easy." Kaito frowned when Ren finished the broth. Tobita took the empty mug and set it aside. "What do you remember?"

"I..." Ren hissed and clutched his head as horrible images battered his mind. "I-it's kinda fuzzy, but I remember... K-Kamino... I-I... All For One is... he's dead." Ren shuddered. Morgana huddled into his partner's side. "I... I *killed* him, didn't I? How could I... People know that I killed someone, right?"

Tobita and Kaito exchanged glances. Morgana's fur bristled.

"... Yes." Kaito stated. "That incident was broadcast live."

"I-I didn't want Sraosha to do it." Tears burned Ren's eyes. "I *begged* him not to. You have to believe me!"

"Everyone knows that." Morgana whispered. "Nezu, All Might, and our group in the top ten stuck up for you in a live interview. All Might took responsibility for everything that went down because of that villain."

"B-but... I *killed* somebody!" Ren's heart wrenched at the vast emptiness inside him. Was it his price to pay for killing somebody? His punishment? "A-and I died... So many times I can't even... and now my Personas are-" A shrill ringing hounded his ears. His vision blackened and he collapsed forward.

"H-hey, Akira!" Kaito shouted as Ren felt arms wrap around him. "You're still sick and you need to rest. Go back to sleep, okay? We'll be with you, no matter what."

Ren nodded into Kaito's chest, and the man lay him out on the futon, the warm comforter caressing his chin. He felt himself being pulled

under, but he muttered something before the darkness embraced him once more.

“I feel so empty, Morgana.” Ren whispered as his eyelids drooped closed.

A heaviness strangled them as they watched him fall asleep, his chest rising and falling.

Kaito cursed under his breath as he rubbed his temples.

Tobita crumpled into himself.

Morgana put his forehead against his partner’s as his heart visibly shattered into bits.

Manami popped her head out from the stairwell, the others followed her lead. “We... we heard everything.”

“We’re all going to have to work together if we want him to pull through this.” Kaito said. “This is... a lot worse than I imagined. It’s going to be a long road for all of us.”

“How could I fail him when he needed me most?” Morgana curled into the crook of his partner’s neck, tears leaking down his fur. “I won’t make that mistake again. *I can’t* .”

“We’ll still take turns watching over him during the day. You need your rest too, Morgana.” Manami whispered, before she glared at Shuichi. “And *no* more bathroom breaks.”

“I get it!” Shuichi cried. “I learned my lesson!”

Lady Stubbs glared at him. “Merp...”

Atsuhiro shook his head. “It’s been a long enough night. Why don’t we all hit the hay? Everyone will need their energy if we’re to take care of him properly.”

“That...” Kaito’s shoulders dropped and he sighed. “That sounds like a good idea.”

That night, they lay out all of their futons in a tight circle around their Leader, hoping that their closeness would soothe him in any way possible.

Aizawa hoped that his students were eager to move in to the dorms. Too excited to *ask certain questions*. That hope shriveled as twenty pairs of eyes stared at him expectantly, their curiosity not spurred by the dorm building looming over them. Some lowered their gazes as his eyes swept over them, doubt or hesitation marred others. Quirked lips, pinched brows. Bakugo became twitchy whenever one of his classmates stared at him for more than a few seconds.

Aizawa took a deep breath, and let it out as a sigh.

“I know what you’re all thinking.” Aizawa said as he decided to hit the nail on the head. “The Summer Camp was difficult for everybody involved. Mutual trust was broken on either side, but I hope we can work together to rectify that.”

“Sensei!” Kirishima stood front and center, his hands into tight fists. “Is it true that you knew Joker was there? Vlad King said that... sometimes, as heroes, we’ll have to accept assignments that you don’t always agree with.”

“Yes, we knew that Joker was there.” His gaze softened as whispers broke out.

“How could you *let* a criminal be at our camp!?” Ojiro shouted, his raw anger made the others flinch.

“Ojiro!” Iida chopped his arm. “Let’s at least listen to Aizawa-sensei before we make demands!”

Ojiro bit his lip, but pinned Aizawa to the spot with a less heated glare.

“Joker’s situation is...”

Chaotic.

Pure, unadulterated *hell* .

They waited as Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose. He warded off images of the kid swamped in the hospital bed, clutching him as he went still in Aizawa’s arms, of the *body* laying on a cold slab in the morgue. He breathed through the pang in his heart. Aizawa checked around, but his class was the first to gather in front of their new dorm. They were alone.

“*Delicate* . Nezu invited Joker and his team to the Summer Camp as a show of trust.”

“But *why* ?” Ojiro ground out, his tail flicking back and forth. “Isn’t he just a criminal?”

Aizawa’s eyes hardened. “He may have bent the rules, but do you think he deserved to be treated the way Kunikazu did in that ICU room?”

A sea of pallid faces stared back at him. Uraraka and some of the other girls put their hands over their mouths as the memory haunted them. Ojiro shivered as he lost all color.

“What I’m saying is this; Society is not black and white.” Aizawa pinned Ojiro with an intense glare. “It has *many* shades of gray. One shade allows Joker to be at the Camp, and another represents a class that thought staging an illegal rescue was a good idea.” Aizawa’s eyes skimmed over his class as their eyes fell to the ground. “Like it or not, that’s the truth of the society we live in. Those who think it’s just one or the other, heroes versus villains, good

versus evil, will become extremely short sighted. Such a narrow point of view will only hurt you in the future.”

Like it hurt Aizawa now, *after* his perspective broadened and it was too late to do anything about it.

Asui raised a hand. “What about Joker, kero? What shade would he be?”

“That’s... complicated. We have reason to believe that he was heavily abused by the system. Both Midnight and Hound Dog have agreed that he had symptoms of severe PTSD. Joker is powerful, but people forget that he is still a *child* who has been harmed by people who were supposed to protect him. It may not be the first time he’s dealt with somebody of Kunikazu’s caliber.”

Midoriya, Iida, and Todoroki exchanged significant glances.

“Sensei!” Iida’s eyes sharpened as he chopped his arm. “Is there any news about Nezu’s Vigilante Program or Joker’s whereabouts!?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because-” He turned to the rest of his classmates, shoulders squared and head held high. “If it gets approved and Joker comes here, then as Class 1-A’s Representative I wish to welcome and support him however I can!!”

“Iida...” Todoroki said, wide eyed.

“But-” Ojiro started, but another stepped to the front of the group.

“I agree.” Tokoyami took the curious stares in stride. “Out of everyone here, I am the *only* one with a sentient quirk similar to Joker’s. I understand him on a deeper level, and will choose to support him despite what happened to All For One at Kamino. One cannot truly know the suffering of others until you have experienced it for yourself.”

Aizawa bit back the classified information that Joker technically *had no quirk* .

“Oui!!” Aoyama beamed, his sparkles somehow brighter than ever before. “I shall support him as a fellow shining star!”

“Y-Yeah!!” Ashido pumped her fist. “Aki-chan deserves the best!!”

Ojiro remained silent then, grinding his teeth together.

Bakugo sneered at Ojiro, but shoved his hands in his pocket instead of snapping at him.

“We don’t know where Joker and his team are right now. As for the Vigilante Program...” They turned their attention to Aizawa, “The time frame is uncertain. The last I heard, the court has accepted the appeal Nezu sent in. I’ll let you know as soon as I find out anything else.” Aizawa sighed as Iida nodded sharply. “Anyway, we wasted enough time standing out here. I’ll give you a quick tour of the first floor, then you’ll have the rest of today, tomorrow, and Sunday to get settled in. Classes resume on Monday.”

They followed him down a beautiful cobblestone path and into the wide wooden double doors.

The interior sprawled out into a large commons area, with floor to ceiling windows letting in plentiful sunlight and a view of the gardens just outside their door. Plush couches and tables were arranged for study areas, with another centered around a large television. High ceilings and cream colored walls gave the illusion of a much bigger space.

“I-it’s like a mansion!!” Uraraka cried.

“Each student dorm building holds one class,” Aizawa said as his students ogled their new living space. “Girls on the right, boys on the left. You all get your own room. The rooms are on the second floor and above, with each floor having four rooms per floor. The main

living area has laundry, a shared bathing area separated by gender, a state of the art kitchen and dining area, while the rooms themselves have AC, refrigerators, a private bathroom, closets, and a balcony.”

Aizawa sighed in relief as he finished his memorized tirade.

“I’ll be back tomorrow to tell you more. That’s all. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Aizawa-sensei!!”

They scrambled around him as they raced up the stairs, or like Kaminari and Ashido, excitedly mashed the elevator call button.

“Sensei.”

Aizawa raised a brow at Todoroki, who peered into him strangely.
“What is it?”

“About Joker, did he...” Todoroki opened and close his mouth several times, but he couldn’t get his words out. “Nevermind.”

Todoroki’s eyes fell to the ground and he walked away.

Aizawa caught Bakugo staring oddly at Todoroki before he too, ventured up the stairs to check out his room. He sighed as his craving for a decent cup of caffeine pantomimed into the forefront of his mind as often as a certain vigilante, but he pushed it away. Right now, he had one more student to check on before he could move into the teacher’s dorms.

Hopefully Marshmallow was patient enough not to claw up his new furniture.

Hitoshi busied himself by arranging his room.

His classmates had acted... strange. They hadn’t paid him much mind before, but since the whole Kamino debacle and Akira’s identity

getting out, they had given him ample breathing room. Their awed stares twisted into his back when they thought he wasn't looking.

He shook his head and focused on his room. Some of the charms from the Blue Lotus hung on his wall, alongside a picture of his parents. Various bits and bobs and tools littered his desk, with pieces of a new laptop set out for later. With a sigh, he plopped down on his new bed, staring at the vibrant red and black tapestry hung above the headboard.

His phone vibrated on the nightstand. His parents had been checking in almost every hour. For now, he ignored them and reached into the closest box by his bed. He froze. Just inside this box was his black fox mask and a replica of Joker's mask. He took them both out and held them up towards the balcony door, the afternoon sunlight bleeding through both pairs of eyes.

"Damn it..." He muttered as a lump formed in his throat.

He hung his best friend's mask on the balcony door. Hitoshi stared down at the fox mask in his hands, the golden moon stamped on the forehead twinkling. His first(and probably last) act of *real* vigilantism happened after he donned it. To Joker, Hitoshi was The Moon.

Maybe he could add a small moon or a fox motif to his hero costume.

Hitoshi put the mask on his desk and turned back to the box, where a figurine of Arsene lay inside. The inky black wings reflected beautiful colors, jewels of blue and purple hidden within an ebony sheen. Vibrant as oil mixed in water. Hitoshi studied Arsene's claws and intricate mask, recalling the time when Arsene appeared in the alley behind the Blue Lotus and pinned Hitoshi against the wall.

How things have changed since then.

He just put the figurine at a place of pride on his desk when somebody knocked on the door. The hairs on the back of his neck

raised.

“Er... come in?”

Aizawa opened the door. His eyes lingered on Joker’s mask and the Arsene figurine, before they landed on Hitoshi. “Sorry for the intrusion.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Hitoshi said as he deflated. “It’s not like I was doing much.”

“I wanted to see how you were settling in.” Aizawa said as he leaned against the wall. “Is anyone giving you any trouble for... recent events?”

“Not really.” Hitoshi deadpanned. “If anything, it’s like they’re almost afraid to talk to me, but in a different way than before. I don’t mind it that much.”

“Let me know if that changes. We don’t want you to feel ostracized-”

“It’s fine.” Hitoshi turned to the black fox mask and fiddled with the straps. “I’ve been ostracized for my quirk almost my entire life. I’m *used* to it.” He sighed when Aizawa gave him a stern look. “What else are you here for? I know it has to be for another reason.”

“You’re as smart as a whip. Enjoy this weekend, Shinsou, because it’ll be the last one where you get to relax.” Aizawa’s terrifying grin sent shivers down Hitoshi’s back. “Your hero training will be with me every morning at five-thirty starting Monday. We’ll see how much you’ve earned from Joker’s training and go on from there.”

“Y-yes, sensei.” Hitoshi’s eyes fell to Aizawa’s scarf. “Could I... would it be possible to train with that, too?”

“It took me over six years to master it by myself, but I think you could do it if I trained you.” Aizawa put a hand to his capture weapon, then smirked at Hitoshi before his eyes trailed over the disassembled

laptop and other metal bits. "I looked over the forms for your costume and hero name."

"And?"

"I think the name *Wild Card* fits." Aizawa snorted as he turned towards the door. "See you tomorrow morning. Don't be late."

Hitoshi lay his head on his desk after Aizawa left. He was already exhausted, but he knew that everything would be worth it.

After all, he wanted to impress Akira the next time they saw each other.

Shoto worked mechanically as he put his room together, his thoughts wandering as he changed this bland room into one like a traditional Japanese inn. Tatami floors, a shoji door to the balcony, traditional Japanese shelving and a desk that was low to the floor. A pot with vibrant green bamboo shoots added that final touch.

Satisfied, he sank into the cushioned zaisu in front of his desk, his eyes trailing to his phone.

He ignored the few lines of awkward dialogue from his father, past the lengthy conversation he's been having with Momo throughout the day, and read a new message from Iida.

[Ingenium2.0]

Are you busy?

I've been.... thinking about something and I need to discuss it with somebody.

Midoriya hasn't answered, so he's probably busy with his room.

[Shoto]

Sure, my door is open.

It took less than a minute for Iida to be at his doorstep, widened eyes studying the room.

“Impressive. I didn’t think this level of work could be done in one day!”

Shoto shrugged as he waved Iida inside and shut the door. “Do you need help with your room?”

“No, it’s not that...”

Shoto tilted his head. “You can tell me if something is bothering you.”

The mask of the astute Class Representative cracked, guilt and horror bleeding through his eyes.

“I...” Iida pushed up his glasses. His fingers trembled. “I overheard something I don’t think I should have. About Joker when he was in the hospital.”

“What?”

“My brother saw Joker’s brain scans, and that the doctor assured him the hemorrhaging was fatal. He was confused on how Joker is somehow... *alive* .” Iida looked into Shoto’s eyes, fear blatant within them. “I don’t know what to think of it. If... If Joker really *did* die, then how is he alive? His powers continue to boggle me. I can’t even *imagine* how Joker feels right now...”

“I...” Shoto pursed his lips. His knuckles turned bone white as his nails dug into his palms. “I know.”

“Know... what?”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone.” lida’s expression hardened, but he nodded. Shoto took a deep breath and cast off the weight he held since Hosu. “It’s something I figured out after Joker joined the fight in Hosu. Native was *dead* . I don’t think even he knows that he died.”

“He was-” lida’s eyes went impossibly wide. “But, that can’t be-”

“I was the one who got closest to Native. He wasn’t breathing, and most of the damage he sustained was internal bleeding. I don’t think he was dead for very long-”

“Are you saying that Joker *revived* him!?”

“*lida* .”

“But that’s... that’s...” lida ducked his head, his voice in a whisper. “That light, the butterfly, the flowers we smelled... that was... it *brought him back* ?”

“Yeah, it did. Think about it, lida. That spell with the butterfly was *different* to any other healing spell we’ve seen. It would make sense that a revival ability would look different to a normal healing one.”

“Th-that makes sense. I... see why you didn’t tell anyone.” lida released a shaky sigh. “So, those brain scans, the hemorrhaging-”

“If they were fatal, then there’s no doubt in my mind that Joker really died.” Their stomachs churned. The truth hung before them on fine spider’s silk, but one snap of the thread would lead to impending doom if word got out. “Joker was alone with All For One for over an hour before the stream went live. His power went beyond what his body could handle, and he was in critical condition while he was in the hospital. It’s not the question of *if* he died, lida, it’s...” Shoto scowled. “I think it’s a question of how *many* times he died. Why else would he bleed black?”

Iida went pale so fast Shoto thought he was going to get sick. It's a good thing he already unpacked most of the stuff for his bathroom. Iida swayed before he sank down onto the floor, his hair hanging over his expression.

"So, our teachers were right to say that he has severe PTSD. Who knows what else he was put through even before Kamino. The USJ and the hero raid might be scratching the surface."

"Yeah." Shoto sat at Iida's side. "I don't think our classmates understand how much he has suffered."

"... Should we tell Midoriya about it?"

"I hate to say this, but the less people that know, the better. Nezu, Aizawa-sensei, and those heroes in Demizu Mika's interview probably all know. There's no way they would pull that off so fast if they didn't figure it out. They wanted to make sure Joker's true power was covered up before people got suspicious. For now, I think we should keep it to ourselves."

"R-right."

Unbeknownst to them, a shadow listened in from the hallway, hand half way raised to knock. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stormed off. His heart hammered a hundred miles a second.

"Bakugo!!" Ashido rushed up the stairs along with Kirishima and Kaminari. "We were about to ask everyone if we wanted to compare rooms!!"

"Dude..." Kirishima frowned as he saw Bakugo's watery eyes. "Are you okay?"

"*I'm fine* !" He snapped as he shouldered his way past. "And no, stay the hell out of my room!"

“C’moooooon!” Ashido said as she clung on his arm. “Pretty please!? We’re going to decide who has the best room! They will be given the name of Room King!! Don’t you want that title?”

Bakugo shoved her off. “*Fine* . But you know damn well that I’m going to win!”

“That’s the spirit!!”

Todoroki’s door opened. Iida and Todoroki poked their heads out.

“What’s with all the noise?” Iida asked.

“Oh, perfect!” Kaminari grinned. “We’re inviting everyone down to the common area so we can compare rooms!”

“I just finished with mine not that long ago.” Shoto said as they stepped out into the hallway. “Is everyone else ready?”

“Yeah!” Kaminari said, “We’re all meeting downstairs!”

Shoto couldn’t shake off the way Bakugo pinned him with a strange look as they went downstairs. Everyone lounged around on the floor or on the couches. His eyes found Momo’s and Shoto’s heart eased when they smiled at each other.

“Okay!” Ashido clapped her hands when everyone was present. “We’ll start with the girls, and then move on to the boys! Afterwards, we’ll all vote on who has the best room design!”

“Remember to be respectful of each other’s rooms!” Iida shouted.

“That’s just like our Class Representative...” Jiro said with a smirk.

Shoto kept himself at the back of the group as they looked at the girl’s rooms until they reached Yaoyorozu’s. His eyes widened as the others marveled at the traditional styled room, quite similar to his.

“W-well, I couldn’t bring anything from home.” She said as she rubbed her arm. “I’ve put a lot of thought about being more economical in my choices. I’ve recently gained a new appreciation for this style.”

The mood dampened, but compliments were given and they swept over to the boy’s side. Shoto noticed one key item in nearly every room. It didn’t matter if Jiro’s had a punk rock theme, or Aoyama’s dazzling decorations, or even Midoriya’s complete obsession with his All Might themed room.

With the exception of Shoji, Ojiro, Mineta, and a small handful of others, each one had some small memento of Joker. Whether it was a mask hanging in the window, a red and black postcard pinned on a board, or in Bakugo’s case, a rare figurine of Seth sitting regally on his headboard, wings splayed and mouth set in a silent roar. Uraraka and Ashido prized their neatly folded handkerchiefs with black and red patterns.

“TODOROKI!” Ashido’s voice brought Shoto out of his stupor. “Your room is similar to Yaomomo’s!?”

“We lived together for a bit.” Shoto stated as he and Momo avoided everyone’s gawking. “Is it not normal to have similar rooms because of that?”

Ashido whispered something in Momo’s ear, and she turned bright red. “Mina!! How could you suggest such a thing!?”

“What? Share the details, girl!”

“Enough, Ashido!” Iida interjected. “We have looked at Todoroki’s room, now we must move on!”

“Fiiine!” Ashido whined as they went next door.

Shoto paused after he closed his door. “What did she say to you, Momo?”

“Ah, nothing! It’s nothing.” Momo said, despite her ears turning red.
“Don’t worry about it.”

Shoto blinked slowly, but decided to drop it. They followed the others throughout other rooms. The girl’s cooed at Koda’s adorable room with a rabbit, harked on Kaminari’s tastelessness, or how Sato’s room smelled like a bakery, though it went unsaid as to why Midoriya and a few others couldn’t bare staying in the room for too long.

It wasn’t until they reached Tokoyami’s room that something truly sparked Shoto’s interest.

Darkness draped the whole space, the only spurts of light coming from purple candles and ominously archaic looking artifacts. Strange charms and posters hung all across the walls.

“Y-you have a sword!?” Midoriya asked as he hovered by the item leaning against the corner.

“Y-yes, please don’t touch anything!” Tokoyami practically drowned in puffed up feathers. “Could we just move on?”

“Wait, Tokoyami...” Shoto walked inside, all eyes on him, and stopped in front of Tokoyami’s desk. A Joker mask and a few decks of peculiar cards sat on the side. “What do you know about the Arcana?”

“Oh?” Tokoyami perked up. “I never thought that you would be interested in Tarot.”

Shoto looked in between Bakugo and Momo, each taking a keen interest.

“Now that you say it,” Kaminari said. “I’m kinda curious too.”

“Do you even have the brains to understand the Arcana?” Bakugo griped.

“Dude, harsh!”

“I admit...” Momo said as she crossed her arms. “After recent events... I am also curious.”

“Perhaps... we could do this in the common area? I would prefer to not have people standing awkwardly in my domain.” Tokoyami said as he took the decks from Shoto’s hands. “My room is the last to be judged, correct? We could take a vote after.”

“Sounds good!” Ashido said. “Everyone, to the common area!!”

Tokoyami pushed everyone out of his room, and they followed him back down to the commons area. Tokoyami planted himself on a couch with a coffee table. Everyone waited curiously as he fidgeted with the first deck, before clearing his throat.

“Before we start, I am curious.” Tokoyami’s eyes landed on Shoto. “What sparked your intrigue in the Tarot? They draw people for a reason.”

Shoto pursed his lips as he sat beside Tokoyami. “Joker.”

Class 1-A’s breath was stolen as the room became tense.

“How did Joker...” Midoriya’s eyes became laced with grief. “What does he have to with this?”

Shoto and Bakugo exchanged glances. Bakugo scowled as he plopped on the armchair beside the couch.

“Back at the Summer Camp, IcyHot and I encountered Seth.” Bakugo bristled as he ignored stares and a few gasps. “Seth... he said I was the Tower.”

“Seth also said that I was the ‘Hanged Man’.”

Tokoyami stiffened. “The *Tower* and the *Hanged Man* ?”

“Yeah, what of it birdbrain!?”

“Joker himself called me an Empress.” Momo added with a frown, “But the Empress *is* part of the Arcana, right?”

“That is correct.” Tokoyami opened the first pack of cards and lay them out on the table.

Everyone leaned forward to study their intricate designs.

“I wonder...” Tokoyami finished laying them out in order, before he locked his fingers together and leaned forward. “The Empress, the Tower, The Hanged Man... are you absolutely certain that those are the names Joker or Seth gave you?”

“Yes, he said it right to my face.” Momo said. “When he delivered the calling card for my parents...”

“A-as for Seth...” Midoriya clutched his chin in thought. “If Joker’s connection with his companions are as deep as I think it is... then it might as well have been Joker that called Bakugo the Tower, and Todoroki the Hanged Man.”

“Okay, I’m so lost.” Kaminari stated.

“Same here,” Kirishima scratched the back of his neck with a sheepish smile.

“It all begins with the Fool and his journey.” Tokoyami pointed to the first card, depicting a young man about to walk off a cliff. “With each card representing a step in that journey. For example,” His hand hovered over the second card, a picture of a steaming chalice, the figure behind was obscured by the wisps of smoke. “The Magician helps the Fool tap into his full potential. The next, the High Priestess, represents his unrealized potential-”

“Can you get on with it?” Bakugo snapped.

Tokoyami sighed as he looked to Momo. “You’re the Empress, who represents mother earth and abundance, of spirituality and feminine

energy. If we skip to the Hanged Man, which is the 12th card of the deck, it is the Fool himself, turned upside-down as if his whole world has followed suit. It can represent self sacrifice needed to save another.”

“What about the Tower?” Shoto asked, brow furrowed.

“The Tower is a tricky card.” Tokoyami said. “It is commonly associated with danger, crisis, destruction, and other such things.” Tokoyami’s eyes bored into Bakugo’s widened ones. “It can be associated with unforeseen change, such as a way for the Fool to free himself from his shackles. It is one of the cards that people misunderstand the most. It is not an inherently *bad* card.”

Bakugo’s eyes were pinpricks. Unbeknownst to them, the sound of broken chains replayed in Bakugo’s mind.

“So... let’s say that Joker is the Fool, then does that make us each a card?” Iida asked, his brow pensive. “Each of us is a part of his journey?”

“It’s difficult to say.” Tokoyami said. “Joker has forged many bonds; this class, some chosen few heroes, and who knows how many others outside of our circle. For example, Midoriya could be the epitome of a Chariot, or Kirishima the Sun. Iida would make a perfect Emperor. I dare say that someone like All Might could be Judgement. However,” Tokoyami stared at the cards, “All of this can be taken with a grain of salt. If Joker is the Fool, then only he knows for certain. There are also other decks with additional cards such as Apostle, Faith, and Aeon. Who’s to say that Joker’s bonds belong to only a single deck?”

“This sounds way too complicated for my tastes.” Jiro deadpanned.

“Maybe, but I find it interesting.” Shoji said serenely.

“Me too!” Hagakure shouted as she waved her arms. “I wonder what Arcana I would be!?”

“It is much to take in all at once.” Tokoyami reached for the cards and packed the first deck together. “But if anyone is interested in them after tonight, then I have no qualms about answering questions... or even performing a tarot reading.”

“You know...” Uraraka leaned over the couch and pointed at the cards. “Can you do a reading now? About... Joker?”

“I suppose it won’t hurt.” Tokoyami said as he reached for another deck. “For some reason, it is the Thoth deck that calls to me.”

“Ooooh, spooky!” Ashido said.

Tokoyami sighed as they waited in anticipation. He shuffled the cards, slowly hovering his palm over each one. When Tokoyami felt a warm buzzing energy seep into his palm, emanating from the card as if it wished to be summoned, he took it and placed it face down on the table. He repeated until there were three cards.

“This card represents his past.” Tokoyami flipped over the first card. “The Fool. How fitting.”

“What does it mean?” Midoriya asked.

“It means that he may have taken his first steps into a new journey. I can think of one such event that could signify a new journey.”

“The USJ.” Momo stated.

“That is correct.” Tokoyami frowned as he stared down at his hand. “He appeared as if out of thin air. I mistook him for a villain.”

“B-but he wasn’t a villain!” Koda said as he wrung his hands together. “He didn’t hurt us at the USJ, a-and he saved me from a Nomu during the Summer Camp...”

“I would say he helped any number of us since then.” Iida said. “My brother would never walk again if it wasn’t for Joker.”

“Y-yeah. I...” Uraraka’s face flushed as she studied the corner of the room. “My family doesn’t have much money, so I was all alone in my apartment and struggling for food. If it wasn’t... wasn’t for what he and the Shinsou’s offered at the Blue Lotus, then I might’ve gone hungry between school lunches.”

“Ochako-chan...” Asui said as she rubbed Uraraka’s arm.

“Indeed...” Tokoyami nodded. “To our knowledge, he never made a public appearance before the USJ, so the Fool fits perfectly. Now, as for Joker’s present-”

Tokoyami flipped over the second card, many reeling back, aghast.

Uraraka paled. “I-Is that....?”

“Death.” Tokoyami said.

Shoto and Iida startled. Others whispered in shock or horror, or in Midoriya’s case, stared at it in dismay. Bakugo’s expression faltered, and ultimately fell into a scowl.

This card depicted a shadowy reaper riding a pale horse, its hollow eyes staring at them as it held a wickedly sharp sickle. A raven perched in a dead tree behind them. Other skulls and vibrant roses decorated the border. But there was one problem.

“Why is it upside down?” Kaminari asked. “Did it get messed up when you were shuffling?”

“Not exactly.” Tokoyami clasped his hands together. “In Tarot, having both Upright and Reversed cards is normal. Each bare different meaning depending on which one you draw, and *how* it is drawn.”

“So, what does a Death Reversed mean?” Shoto asked.

“Death...” They all held their breath as Tokoyami closed his eyes. “Like the Tower, is not always a bad card. It is often misunderstood, for it does not always imply a physical death, more of a

metamorphosis and deep change. As for a Reversed Death, much remains the same. However, it means that he is on the verge of change, but at the same time, resisting it. He feels... stuck? I'm getting the feeling about something in his past, but I cannot see it clearly. My inner eye is clouded by an impenetrable veil, but I sense a sinister shadow lurking in its midst, overwhelming in strength."

"What about his past?" Midoriya muttered. "If he feels stuck, then is it impossible for him to experience the change he needs?"

"Not necessarily." Tokoyami said. "Sometimes a Death Reversed will provide more opportunities to embrace the change. I could say that a Reversed Death may have brighter outcomes than the Upright version. Whatever it is, I feel that this card represents him the best at this moment."

"A-and the last one?" Asui said as she and Uraraka huddled close. "Is it Joker's future?"

"Yes." A deep breath steadied Tokoyami's hand as he flipped it over. The troubled look in his eye vanished. "The... the Aeon."

The class zeroed in on a card depicting an angelic being rising into the clouds, her fantastic splay of feathers dyed by the vibrant sunset behind her. Long golden hair fell down her back and hung below her ankles. A flowing ribbon twirled around her body, and in her hands was a golden goblet of overflowing water.

"Spit it out already." Bakugo said. "What does it mean?"

"The Aeon Arcana is unique to the Thoth deck. There will be changing times ahead, filled with hope and most importantly, *redemption*. Rebirth, renewal, transformation." Tokoyami leaned back into the couch with a sigh of relief. "The reading I get is this: Joker began a new journey when he stepped into the USJ, performed fantastical feats both mundane and extraordinary. Then, the present. Kamino happened, and Joker is experiencing a Reversed Death of some sort, but that death eventually leads him to

the Aeon. Joker's future... I sense a profound aura of hope within the despair."

"So... that's good?" Kirishima's eyes watered. "H-he'll be okay?"

"In due time. The Thoth deck drew me for that reason." Tokoyami firmly nodded. "For now, he is locked in a battle of significant change, but I believe that Kurusu will be alright. Perhaps we'll see him again after his transformation is complete."

Bakugo vaulted himself from the chair and stomped towards the stairs.

"Bakugo, we're not done! Don't you want to know who wins Room King!?" Ashido shouted.

"I don't give a shit anymore." He looked over his shoulder and stared at the Aeon card, his eyes unreadable. He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned his back on them "I'm going to bed!"

Iida cleared his throat, face pallid, "Perhaps... we should all finish up and call it a night. It's been a long day."

"I agree." Tokoyami said as he packed the cards away. "Giving such an extensive Tarot reading drains your energy."

"Okay, voting time!" Ashido said. "Does anybody have a piece of paper so we can keep track?"

In the end, Sato claimed the title of Room King because he bribed everyone with cupcakes and an absurd amount of chamomile tea.

Little bit of a shorter chapter, the next chapter will be a bit longer and have quite a lot of humor in it. I seriously can't wait ;)

Counterfeit Phantom

Chapter 66: Counterfeit Phantom

“Just peachy.” Sansa hacked as he pounded his own chest. Then, he looked down on himself. “What the- ARE YOU FREAKING KIDDING ME!?”

This story broke some more milestones!! Over 400k hits, 1500 bookmarks, and steadily on the way to 7500 kudos? That's beyond crazy to me, thank you guys so much!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

FANART!

[Kirisuma](#) on Twitter!

Atsuhiro stepped over the sleeping forms scattered in the dark attic. Having memorized where everyone slept in this cramped space allowed him to move without stepping on everybody.

“Where are you going?”

He flailed his arms as he almost tripped over a blanket, but stabilized himself with a strangled huff.

“I’m going... shopping.” He whispered to Manami.

He sensed her blank stare through the darkness. “This early in the morning? The sun’s not even up.”

“Yes, well... the early bird catches the worm and all that.” Atsuhiro stepped over a snoring Shuichi and his feline friend.

“You know that’s not a good idea, right?” She said. “There’s still *some* suspicion towards you even after everything you’ve done for us. Sneaking out isn’t a good look.”

“I’m not going shopping for *me* . Look at him.” Atsuhiro stared towards Kurusu, the dim lighting outlined how he was curled on his side. His brow became scrunched and he snuggled his face into Morgana’s fur. The feline’s ears and feet twitched in a dream. “We can’t just sit on our hands and wait for him to feel better by himself, he needs some sort of motivation. I have some ideas on gifts that might improve that situation. Would I be able to call on you later so I can make sure I get everyone something that they would like?”

An awkward stillness permeated the attic as he felt her stare grilling into his skull. Another long moment passed before the feeling dissipated, and she sighed.

“... Okay, at least it sounds like you have a plan.”

“Trust me, this shopping spree *will* be worth it.”

“Fine.” She grumbled, but her voice took on a noticeably softer tone. “Just don’t be an idiot while you’re out, alright? We have enough of those in this group.”

“Duly noted. I have several potential venues to visit, so I might be back late tonight.”

He made it to his personal pack in the far corner without a whisper of noise. Atsuhiro swiped up all the blue marbles he might need for his little ‘shopping spree’. He nodded to Manami when he was finished gathering his things, who rolled her eyes and dove back under her blankets.

Nobody noticed Atsuhiro vacate the bar in the early hours of the morning.

Wisps of steam curled from bubbling curry pots and the mouthwatering sweetness of baked goods wafted through the kitchen. Risumi leaned against the flour speckled counter as she skimmed through the news article on her phone for the twentieth time that morning, feeling just as flabbergasted as when she and Ayumu read it an hour ago.

Silver Falcon's Verdict: Guilty!

After a long and arduous battle in court, Kyogi Munashisa, aka the former hero Silver Falcon, has been declared guilty by a jury of his peers. The charges include, but not limited to, several accounts of assault and battery, property damage, menacing charges both brandishing and stalking, among many others.

Brave victims of the former hero's tyranny testified under oath, and relived their terrifying experiences to judge and jury.

While his sentencing will be determined at a later date, these charges are usually followed by extensive fines and prison sentences-

A knot in Risumi's chest unfurled. She gently rubbed at the scar on her stomach, a sense of satisfaction curling up her spine. Silver Falcon's article became buried underneath a slew of speculation and other events related to Joker or the top ten who helped him. A few articles spoke about how Silver Falcon became Joker's first target. The man would eventually be buried underneath a sea of scorn, to be locked away and never see the light of day again, forgotten and left alone to rot. Nothing less than he deserves.

She couldn't help but feel vindicated.

Curious, Risumi scrolled to the comments on the bottom.

Ubomi48: *Wait, when Silver Falcon got arrested for attacking a 'quirkless' person, do you guys think it was Joker?*

Anon7538: *@Ubomi48 omg what if it was??*

Yumi382: *With how high Japan's rate of getting guilty verdicts (currently at 99.7%), its not long before the rest of Joker's targets get their just desserts. I don't think even Kunikazu will be able to escape. Even if he miraculously doesn't get convicted, he wouldn't last long on the streets.*

Cr3st: *@Ubomi48 Silver Falcon got played LMAO*

Anon8902: *I tried congratulating Joker on his Spotlight, but it immediately got buried. It looks like he hasn't posted anything since before Kamino, I hope he's ok :(*

Anon3472: *All of this senseless drama could've been avoided if somebody just stood up to Silver Falcon :/ Why should Joker get praise for what anyone would be able to do in the first place? What a load of crap.*

IcyDok28: *@Anon3472 you.... you're not being serious, right? It's easy to point at someone else's life and think its so simple to take care of a problem, but it's an entirely different ball game if you're actually in that situation. I'd know. I've never dealt with Silver Falcon, but I've had my fair share of slimy heroes taking advantage of people and being helpless to do anything without severe consequences to myself or those I love.*

Anon6201: @Anon3472 *You know there's this cool little thing called Empathy, maybe you should try it instead of bashing people who needed help. The only one to give that was Joker. So yes, he does deserve some praise.*

Risumi sighed as the comments devolved from there. She closed out of it and set her phone aside. It was just then that Ayumu walked into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he smiled at her.

"How did it go?" She asked as he kissed her on the cheek.

Ayumu sighed as he rested his forehead on hers. "It went about as well as you'd imagine."

"You've never spoken to an animal in their dreams before. Could you not do it?"

"It's not that." Ayumu stepped back and shook his head. "Actually, Mona's mind space is surprisingly close to a human's, all things considered. I even got to chat with Mercurius. He's nice enough for a mythical god."

In truth, Ayumu's quirk wasn't the mere dream walking quirk stated on his official file. He chose his targets at will, diving deep into their psyche whether or not the other person wanted him to. Controlled their dreams as easy as breathing. Mystical worlds. Floating islands. An ocean flowing over the skies filled with ancient monsters, such dream creatures that were so life like it's as if they stepped right out of reality. He created fantastical landscapes to escape from the world without leaving their home... or concoct the vilest of nightmares for their enemies.

Risumi became certain that Kunikazu often woke up in a cold sweat within his pathetic jail cell.

But the creative uses for her love's quirk didn't stop there. It was helpful for communicating long distance without leaving physical evidence behind. Sure, La Brava could conceal texts or emails like she did with Hitoshi's phone, but it was better to not leave a trail at all.

"Mona says the kid's not doing well. He's lost a lot of weight and doesn't have an appetite, doesn't want to do much else except sleep. It's bad."

"... What?"

"And whenever I try to visit his dreams to help him, I feel..." Ayumu looked down at his hands, and curled them into fists. His brow pinched together. "It's so dark and desolate. I hear strange voices I can't make out, and it's as if *something* keeps trying to take him away somewhere, but they fail every time they try. He doesn't seem to remember it though. It makes no sense to me."

"I... I see." She collapsed against the counter as her heart hurt. "I wish we could be there to help him. It must be worse than when he was brought to us after the raid."

"We'll do what we can to show him our support from here." He took her hand in his and massaged her palm with his thumb. "Besides, he wouldn't want us to be upset on our reopening day."

"It won't be the same without our boys here."

"I know."

"And the police officers stick their nose in everything."

"Hey, if they give us trouble then we ban them from our food. Simple as that."

Risumi huffed. "Prohibiting coffee would be a proper punishment."

“How ruthless.” He smirked as he kissed her on the forehead. At least that got a smile out of her. “They need their caffeine fix to function throughout the day.”

“Exactly.” She looked at the clock, her playfulness falling. “Let’s get everything to the front. It’ll be time to open soon.”

Ah, the rush of an early morning Japanese market was a unique atmosphere indeed. He’s encountered many bustling markets during his travels, but the excitement and intrigue was palpable on the breeze.

Atsuhiro flowed through the crowd vying for stalls of delicious food and hot drinks. He knew that the freshest of fish had already been auctioned off, their buyers eager to put their artistry to work. Watching a man slice up a fully grown tuna in less than a minute took serious skill. He stood in front of one such stall, and he smiled as other patrons around him clapped, dispersing to warm themselves from the cold ocean air.

With a quick word and a generous roll of yen, the chef passed him a container with the best slices of fatty tuna. He nodded his thanks and left the market behind. The lonely alley provided the perfect cover to use his quirk, thankful that it kept food as fresh as the second it was locked in the marble. He rolled the marble over his fingers before it vanished into his sleeve with a wave of his hand.

Morgana would be ecstatic.

A hill rolled at the end of a cemetery, a lonely wave surrounded by a sea of weather worn headstones. Toshinori grasped the hem of his shirt as he stared down at the small plaque in the ground. No name. No date of death or birth. Only a serial number. The recently disturbed patch of dirt hinted at the freshness of All For One’s tiny, unremarkable grave.

Toshinori took it upon himself to witness All For One's body being cremated, down to choosing an inconspicuous urn and an empty lot to bury the ashes himself. There was no funeral or ceremony, no flowers or farewells gifts, not that this villain deserved anything like that.

Sometimes he was convinced that this was a dream. Here he stood, free of that scar and the debilitating pain, in front of All For One's final resting place.

Tsukauchi stood beside him as a gust of wind tugged at their clothes. "Are you okay?"

"Not really. I thought I would be..." Toshinori frowned. "I didn't think I would live long enough to see this. I'll be fine... eventually."

Toshinori turned and walked down the hill.

Tsukauchi shuffled on his feet as he studied the grave a few moments more, before he followed his best friend.

"Aren't classes resuming soon?" Tsukauchi asked, smiling as Toshinori latched onto the change of subject. "I figured you would preparing at school rather than visiting the grave again. I'm glad you called, though. I still have a hard time believing everything myself."

"Yes, they will begin working on their signature moves first thing tomorrow. Aizawa wants to prepare them for their provisional license exam. I wanted to take care of a few things before classes started. Nezu understands." Toshinori stopped at the gate, glancing back at the hill in the distance. Tsukauchi waited patiently before they left the cemetery behind. "How about you? I'm sorry I haven't been around as much. Aizawa said you haven't accepted your promotion yet?"

"Don't be." Tsukauchi snorted, but his expression fell. "I... I'm not ready yet. Inu left behind an absolute *mess*, and there's still a lot of work to be done before it can return to normal. Not to mention..."

Toshinori's eyes softened as Tsukauchi sighed. "What is it?"

"There's just... so many loose ends. The League is still out there somewhere, we just don't know where. We need to go through evidence left behind by Joker's team during the Summer Camp, but nobody can crack La Brava's laptop or Joker's phone. Nezu pulled a lot of strings to get his knife, but there are other strange items and artifacts I don't even have a name for. Sansa thinks some of the items belong to the occult." Tsukauchi stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "It just feels wrong to go through their stuff when the kid is still out there somewhere."

"I get it." Toshinori smiled. "But maybe you could find a way to help Joker if you understand him better. Something as personal as a laptop or a phone would be a great insight."

"Tell that to the people who are pulling their hair out trying to break into them... or the analysts too creeped out to work with eerie objects. And don't even get me started on the *mountain* of work going towards Kunikazu's eventual trial. In any case, I might accept the promotion after everything is over." Tsukauchi frowned as his phone pinged. He checked it, then sighed as he stuffed it back into his pocket. "That's Sansa. I should be going back."

"Wait." Toshinori latched onto Tsukauchi's arm. "You're overworking yourself Tsukauchi. Why don't you take a short break and have lunch with me, instead?"

"I don't know..."

Toshinori raised a brow. "Ill text Sansa myself and tell him I kidnapped you for coffee and decent food. He can't object then."

Tsukauchi snorted. "Alright, alright. What did you have in mind?" Tsukauchi frowned as Toshinori gave him an odd look. "What?"

"I was thinking the Blue Lotus."

Tsukauchi's eyes widened. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Why not?" Toshinori looked down on himself. "I wasn't able to enjoy their food the first time I went there, but now... I might be able to."

"Toshinori..."

Another alien thing that Toshinori was getting used to. Breathing pain-free. Walking and exercising in the sunlight without having to stop, or worry if he always had a handkerchief on hand to wipe bloody lips. He had no quirk anymore, but he was finally *free*.

Having a steady, protein-based diet helped him gain a healthy weight. No longer was he just a living corpse of skin and bone. His face and body slowly filled in with muscle. Recovery Girl approved of his progress. He thought he would treat himself now and again, and the first place that popped up in his mind was the Blue Lotus. After everything that's happened... he felt a sudden obligation towards the Shinsou family for looking out for Joker. But whether or not they shunned or accepted him was yet to be determined.

They had every right to throw him out, should they choose to.

"Toshinori?"

He blinked, and looked at a concerned Tsukauchi. "Apologies, I was lost in thought."

"Don't worry. I'll go with you, I've been meaning to check in with them personally." Tsukauchi smiled sadly, "Let's be careful, okay? They aren't exactly *happy* about police and heroes hanging out on their doorstep."

Locating something for Spinner and Lady Stubbs proved to be difficult. Manami pointed him towards a boutique nestled within a mall. It took Atsuhiro a two hour train ride and another hour of exploration to locate it.

To say it was a one of a kind experience put it lightly. He practically stepped into another world. Hints of spice and sweetened smoke stained the air. The muted lighting added a touch of mystery. Rolls of fine silk in all colors decorated the walls, with finely tailored costumes and other articles of clothing displayed around the main floor. The ceiling was arched high overhead, enough to where no light touched the top. He compared it to a cocoon or an egg, as much as the thought unsettled him.

“Welcome to my parlor,” A woman draped in a lavish kimono, her face as beautiful and pale as the moon, stood behind the counter. Her raven dark hair was trussed up in a traditional Edo style, her golden accessories glittered like drops of sunlight. “How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for a gift.” He traipsed up to the counter with an easy smile. “I’ve gotten word that your store might have what I need.”

“A gift?” She tilted her head. “What kind of gift?”

“Friends of mine are trying to piece together a costume. Their colors are black, green, and yellow. I was thinking something simple, yet elegant. Another pop of color is so dearly needed.”

“Simple and elegant, but with a pop of color. I would suggest a scarf or a handkerchief. I have all sorts of greens and golds at my disposal.” She waved a milky-white hand, her kimono sleeve flowing with the movement. A sharp, metallic *tap tap* came from beneath the layers of kimono. “Feel free to peruse my wares on the right handed side. If you don’t see anything befitting your friend, then you can place a custom order.”

“Perfect!”

He turned on his heel and explored the parlor. Lustrous silk shone in the low lighting of this store. Their quality was assured and the colors were vibrant, almost jewel-like in appearance, but there was something about the silk that felt strange as he ran his fingers over it,

organic in a way that didn't come from normal silkworms. He pushed it out of his mind as his eyes were drawn to a soft golden scarf.

Dark enough to not attract unwanted attention in the shadows, and not too bright to clash with Spinner's green scales. It complimented the gloves Joker bought for him. With a nod, he took the scarf and an additional handkerchief of the same color to the counter to pay for them.

The strange woman waved with a knowing smile on her lips.

He shrugged it off and packed the gifts away.

Three presents down, four to go.

Flowers and gifts overflowed the cafe's store front.

Toshinori marveled at the sheer quantity of items before they walked in through the door. The bell chimed, and the natural ambience went silent. Chills crept up Toshinori's spine as other patrons' eyes lit up in recognition, but more than a few became wary or on the verge of hostile.

Shinsou Risumi placed her hands on her hips as they walked to the counter, their footsteps louder than they should have been. Sweat broke out on the back of his neck as keen eyes followed them the whole way.

"Detective Tsukauchi." Her eyes flicked to Toshinori. "... All Might. How may I help you?"

"Please don't be so tense." Tsukauchi said with his signature smile. "We're only here for lunch."

"You don't say." She stared oddly at Tsukauchi, before her eyes scanned the cafe of tense patrons. She waved her hand, and the ambience returned, albeit stilted and tense. A majority of them

watched from the corner of their eye. "I recommend today's house special. A new dish recently added to the menu: Curry Buns. It is... a recipe given to us by Kurusu. We have a spicy variety as well as a sweet one."

Toshinori shared a look with Tsukauchi. "I'll have one of each, and a cup of your best coffee."

"Feeling adventurous, All Might?" Risumi said as she wrote it down. "And you, detective?"

"I'll take the same, as well as two of your famous brownies." Tsukauchi said.

Risumi nodded. "Go on and take a seat, I'll get your order ready."

A red-haired woman glared at them as they found their booth. Toshinori tried to make himself seem as harmless as possible. Forcibly relaxing his shoulders, not bouncing his knee. He felt more vulnerable here than on the battle field.

"Don't let it get to you." Tsukauchi said as he calmly placed his hands on the table. "This cafe has protective customers. They're probably just nervous without Kurusu."

"I understand." Toshinori sulked in the booth. "Perhaps this was a bad idea after all."

"Don't say that." They looked up as an older woman approached, bearing the warmest smile of the entire cafe. "It was awfully brave of you to come here. I think Kurusu would be happy that you visited."

"Oh." Toshinori blinked. "Are you a long time patron, mrs....?"

"You can just call me Haru. Yes, I come here every single day for a cup of tea." Her eyes sparkled as she looked between them. "And... I want to thank you gentlemen."

The cafe went quiet, all ears tuned in.

“Thank us?” Tsukauchi asked. “For what?”

“For helping our boy, for giving him a real *chance* .” She put her hand on Tsukauchi’s shoulder. “You and Eraserhead did your best, I know in my heart that you just wanted what was best for a boy who was lost in the world.” She turned her eyes on Toshinori, and a spark of warmth flooded his heart. “And you, too. It takes someone of genuine character to admit your shortcomings, let alone doing it in front of the entire country while sticking up for a young man who dearly needed your support, and you gave it willingly. I cannot speak for everyone here, but I wanted you to know how much I appreciate your efforts.”

“Thank you.” Tsukauchi whispered. “We were just doing what we had to.”

Toshinori nodded. “I believe Kurusu will come back one day, and I wish to be at his side when he does.”

Haru beamed and patted both of their shoulders. “I’ll get out of your hair.” She looked over to Risumi, who stood with a tray in her arms. “Enjoy your meal.”

The sharp tang in the atmosphere melted with Haru’s honeyed words. Tension drained from the other patrons and a sense of calm settled into their bones. Risumi set out their dishes and tucked the tray under her arm.

“She’s right, you know.” Risumi directed a smile at Tsukauchi. “We know what you’ve done for us behind the scenes, detective. Without you, this cafe would never open again, and Ayumu and I would probably be thrown in a cell somewhere. Not to mention what could’ve happened to our son. You have our thanks.”

“How did you know?” Tsukauchi sat ramrod straight. “I’ve never mentioned anything about that.”

Risumi winked at him before she walked away.

“It’s no wonder Kurusu got along so well with them.” Toshinori chuckled. “They have the same level of mystery and know how to execute it when it suits them.”

“Tell me about it.” Tsukauchi shook his head and stared at their steaming dishes. “I hope Eraser won’t get mad at us for coming here without him.”

“It’ll be fine.” Toshinori snorted as he picked up one curry bun, the wrapper spreading warmth into his hands. “Perhaps I can request some treats to take back to the dorms. He can’t stay mad at us then.”

“True. Well, bon appétit.”

Toshinori took his first bite.

An explosion of flavor coated his palate. Cinnamon and hints of spice danced together on his tongue, with the natural sweetness of apple and brown sugar waltzing in the back. The crust, perfectly crisp while still fluffy in the middle, tied everything together in an epic symphony.

With how masterfully the flavors and textures worked alongside one another, it wasn’t something mashed together without a care in the world. Whoever made this truly put their heart and soul in it.

“Toshinori?” He looked at Tsukauchi, who had genuine worry in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes, I’m-” Toshinori blinked as his vision became blurry. He put the curry bun down and touched his face, surprised that his fingers came away wet. “I-I don’t know why I’m crying over a curry bun.”

Tsukauchi’s eyes softened. “When was the last time you had any real food? And I mean a *really* good, home cooked meal.”

“I don’t know. I could barely eat after my injury, and before then I...” Toshinori reached into the depths of his memory, but came out blank.

He wiped his eyes with a napkin and tried to calm his rabbiting heart. "I honestly don't remember the last time I had a home cooked meal, if ever. Nana and Gran tried, but they weren't the best of cooks..."

"Well," Tsukauchi murmured. "There's a first time for everything."

"R-right. It's another thing I have to thank that boy for."

Tsukauchi smiled, and they continued their meal, sipping on *real* coffee and enjoying their food without the worry of it coming back up in a bloody mess later. Genuine joy nestled within Toshinori's heart as they finished the curry buns and moved on to the brownies. He had forgotten what chocolate tasted like.

Toshinori truly felt full for the first time in years.

Tobita was the easiest one to shop for.

Manami pointed him to the man's favorite tea shop run by an older couple. The building, despite being the smack dab in the middle of Musutafu, looked homely. A quiet cottage with green grass and a garden. Quite unlike the cheap convenience store and other skyscrapers around it.

He stepped inside the tiny cafe and purchased a vast quantity of Golden Tips Imperial Black Tea. Enough for Tobita's tastes, at least. Who knows when they would be able to go out normally. While it slowly diminished like an untended bonfire, the attention zeroed on their group remained steady for the better part of the past month.

People wondered for what Joker would do next, demanded an encore while the actors were so helplessly exhausted. Personally, it sickened him. He adored the attention of the masses from time to time, but such vicious hunger from an eager audience could be merciless. An inexperienced thespian would be swallowed by it.

It made it more difficult for Tobita to test the new limits on his quirk. He suggested they search for an empty warehouse or something of the like, but until they found a suitable place he would be forced to lay low and keep that cuff on at all times.

Atsuhiro sighed as he walked out of the tea shop, looking up into the cloudless sky.

Now, for the hard part.

Kaito; the complete enigma. No matter how much Manami prodded him, he just shrugged her off and said he'd be happy if Kurusu was happy.

He had a plan for Joker. The angelic gun was still in his possession, along with another idea that floated around his noggin. But he didn't know if that particular gift would ease his pain, or make it worse. Finding somewhere that cleaned books, especially an old book with prominent *blood stains*, was a challenge in its own right, but he managed to find somewhere weeks ago that wouldn't ask questions when a hefty bribe was waved under their noses.

As for Manami...

It's not like he could ask without spoiling the surprise. She liked all manner of gadgets and technological gizmos. Perhaps another laptop or something similar?

Something similar...

Perhaps something that already existed?

"That's it!" He cried as a light bulb turned on in his mind.

He ignored the few people who turned to stare at him as he marched down the street. Atsuhiro didn't know what she would prefer normally, but that didn't mean there wasn't something out there that both she and Joker dearly missed.

Like certain items tucked away in evidence lockers right here in Musutafu.

Manami drummed her fingers on the side of her phone.

The afternoon stretched on into early evening, and she hadn't heard from Atsuhiro for the last few hours. The rest of the team kept themselves busy, doing small chores around the bar for Magne. They were thankful to have something to keep their hands busy.

Except for Akira and Morgana.

They didn't allow Akira to be on his feet for more than ten minutes at a time, but boredom seeped into every fiber of his being. He kept fidgeting or just staring blankly out the window. Currently, he was slumped over on his side, wrapping himself and Morgana in a cocoon of blankets. Hitoshi's laptop sat in front of them, playing a movie.

Morgana was engaged and made comments, or showed genuine surprise at a plot twist. Akira nodded and hummed at the right moments, but Akira's eyes were dull and unfocused. He stared at the screen, and yet his mind was far away from whatever movies Morgana picked out.

She jumped when her phone went off.

Akira blinked at her as she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Manami! I need a quick favor."

"You..." She sighed as she stood up and went down the stairs, both Morgana and Akira's eyes following her. She huffed at the bottom of the stairs. "Where have you been? You haven't checked in with me in hours! I was getting worried."

"You? Worrying about me? I'm flattered."

Manami's eyes twitched. If she didn't know better, she would think he and Akira were related just by their similar(horrible) taste in humor.

"What do you need?"

"Don't be mad, but I need you to hack into the cameras of the Musutafu police station. As much as I love being the center of attention, I don't think now would be the best choice to show off."

Her brain short circuited.

"Shopping." She ground through her teeth.

"Pardon?"

"You said you were just going shopping!"

"I was! And I did go shopping, but why waste this opportunity? I'm was Musutafu for that tea, so why not reclaim what was lost during the Summer Camp? Do you want to take the chance of them cracking Joker's phone or your old laptop? It's been quite some time and they might be close to a breakthrough."

"Well, no, but-" Manami sighed sharply through her nose. "You shouldn't have gone it alone! We're all part of a *team*, remember? We could've created a plan *together* to get everything back!"

"I... I meant no offence." He sighed, *"I've never been part of a team, even when I was temporarily allied with the League. That video with Toga doesn't count. I'm used to doing everything by myself. I do apologize."*

Dammit, now she felt guilty.

"It's fine." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Is that why you haven't checked in?"

“Yep, I’ve been monitoring the station. Discreetly, of course. Detective Tsukauchi returned some hours ago and I wanted to wait until nighttime anyway. I have a plan, but I don’t want to risk it with cameras or any other security measures.”

“I understand.” She said as she turned towards the stairs. “I’ll message you when I’m done.”

“Much appreciated!”

“And we will be having a *talk* when you get back. Understand?”

“U-understood. Oh, and tell Magne and Tobita not to worry about dinner tonight. I’ll pickup something special after I visit the station. With any luck, it’s just the thing Akira needs to recover his appetite. Ciao!”

She scoffed as he hung up. She ran a hand down her face as she shoved her phone in her pocket.

“Merp.”

Manami looked down as Lady Stubbs pranced through the little hallway connecting the back storeroom to the kitchen, and rubbed on her leg.

“Tell me about it.” She muttered as she scratched the ghoulish cat’s head. “I wasn’t sure what to think of Mr. Compress at first, but he fits right in with our boys, don’t you think? Right down to being a lovable idiot. He almost feels like a natural part of our team, now. Almost.”

“Merp.”

“I know. We all just... need some time to accept things.”

“Merp...”

“We’re not going to let this get the better of us. Everything will get better, right? We just need to stick by our boys!”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs puffed up her fur in some semblance of a feline salute.

Lady Stubbs dashed into the store room to resume her secret guarding duties. The back door in the storage room led outside into the intricate labyrinth of alleyways twisting through this city, and it was the cat’s job to make sure nobody broke in. A strange job for a cat to be sure, but then again, Lady Stubbs wasn’t a normal cat. Not like Morgana... but still unusual.

Manami chuckled, then went back upstairs.

Akira sat up, his blankets pooling around his waist. “What was that about?”

“O-oh, Compress is out shopping and he needed help with something. Could I borrow that laptop for a little bit?”

“Yeah, sure.” He said. “It’s yours anyway.”

“Technically Hitoshi’s.”

Akira frowned. “Right...”

A beat of silence passed between them. Morgana looked like he wanted to say something, but Akira laid down and pulled the covers over him, his back turned towards them.

“Do you need anything, Akira?” She whispered, her hands fidgeting together.

He flinched, as he did whenever they said his name now, “No.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t eaten anything today-”

“I said I’m fine.” She snapped her jaw shut as her heart lurched. Akira released a long, exhausted sigh, and turned his head to look at her from under the covers. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so harsh. I’m just... so tired.”

“It’s okay.” She whispered. “I’ll check on you two in a bit?”

“... Okay.”

Morgana’s eyes watered as he stared at her, but he kept himself together as he took his spot under Akira’s arm. She couldn’t see, but she knew how Akira’s knuckles turned white as he held Morgana to his chest, black fur spilling between his fingers. As they did every single night.

She walked over and picked up her laptop, closing out of the movie before she nestled in the corner to start hacking. Manami hoped Atsuhiro’s plan worked.

She couldn’t bear seeing Akira in so much pain.

Tsukauchi paced around his office.

He returned to the station after lunch with Toshinori, but any sense of calm eroded away as he became swamped in work. He searched through files and reports and so so many maps, but his eyes occasionally went to the police commissioner badge sitting at the end of his desk. A slight nudge from Tsuragamae.

Although the chief insisted that he accept whenever he was ready, the thought of him being the commissioner distracted him. Not to mention the detailed map that hung on the cork board behind his desk, dotted with pins all interconnected with string. The Blue Lotus marked the center. They swept through the surrounding area, but there was no sign of Joker or his teammates.

There was a possibility they weren’t even in Musutafu anymore.

Tsukauchi scrubbed at his eyes.

He trusted Nezu. The rat was too smart for his own good, so if he predicted that Joker would return and eventually make his way to

U.A., then Tsukauchi had no doubts. But it didn't mean that he didn't worry for the kid. It's been over a month of radio silence since the Kamino Disaster. Tsukauchi couldn't even imagine what trauma this *teenage boy* shouldered at this very moment.

There was a knock on the door, and Tsukauchi pulled himself together with a sigh. "Come in."

Sansa stepped inside. Alarms blared in Tsukauchi's head when he took in Sansa's bug-eyed look.

"We have a problem." Sansa said.

"Is it Joker?" Tsukauchi asked, unable to keep the hopeful lilt out of his voice.

"No... at least I don't think so." Sansa said, grimacing. "The techies wanted to take another crack at Joker's phone before they called it a night and, well.... you better come see for yourself."

A renewed sense of fatigue pressed down on Tsukauchi like a mountain, but he followed Sansa through the station. Whispers from other officers filtered through the hallways. A small group hung around the door to the evidence lockers, and they cleared the way when Tsukauchi came through.

Most of the lockers were left undisturbed, except for *one*. Tsukauchi rushed to it, dread washing through him as everything was *gone*, save for a single blue marble rolling back and forth in the corner.

"Do we have any camera feed?" Tsukauchi asked as he picked up the blue marble, a sense of strange familiarity came over him.

"Nope." Sansa said as he crossed his arms and glared at the marble. "Take one guess why."

"Cameras were hacked?"

"Yep."

“It was most likely La Brava. Then we can guess that this was the work of-”

Sansa shrieked as the marble exploded. Clouds of dust drowned the evidence room. Tsukauchi became blinded as he tried to feel his way out. A hand latched onto his arm and dragged him into the hallway.

“Are you two okay!?” An officer shouted.

“Just peachy.” Sansa hacked as he pounded his own chest. Then, he looked down on himself. “What the- ARE YOU FREAKING KIDDING ME!?”

“What’s wrong?” Tsukauchi said as he blinked rapidly to regain his vision. He didn’t hurt anywhere, so he doubted anybody sustained injuries, but his eyes widened as he looked down at his stained clothes. “Glitter?”

“Yes, glitter!” Sansa threw his arms up. “I’m *still* finding glitter around the station from his live interview months ago, now this!? It’ll take years to fully get rid of this stuff! YEARS!! What a mess!!”

Tsukauchi’s soul left his body. It was *everywhere* . Sparkling silver and red powder floated through the air, stained the hallway, the vents, the walls, which glimmered like fresh snowfall on a winter’s morning.

“Sansa.”

“*What ?*”

“You have something on your ear.”

Sansa blinked. He reached around his ears and pulled a slip of paper stuck in his fur. He glared as he read it aloud.

““Dear Detective, I want to extend my thanks for keeping our items safe, but it’s time everything was returned to its rightful owners. From, a mutual friend.””

“Any name?” Tsukauchi asked as he wiped himself down, but it only made the glitter spread further. The rest of his officers kept a healthy distance away, lest they suffer the sparkly wrath alongside them.

“Nope.”

“Wait... testimony from the U.A. kids stated that Bakugo and Tokoyami were trapped in blue marbles, a quirk belonging to Mr. Compress. He could be the one who ambushed us when we had La Brava and Gentle Criminal.”

“You really think so?”

“I’m positive. We actually had him on file before the Kamino Raid, but he wasn’t there. If his quirk can trap live people in it...”

“Then, yeah. That would match what you and those kids went through.”

Sansa pointed at the note. “But it says from a ‘mutual friend.’ Would that mean Mr. Compress switched sides and started working with Joker and his crew?”

“It’s possible. But why would he switch sides all of a sudden?”

Sansa shrugged. “That’s a question we have no answer for right now.”

“You’re right. In any case,” Tsukauchi said as he felt an impending headache. “We have to report this to the chief and Nezu.”

Nezu and Aizawa reached the station first. Nezu took one look at Tsukauchi covered head to toe and glitter, laughing so hard that he fell off of Aizawa’s shoulder and rolled around on the floor. His howling cackles echoed through the hallways for the rest of the night.

Risumi busied herself by cleaning the empty cafe.

Tables were wiped, and a mountain of dishes piled up on the counter. She put her hands on her hips and stared out the window. She had yet to sort through today's 'gifts' left by patrons. Risumi looked over her shoulder and opened her mouth to call on Akira out of habit, but there was nobody there. Her heart squeezed.

Their first day was eventful. The customers were many and the regulars offered her words of comfort and support. But something was amiss. Akira. How he had flowed through the cafe, taking care of customers with that saccharine smile. How easy it was to work alongside him, how he played to her strengths and covered weaknesses.

She had forgotten how much energy it took to run the front by herself, let alone how the cafe earned national attention. Risumi lifted her glasses and wiped at her eyes. She would not cry now. She *refused* to cry.

Risumi took a breath and rolled up her sleeves. She had too much work to-

"Risumi?" She turned to Ayumu, who poked his head out of the kitchen door.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you put the leftovers somewhere?"

"I've been out here cleaning." She frowned at his confusion. "Why? I thought you were taking care of it."

"No. I was in the office double checking our shipments for next week. Just to be sure nobody tampers with them again."

They stared at one another for a moment, before they dove inside the kitchen together. It was like Ayumu said. Today's leftovers

disappeared. At least two pots of curry, baked goods of all sorts, and a few bags of coffee.

“You don’t think somebody broke in?” Risumi asked as she walked around the kitchen.

“It seems like it.” Ayumu muttered as he checked over the ovens and other appliances. “At least they didn’t break anything. Should we report it to the heroes outside? I think its Mt. Lady and Kamui Woods patrolling tonight.”

“No... wait.” She plucked a blue marble from the same shelf that held their recipe books, the marble itself sat in front of Akira’s notebook. “Is this what I think it is?”

Ayumu crossed his arms. “But why would he-”

The marble snapped. Risumi flinched as items landed in her palm. A thick roll of yen and a tiny Joker mask pin. A slip of paper floated down to the floor as light as a feather.

Ayumu picked it up and read aloud, “To the Shinsou family: Apologies for barging in unannounced and stealing the results of your hard work, but we both know how much a growing young man needs to eat. I do hope I left enough to pay for it all. From: A mutual comrade in arms.” Ayumu snorted as he went to the stove and turned on the burner. “Compress is as flamboyant as Joker. How much did he leave?”

Risumi counted the bills as Ayumu turned the note to ash. “Enough to pay for all of it twice over, and then some.”

“And the pin?”

Risumi smirked as she put it on her apron. “People have left enough Joker merch on our doorstep. What’s one more tiny, inconspicuous little pin?”

Ayumu chuckled and turned off the stove. "Oh no, the note from the mysterious stranger seems to have burnt up, and our left overs won't go to waste. We shouldn't bother the heroes with something so small."

"Exactly." She smirked at her husband. "Oh, and Ayumu?"

"Y-yeah?"

"I believe its your turn to do dishes. They're already piled on the counters up front."

"Has it been one month already?" He wilted as her smirk widened. "Y-yes ma'am."

She chuckled, the sound sent bubbles of joy through his heart. Risumi stepped up and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll double and triple check our shipments, just to be sure."

Ayumu nodded as she slinked off to the office.

Atsuhiro hummed a tune as he slipped in the backdoor of Magne's bar.

"Merp!"

He cut off the screech in his throat as he jumped back. Lady Stubb's eyes were like bright lamp lights in the dark room. He put a hand over his heart.

"Geez, give a gentleman some warning!"

"Merp."

"Hey, don't look at me like that. My shopping trip was successful!"

The cat seemed to roll her eyes as she hopped down from a pile of boxes. He followed her through the door, where Magne awaited in the hallway, leaning against the wall.

“Magne-”

“It’s okay.” Magne waved a hand. “I already closed the bar for the night. You owe me, mister.”

Atsuhiro smirked. “It’s a Sunday night, I doubt you would’ve gotten much business.”

“How dare you.” Magne matched his playfulness, but gestured towards the stairs. “Everyone else is already upstairs.”

“Why don’t you join us?”

Magne flinched. A simple flicker of emotion before she turned stoic. She stood fully from the wall and turned her back on him.

“Nah, you go ahead. I still need to clean some before tomorrow.”

Atsuhiro sighed as she walked away.

“Merp?”

Atsuhiro shrugged as the cat tilted her head, and they made their way upstairs. He ducked underneath that wooden beam with a practiced motion, and stood before the group. Manami stared at him with puffed cheeks, Shuichi and Tobita sat next to each other with cups of tea.

“I told them what you did.” She said.

“R-right. I can explain, but first... how about we set up for dinner?” Atsuhiro said. “I have enough food for a feast!”

“Sweet!” Shuichi grinned. “I heard you got us presents too?”

“You’ll have to wait until after dinner.” Atsuhiro scolded.

“Aw man...”

“I’ll go ahead and set everything up.” Tobita said as he stood.

“Thank you. Magne wanted to clean the bar, so we’ll have to eat up here.” Atsuhiro set a handful of blue marbles on the floor. The others gasped when he snapped his fingers, and a delectable banquet from the Blue Lotus was unveiled before their eyes. “Where’s Kurusu and Morgana?”

They stiffened and exchanged hasty glances. Shuichi pointed his thumb towards the window, where a cool breeze filtered through the open slit.

“Ah, I see.”

“Why don’t you go speak to them?” Tobita said with a smile.

“Me ?”

“Are you sure?” Manami asked as she fidgeted. “Akira isn’t.... in the best mood.”

“Perhaps some words of encouragement are needed.” Tobita nodded. “Who knows. You two are alike in so many ways, it might help him more if they came from you.”

“I’m still new to the group, and I...” He cleared his throat, “It’s partially my fault for the state he’s in. After everything, I figured I would be intruding.”

“A new perspective might be just what he needs.” Atsuhiro never noticed Kaito sitting in the back corner, looking thoughtfully at that silver band. What, were his sense getting rusty or something? “I’m sure he’s tired of hearing the same words from all of us.”

“It’s worth a shot.” Manami looked at the array of dishes on the floor. “Besides, I think... he would appreciate what you did today. Maybe a good meal with friends would help him feel better.”

“So I’m not in trouble?” He asked, hopeful.

“Oh, I never said that.” She deadpanned. “We’re still having that little chat later.”

Tobita and Shuichi chuckled as he sulked. He shook himself out of it and approached the window. The sill groaned as he slid it open and stepped out onto the rooftop, light from the attic spilling out into the blackness. It took his eyes a moment to adjust before he saw them.

Morgana’s head snapped towards his direction as Atsuhiro’s footsteps crunched over gravel. The feline sat beside Kurusu, who hugged his knees to his chest as he stared out into the boisterous city. The kid didn’t move when Atsuhiro approached, though Morgana watched him carefully.

“May I sit?” Atsuhiro asked.

Kurusu shuffled, his eyes flicking to meet Atsuhiro’s for a moment before they darted back to the city. “Do what you want.”

Atsuhiro sat half an arm’s length away, with Morgana in between them. Morgana’s eyes were unreadable as he curled his tail around himself and waited in silence.

“Beautiful night, isn’t it?” Atsuhiro said.

“I guess.” Kurusu muttered.

The boy flinched when a police siren echoed somewhere in the city, his knuckles turned bone white as his nails dug into his sleeve. He stared into the city with longing in his eyes. Atsuhiro and Morgana exchanged glances as the siren fell off into the distance. Kurusu curled into himself.

Guilt and remorse stewed in the boy's soul. Anybody could see that. Maybe a touch of home sickness, too. Atsuhiro knew that feeling all too well.

"Do you know what two of my favorite phrases are?" Atsuhiro asked. Kurusu didn't move as Atsuhiro looked out into the city. "'Que Sera, Sera' and 'C'est La Vie'."

Kurusu pulled his head up. "What?"

"They mean 'What will be, will be,' and 'Such is life,' respectively." Atsuhiro leaned back on his hands and stared up at the heavens. "The paths we take in life can be as numerous as the stars in the sky, but that doesn't mean you always retain control. Life just... happens, and it is up to us on what to do when something inevitably goes wrong."

Kurusu's lips pursed.

"I know how you feel about All For One's death." Atsuhiro said before he could stop himself. The boy flinched and his expression fell into a muted despair, a dam of emotion only held back by sheer will.

"He didn't just die. I-I... I *killed* him."

"I know, and so does the rest of the world. All Might took responsibility for it, but you still feel guilty that the blow was done by your hand." Morgana glared at Atsuhiro as a sharp breeze blew across the rooftop. He continued regardless. "I could tell you that All For One was the bogeyman who controlled the underground for over 200 years, wax poetic about how he was beyond cruel and caused hundreds of thousands of casualties over those years. I would even go so far to say that his death *saved* us from a future where millions more might suffer under his reign. A prison like Tartarus would never hold him for long."

"What are you getting at?" Kurusu muttered. "Are you just mocking me?"

“Of course not.” Atsuhiro absorbed the pain and suffering lingering beneath faded silver. “I know that all of these words don’t mean much to you. You feel as if you have failed, that you have committed a grave sin for which there is no forgiveness. Am I correct?”

“Just get to the point.”

“What I’m saying...” Atsuhiro placed a careful hand on the boy’s shoulder. Kurusu went rigid, his eyes widened at the warm hand on his shoulder, at the kindness in Atsuhiro’s eyes. “Is that life happens, and you need to learn to *forgive yourself* and move on.”

Kurusu shook his head and clutched at his chest. “How could I ever forgive myself after what I... what I let Sraosha do? Taking a life is against everything we ever worked for!”

“Akira...” Morgana whispered.

“The fact that you feel so guilty is proof that you’re still a good person.” Atsuhiro tightened his grip on the boy’s shaking shoulder. “What happened was unfortunate, but far beyond your control. Steel your resolve, learn from what happened and do better in the future. Learn to accept the forgiveness that you so righteously deserve, because if anybody in this wretched world deserves such forgiveness, it is you.”

His words struck Kurusu. He blinked rapidly to stem the flow of tears, to swallow back the emotions trying to claw themselves free. His efforts were futile.

That was it. The straw that broke the camel’s back. The agony that this boy, this *child* with the weight of a world on his shoulders, needed to finally break down. Atsuhiro held a firm grip and Morgana huddled against the boy’s side as he let the tears fall. Atsuhiro let go to reach inside his pocket. Kurusu gave him an odd look, but he accepted the teal handkerchief from Atsuhiro.

Time passed strangely as Kurusu allowed himself to cry. Whether it was minutes or hours shared upon that rooftop, Atsuhiro wouldn't know, but Kurusu wiped his eyes and sniffled as he calmed down. Then, silence. The calmed wind carried the sounds of the streets below, but they didn't seem to notice. No longer did the lull in Kurusu's actions contain barbed wire and glass shards.

The boy's posture softened, comfortable, as did the silence that spread between them.

"Thank you." Kurusu spoke first, clutching onto the damp handkerchief for dear life. "I think I needed that."

"It was a long time coming." Morgana said as he rubbed against Kurusu. "Do you feel a little better?"

"Yeah, I feel... lighter?" Kurusu said.

"A good cry is something we all need every once in a while." Atsuhiro smiled as he squeezed the boy's shoulder one last time before his hand dropped. "I have something to help ease your burden. Well, many *some things*, but I think you need this one first."

New interest simmered in Kurusu's damp eyes.

Atsuhiro waved his fingers with a dramatic flourish. A blue marble appeared in his right hand, held between his pointer and middle finger. He rolled it over his knuckles and flipped his palm. It disappeared. Morgana stared at him, unimpressed.

"Sorry, old habit. Perhaps I can teach you the finer nuances of slight of hand sometime." Atsuhiro said as he rolled his left palm towards the sky. The marble reappeared. The inky blackness and the city lights reflected within the marble, almost as if it contained the entire city. He held it out for Kurusu. "Go on. Take it."

Kurusu uncurled himself as he reached over and grabbed it, his legs swinging over the edge. With a snap, the marble popped out of

existence. Kurusu jumped as a book fell in his lap. Thankfully, all of the pages could be saved, but the cover of the book had to be completely replaced since it soaked in most of his blood. It's a shame, that old cover was something Atsuhiro grew fond of over many years, but the sleek black cover and flowing gold writing on the front and spine was something to behold.

Kurusu put down the handkerchief and held the book in both hands, his brow falling. Panic jolted through Atsuhiro. He should've asked Manami if Kurusu could read any other languages. Atsuhiro was about to say the book's name out loud, but there was no need to worry.

"Arsene Lupin, Gentleman Burglar by Maurice Leblanc." Kurusu said, his voice quaking as he traced a finger over the word *Leblanc* .

Morgana blinked. "When did you learn to read that? Usually Lady Ann would have to translate these sorts of things for us."

Kurusu went stone still.

Morgana's fur bristled and he looked down in shame.

"That book has been passed down through my family for several generations. It was one of the original copies from Leblanc himself." Atsuhiro said before the air soured. "And now, I'm giving it to you."

"Me?" Kurusu's eyes widened as he gaped at Atsuhiro. "But this is something you've had for-"

"Pretty much my entire life." Atsuhiro's expression turned thoughtful as he threaded his fingers together. "It is an important heirloom, but I believe you deserve it more than I ever did. After all, Arsene himself chose *you* . I still think about our first meeting in the Yaoyorozu manor, and my awe for Arsene has more than doubled since then. Well, *after* I recovered from the thrashing he gave me, of course."

“But...” Kurusu’s shook his head. “Arsene is gone. All of them are *gone* .”

“I don’t think so.” A small smile pulled at Atsuhiro’s lips as Kurusu stared at him. “Yes, they may not heed your call right now, but if I had to take a guess at how your power works, then I would say your bond with them runs deeper than any ‘quirk’. Blood flows thicker than water, but what you have flows stronger than any mortal flesh ever could. I’ve sensed something special about you ever since we first met.”

The tears renewed in the kid’s eyes. Morgana looked torn as he frantically looked back and forth.

Now, for the real test. Atsuhiro stared at the book in Kurusu’s hands.

“I have a question. Do you remember where Arsene Lupin originates from?”

Morgana squinted at Atsuhiro, but Kurusu nodded.

“That’s easy.” Kurusu replied as if nothing were amiss. Morgana’s head snapped the opposite direction so fast that Atsuhiro was surprised he didn’t get a neck cramp. *“His story takes place in France.”*

“More than just France, my dear boy. His tales span multiple countries and continents, he rode on trains and boats alike, he takes on different identities as easy as breathing. He was fluent in a number of languages and charmed many a fine lady. Now, doesn’t this sound familiar?”

Kurusu glared at him, but it wasn’t heated.

A coil of satisfaction curled around Atsuhiro’s heart. The boy was slowly coming out of his shell, and he hadn’t yet caught on despite Morgana’s jaw falling to the floor.

"But... there is one section of the story that may interest you. It correlates to your current predicament. May I?" Atsuhiro held out his hand. Kurusu hesitated, but handed the book over. He flipped it open to a familiar chapter he knew by heart. He placed the book in Kurusu's hands and pointed at a particular page. *"Read this passage."*

Kurusu's eyes flicked over the words with ease, slowly widening.

"Even the great Arsene Lupin needed a break after all of his feats. To rest and recover, to regain his true identity." Atsuhiro placed a careful hand on Kurusu's shoulder once more. *"Reclaim your true self. Kurusu Akira is a fine name, don't get me wrong, but I think it's time you stopped lying to yourself and use your real name. It might be just as important as forgiving yourself."*

Ice flowed through Kurusu's eyes. *"How did you know I was using a fake name?"*

"Arsene is a man of many faces and names. I expected no different from you." Atsuhiro shrugged. *"I recognize the shame in your eyes whenever we call you Akira or Kurusu now."*

"Arsene is gone for good. He evolved into Satanael at Kamino."

"I don't believe that for a moment. Even so, he would still be a part of Satanael, no?" Atsuhiro would have his own little crisis at discussing a biblical figure appearing in the flesh later. *"He's still in there somewhere, along with the rest of your comrades."*

Kurusu looked away, his voice like frail glass. *"How can you be so sure?"*

Atsuhiro chuckled. That earned another glare from the boy, but Atsuhiro shrugged.

"Where did you learn to read English so well? Morgana seems surprised you could read it at all. Let alone..." Atsuhiro leaned closer

to the boy and whispered. *"You haven't noticed how we've been speaking French for the past several minutes ."*

Kurusu jolted. He stared down at Morgana, mouth as agape as his partner's. "Were we....?"

"Yeah!" Morgana hopped up to all fours and put his front paws on Kurusu's knee. "I couldn't understand what you were saying! Where did you learn to speak like that!? Were you holding out on me the whole time!?"

"Of course not! I would never-" The panic vacated the boy's body as he took in Morgana's playful smirk. "I didn't know I could do that..."

"Did you know?" Morgana asked as he looked at Atsuhiro.

"Nope." Atsuhiro shook his head. "It was simply an educated guess. But my point stands. Your comrades might not be here physically, but I believe they're still with you, buried deep and just waiting for the right moment to return." Atsuhiro stood and brushed gravel off his pants. "Now, I believe the others might worry if we're out here much longer. Are you ready to go back inside?"

Morgana hopped onto Kurusu's shoulder as he gathered the book and handkerchief in one arm and latched onto Atsuhiro's hand with the other. He pulled the boy to his feet. Atsuhiro held on while Kurusu steadied himself, for he was scarily thin and they were on the edge of a rooftop.

"Wait, there's one thing I want to ask." Kurusu said before Atsuhiro could pull away.

"Oh?"

The boy stared down at the book, then looked at Atsuhiro with a raised brow. "You said this was an heirloom, right?"

"... Yes."

“How did it become an heirloom when the author was from France?”

Atsuhiro chuckled. “Perhaps, in times long past, Arsene Lupin took on the moniker Maurice Leblanc to write his adventures down, and perhaps... my ancestral name just happens to be Lupin.”

Kurusu’s paleness gained another level. “Y-you... you’re...”

Atsuhiro squeezed Kurusu’s hand before he pulled away and turned towards the window. “Come now, there are yet other surprises in store for tonight and we don’t want the food to get cold. Why do you think I was gone for so long? This little group isn’t easy to shop for!”

Kurusu and Morgana exchanged flabbergasted glances before they followed. They trailed back inside and were greeted with a delicious spread of curry dishes and desserts laid out on a blanket, with cushions surrounding it.

“There you are!!” Shuichi grinned from his cushion. “We were just about to come check on you.”

“Sorry.” Atsuhiro said as he sank into the seat closest to the window. “Our little chat went on longer than anticipated.”

“Did you go to the Blue Lotus, too?” Kurusu asked as familiar scents washed through the attic.

“One of many stops. Don’t worry, I left them a hefty tip.” Atsuhiro waved a hand as the others smiled at Kurusu.

“Do you want to try eating something, Akira?” Manami asked. “Y-you don’t have to if you’re not feeling up for it!”

“I...” Kurusu scanned the group, then stared at the plates of steaming food. He sat between Atsuhiro and Kaito, then put the book and handkerchief aside. “Sure.”

The attic was so tiny, but they were comfortable despite everyone rubbing elbows. Dishes clattered as food was passed around.

Manami, Kaito, and the others froze when Kurusu grabbed one of the curry buns and took a bite. Nothing more than a small mouthful, but it was a start. His first bite of real food in weeks. His eyes gained the first lukewarm embers of life.

Kurusu looked up at the silence. He swallowed as he took in everyone's attention. "What?"

"N-nothing!" Manami chuckled as her eyes watered. "I-It's nothing! Would you like some coffee?"

Kurusu blinked. "Sure?"

Atsuhiro caught Kaito's subtle nod of thanks and the meal progressed smoothly.

Shuichi's boisterous laughter, Morgana's banter, how Kaito discreetly pushed more food towards Kurusu. The obvious love in Manami's eyes, and Tobita's quiet and gentle demeanor. Atsuhiro absorbed everything, and in turn, studied how it affected the boy sitting beside him.

Once Kurusu finished eating, no more than half a bun and only a few spoonfuls of curry, Atsuhiro grabbed Kurusu's wrist and placed two marbles in his palm.

"Tsukauchi might've sent his regards, but I didn't stop long enough to chat with him."

"What are you talking about?" Kurusu asked.

Atsuhiro snapped. The angelic gun and the boy's phone popped into existence. Morgana gasped. Kurusu held the items in each hand. His breath left trembling as he put the gun down and unlocked his phone. He ran his fingers over the screen as it lit up.

"Thank you."

Atsuhiro blinked. He's never recieved such heartfelt thanks before today. He cleared his throat before the lump could choke him.

“Yes, well... I retrieved a majority of your equipment, but I couldn't get everything. Your knife was missing.”

“It's alright. Morgana told me it was in a safe place.” Kurusu's hand tightened over the phone as he looked at Atsuhiro. “But it means a lot that you got this much.”

Atsuhiro winked as he handed out the other prizes.

Morgana screeched in joy at the platter of fresh fatty tuna.

Lady Stubbs purred like a motorboat when Shuichi tied the handkerchief around her neck, then donned his own golden scarf with pride.

Tobita made enough tea for everyone, the fragrance and freshness invigorating after a heavier meal.

Manami typed away on both computers.

Morgana lazily sprawled out over Kurusu's lap, his belly bulging with tuna.

True to Kaito's word, he was happy to see everyone else marvel over their gifts.

Kurusu slowly ran his hand over Morgana as the feline dozed. His other hand held open his new book, and he read with rapt attention, though occasionally his eyes flicked to the phone resting on his knee. Atsuhiro couldn't read the strange expression on Kurusu's face, for he received no messages on it. In fact, he seemed hesitant to open the message app at all.

When it was clear that everyone finished eating, Atsuhiro offered to put away the food and wash dishes. Kaito helped. There were still

some cinnamon rolls left over, so he saved them for Magne. He knew she liked them.

“Thanks for that, by the way. Whatever you two talked about worked wonders.” Kaito said after they took the stacks of dishes down to the kitchen. “It’s the first time he’s been so lively since...”

“You don’t have to say it.” Atsuhiro focused on the steam from the tap, and the sprouting bubbles bobbing over the water. “I’m glad I could do... *something* to start repaying my debt to him. I probably haven’t scratched the surface, though.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.” Kaito said as he rolled up his sleeves. “He wouldn’t want that.”

The lull in conversation stayed until a third of the dishes were done.

“You should get some rest.” Kaito suddenly said. “I got it covered.”

“Are you sure?” Atsuhiro raised a brow. “There’s still a lot left, and we all need our beauty sleep.”

“I’m not the one who needs sleep.” Kaito snorted as he held up the plate. “Besides, this is the third dish that’s still dirty.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, I can finish up. I could use something to keep my hands busy.” Kaito flexed the wrist with the quirk suppressant. “Even with this thing on, I don’t need to sleep.”

“Wait, but you...” Atsuhiro tilted his head. “Have you spent every night laying awake while the rest of us are asleep?”

“Mostly. I kept an eye on Akira. He’s lost *everything*... again.” Kaito stared at his own reflection barely visible in the plate. “I was afraid he would try to sneak out and do something stupid, and not the *good-natured* sort of stupid he’s pulled off before, if you catch my drift.”

Dread slithered down Atsuhiro's spine at the implication. "I... I see."

"In any case, you youngsters are the ones who need more sleep." Kaito snorted as he turned towards the dishes. "Go on. You've been out all day and look dead on your feet."

Atsuhiro nodded and dried his hands. He was on his way upstairs when something occurred to him. He stopped and scratched his head.

"You youngsters?" Atsuhiro muttered, "But I'm a few years older than him, and so is Tobita..."

Kaito remained the enigma. His youthful look betrayed his antediluvian mannerisms; like how often Kaito seemed to think everyone acted like small children most of the time, like he was *too old* to join in their antics. Sometimes he offered sound advice as if he's had decades of life experience. Shuichi slipped and called him 'grandpa' once.

At first Atsuhiro thought it was some inside joke he wasn't privy too, but now he wondered if it was related to Kaito's quirk. Kaito never talked about his quirk, but the others seemed to know what it was and why he kept that suppressant on at all times. Atsuhiro wouldn't ask.

He shrugged and continued upstairs, despite feeling like he just got playfully scolded by an elder.

I wonder if there are any of my long time readers who would recognize Arachne from my other fic? Both she and Kaito are tied for my favorite OCs to write, and I've always wanted to sneak her into DTESH somehow without directly involving her in the plot.

UPDATE SCHEDULE. I did decide to add a week between one of the upcoming chapters, because while I do feel a little better

compared to a few chapters ago, there's still some lingering brain fog that has been making it difficult to write. Despite this, I'm still very excited for all of the twists and turns that are coming soon ;) We're still in a cool off period of the story, but it won't be too much longer before things kick off again.

Sweatshop - March 5th

Run, Run, Run! - March 26th

You Are Stronger - April 9th

Mementos(Upper Layer) - April 23rd

Sweatshop

Chapter 67: Sweatshop

“Oh yeah?” Vlad King raised a brow at him. “And how did he do with your training, Aizawa? You’re going to be the one training him the most.”

Aizawa deadpanned. “I’m keeping the details to myself.”

“Shouta, you’re no fun!!” Mic yelled.

This chapter covers several days worth of events.

I'm also quite surprised by how many people like Arachne last chapter! I don't know if she'll get anymore scenes in this story, but we shall see :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hawks floated above the city, in the darkness between rivers of golden light and the sea of twinkling diamonds. Wind swept through his hair and rustled pleasantly underneath his outstretched wings. He took a deep breath, savoring the familiarity of a light smog and the tinge of an approaching rainstorm that would wash it away, if for a few hours.

Hawks relished these moments.

Kept them hidden. Nestled them away from the rest of the world so that he could have something that was *just* his. Get lost within them to find peace on a particularly bad day when Kunikazu’s temper flared and his insides were flambeed. Not that he had to worry about

that anymore, but he didn't think he'd ever break this habit. It was the only thing that kept him sane all these years.

Unfortunately, this little bubble of joy had to be popped. He expected the trill from his comm and the familiar voices pulling him back into reality.

"They did what with glitter!?" Miruko howled with laughter. *"Oh my god, they'll never get rid of it at this rate!"*

"Yeah, I know." Ryukyu's voice crackled, and Hawks felt the weight like stones tied to his wings. *"No wonder Tsukauchi wants to keep this under lock and key. It's a small miracle that there's no articles on it, let alone how that police station wouldn't ever live it down with the public."*

"Let's hope it stays that way." Hawks veered towards a skyscraper and perched on the corner like a gargoyle, his wings splayed in a fiery fan. "Someone breaking in and taking Joker's things wouldn't look good for any of us."

Miruko grumbled.

"Tsukauchi's theory on the culprit is more surprising." Best Jeanist stated.

"Jeanist!" Miruko gasped. *"Buddy! Pal! Compadre! Where have you been!?"*

"I apologize for my absence. I needed some time to recover after Kamino, but I'm feeling better now."

"Are you certain you should get back to work so soon? You don't sound like you've fully recovered." Gang Orca said. *"We won't blame you for needing more time away."*

"It's fine. I admit that I felt crushing guilt after Joker... died. I almost passed out from relief when I heard you say he was alive, Hawks."

“So you did watch our interview.”

“Of course I did. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any help with that.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it!!” Miruko said. *“We totally had your back 100%!”*

“Agreed.” Ryukyu added.

“I’m glad you’re hanging in there Jeanist.” Hawks said as he shuffled his feathers into a more comfortable position. “What’s your take on this little break-in? Have you figured something out?”

“Maybe. This is only a theory, but it makes sense to me. Have any of you read reports from the Summer Camp incident?”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.” Hawks chirped. “There was a lot to take in from that.”

“Fair enough.” Jeanist huffed, *“I’m talking about the report where police tracked the center of Joker’s attack that leveled the mountain range and the surrounding forest. There was a large pool of blood nearby, but it was too contaminated to get a clean sample, let alone do any tests.”*

“Okay, and?”

“Tsukauchi’s suspicions line up: The blue marble quirk was used with Bakugo and the incident with Gentle Criminal and La Brava, as well as a blue marble being left behind in the station before it exploded into glitter. One villain was missing from the League without a trace. If this theory is correct, then we could guess that the blood belonged to Mr. Compress.”

“Wasn’t Mr. Compress in Gentle Criminal’s video with Joker, too?” Gang Orca asked.

“Yes, ” Ryukyu hummed, *“Alongside Himiko Toga.”*

"That confirms his connection with the League, but we know that Joker wouldn't willingly hurt someone like that." Jeanist sighed. "My take is that Mr. Compress did something the League didn't like, thus they must've stabbed him in the back and left him for dead. He may only be alive because of Joker..."

Hawks frowned. "You okay, pal?"

"Yes." Best Jeanist did not sound okay, "I thought I would die in Kamino. I'm only breathing because Ishtar healed me."

"Jeanist..." Ryukyu whispered.

Best Jeanist sighed, and carried on. *"What I'm saying is that it makes sense if Mr. Compress abandoned the League and helped Joker out for saving his life. Given the contents of Gentle Criminal's video, it can also be said that Joker and Mr. Compress share similar world views, more so than with the League."*

Hawks whistled as the pieces all came together.

"Do ya think the League knows Compress is alive?" Miruko asked.

"I wouldn't be so certain." Gang Orca grumbled. "Any reports from the Summer Camp and onwards have been highly classified. Not just anybody has access to them."

"All For One kicked the bucket and the League barely has any members left after the Summer Camp. I doubt they'd have anybody snooping around in the police force for them." Miruko snarked. "They probably think he's as dead as a door nail."

"I agree, but it's only a matter of time before they figure out he's alive, and in turn figure out where our kid is hiding." Ryukyu said. "Right now, the best we can do is keep our eye out for Joker or any of his teammates."

"You're still searching high and low for him, aren't ya? You're the perfect mother hen of this group, Ryukyu!" Miruko teased.

"She's not the only one. Which one of us has been going from city to city all across Japan in search of our kid? Oh right, that was you, Miruko. You have no right to tease Ryukyu for doing the same."

"H-How did you know!?" Miruko sputtered. *"You want to say that to my face!?"*

"Nah, I'll pass." Hawks laughed at her muttered string of curses. "I'd sooner prove that waffles are always the better choice over pancakes."

Miruko gasped dramatically. *"YOU TAKE THAT BACK, BIRD BRAIN! PANCAKE POWER ALWAYS BEATS WAFFLES!!"*

"... Are we sure these two are mature adults?" Jeanist asked.

"Sometimes I wonder." Ryukyu said, her voice as warm as a mug of hot cocoa.

"They certainly know how to liven up a conversation." Gang Orca said. *"But it's getting late and I have many preparations to make for the upcoming licensing exam. Thank you for keeping us up to date Ryukyu. Jeanist too for your valuable insight."*

"Think nothing of it." Ryukyu said. *"Make sure to get plenty of rest, everyone. I have a feeling there will be trying times ahead. We need to be prepared for anything."*

"And they hang up on that ominous note." Hawks says as he reached for the button on his comm.

"Hey, I'm still here!!" Miruko shouted. *"And we will be having another talk on why pancakes are better!!"*

"Hmm? That's strange, I don't hear anything. Maybe my comm is broken. Gonna hang up now!"

“HEY!! DON’T YOU DARE HANG UP ON ME MISTER! I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE!!”

“Not for long!” A genuine grin broke out on his face. “Ryoto fired all of the staff Kunikazu had on me, and he promised I could choose where I want to live now! No Commission housing will keep me cooped up any longer!”

“Hawks-”

Her sudden change in tune made his heart feel funny. He didn’t like it. “Ciao!”

“Wait, Hawks!!”

He snickered as his comms went silent, but his phone vibrated nonstop for the next couple of minutes as she demanded answers, and ended up offering to help him find a new place. Hawks bounced to and fro on his heels as he scrolled through his other messages, the perilous drop off the side of the building not two inches away. Chat rooms with various pictures from Ryukyu and Gang Orca, memes and playful fights from Miruko, and occasional bits of advice from Best Jeanist. A constant stream of questions and curiosities from Tokoyami (and Dark Shadow! As he was so often reminded) were in here, too.

Hawks checked Joker’s Spotlight again. Surprise! No updates, but plenty of hero and citizen banter flooded the page nonstop. Questions. Concerns about his safety. ‘Righteous’ demands that Joker return to his vigilante work or make an appearance, as if those people had any right to do so.

“They’re just saying whatever the hell they want.” Hawks muttered. “I should’ve given him a feather when I had the chance.”

He stood and stretched, absorbing the refreshing wind before the last leg of his patrol. Hawks carefully tucked his phone in his pocket

and zipped it shut. Double checking that it was secure, he let himself fall from the building with the wind howling in his ears.

This is the first phone he never wanted to lose.

The sky glowed with the approaching twilight, the cool light glistening off the dew drops dappled on the grass like gemstones. The cold morning air stung Midoriya's throat as he jogged. The strange newness of the dorms hadn't worn off yet, and he thought a morning run would shake the sleepy fog from his brain, granted he'd come back to shower up and have breakfast with everyone before it got too late.

Classes resumed today.

It felt strange, going back to school after such a painfully hectic summer. Classroom shenanigans. Training. Happy lunches filled with excitable conversation. Mundane things. But perhaps they all needed a dose of *normalcy* . Time to properly cool off and focus on their studies as the world waited for the next big event.

Midoriya slowed down to catch his breath.

Cobblestone pathways twisted around the dorms, either side of the path lined with vibrant greenery. Shrubs, bushes, tall trees that would sprinkle shade during the daytime. An occasional break between the flora rewarded potential explorers with intricate gardens and blooms of all colors, clearings with faerie rings that were almost magical in nature. He heard water from a fountain or a small brook somewhere behind him, shrouded in verdant curtains. Birds woke from their slumber and the smallest of chatters came from awakening insects.

It was hard to forget that this was a *school* .

Footsteps pricked at his senses. He turned to look at the form jogging down the path. Purple hair. A sweaty face accompanied by exhausted, indigo eyes. Such eyes snapped to his.

Shinsou slowed to a stop and wiped his brow.

Shinsou, who he hadn't talked to since the Sports Festival, whose family became littered in online message boards since Akira's identity came out. Theories and rumors swirled on just *how much* the Shinsou family knew, or if they helped Joker, some even said that Joker tricked or threatened them.

All of it made his stomach churn.

Shinsou narrowed his eyes. "Stop staring at me like that, Midoriya."

"O-oh, sorry!" Midoriya scratched the back of his neck as warmth sprouted on his cheeks. "I was thinking it's nice to see you again?"

"Riiight. Because you totally don't have the thoughts of '*guilty criminal*' written all over your face." Shinsou huffed. "My classmates have better poker faces. And they *don't* mutter."

Shame curled up his spine. "I-I didn't mean it that way! I swear! I just didn't expect to see you out here this early in the morning?"

"Whatever." Shinsou gave him a deadpan stare. "I don't have time for this."

Midoriya stayed rooted to the spot as Shinsou passed by, but he stopped beside Midoriya and firmly grasped his shoulder. Shinsou leaned in.

"Though I guess I should thank you." Shinsou whispered. "It turns out you *did* have the strength to rescue my best friend. Good job, *Deku* ."

Midoriya inhaled sharply as Shinsou patted his shoulder. The pressure on Midoriya's shoulder disappeared while his brain short circuited. His phone... he still had those messages of that stranger who pointed them to Kamino, even if he only got an error when he tried to reply now. Shinsou's wording was on purpose. That means...

“Shinsou!” Midoriya whirled around.

He was alone. Any trace of Shinsou vanished as if he were never there. He faded into the morning light like a ghost, or more appropriately...

A Phantom Thief .

An unsettling chill crept into Midoriya’s bones, but he returned to the dorm and kept his mouth shut as if nothing happened.

The door creaked shut behind Hitoshi, the too-loud echoes bounced through the darkness draping the far corners of the gym. His hair stood on end. A chill slithered into him as if someone ran the tip of an icy dagger up his spine. The pointed weight of eyes settled upon him, but he couldn’t see where they hid.

He shifted his stance before he walked forward. His footsteps became feather soft, his center lowered. Just like Joker taught him. His senses were as fine as a strand of silk, pulled taught and ready to snap at the slightest hint of danger.

Hitoshi went rigid at the displacement of air above him. He threw himself forward before a small gust of air brushed the top of his head. Hitoshi rolled into a crouch and looked behind him, where the dark shape of Aizawa stood, appraisal peeking through his coffee colored eyes.

Aizawa smirked. He waved Hitoshi forward in a challenge, one that Hitoshi eagerly met with his own smirk. He charged at Aizawa with a battle cry. Quick blows were traded. Or so Hitoshi would like to think. His punches and swipes hit nothing but air as Aizawa flowed around them as easily as water.

Aizawa didn’t return in hard punches or kicks, but soft taps. Gaps where Hitoshi remained open after overextending. A tap on his head,

his shoulder. One tap on his ribs after Aizawa became a blur, weaving around Hitoshi's fist in an elegant and deadly dance.

Tap.

Tap.

Hitoshi's muscles burned. His movements became sloppy and sweat beaded on his forehead. Aizawa's eyes narrowed as he dodged the next sluggish blow, Hitoshi jerked back when the man jumped away and sent a wave of silver cloth at him. The fabric encased him in a cocoon, locking his hands at his sides. His stomach flopped as he teetered backwards, only for Aizawa to stop him mid-fall with a tug on his scarf before Hitoshi could smack his head on the floor.

They paused for several moments, the only sound was Hitoshi gasping for breath. He strained his neck looking at Aizawa, who studied him intensely.

"Not bad." Aizawa stated as he pulled Hitoshi into standing.

"Especially for a beginner. You're a bit rough around the edges, but we'll work on that."

"Thanks?" Hitoshi said.

Aizawa snorted. The scarf released Hitoshi in a flourish of silver fabric before it settled back on Aizawa's shoulders. How did it do that? It almost looked... alive. But it wasn't, not in the way Joker's weapons-

Hitoshi cut off that train of thought before the lump in his throat could form.

Aizawa frowned, as if he read Hitoshi's mind. "Joker taught you the basics, that's as clear as day. He also taught you how to be aware of your surroundings?"

“Yeah,” Hitoshi crossed his arms, “And also how to know when you’re being followed. It comes in handy.”

“Good.” Aizawa hummed. “Not many beginners could dodge my first attack or even know that somebody was watching them. But just because you know the basics doesn’t mean I’ll be go easy on you. Compared to my class, you’re still behind in several areas. I’ll train you so hard that it’ll feel like your muscles will give out, then train you some more. Given your routine with Joker, Nezu thinks that other teachers should test you on certain things too. This is going to be hell, but you already know that, don’t you?”

Hitoshi smirked. “Joker threw me on my ass more times than I could count, but I’m ready to get better.” Hitoshi set his jaw and met Aizawa’s eyes head on. “Bring it on.”

Aizawa grinned from ear to ear, and Hitoshi’s fate was sealed.

He’d be wallowing in sore muscles before morning classes even started.

Aizawa’s students studied Gym Gamma with awe.

High vaulted ceilings and large windows allowed plenty of space and lighting. Twenty spaces were marked off around the concrete floor, plenty of room for each student to get their own specialized training area.

Cementoss, Midnight, and Ectoplasm stood with him.

“Sir!” Iida’s hand shot to the heavens at mach speed. “Why do we need to come up with ultimate moves for our provisional license exam!?”

“The job of a hero is to save people from danger, like crimes, accidents, man-made and natural disasters.” Aizawa said, “Naturally,

this exam will look at how well you handle those types of things. Cementoss?”

Cementoss nodded as he walked to the first square. He put his palms flat on the ground and the cement molded itself as easy as clay, forming miniature structures and towers.

“I came up with the idea that every student should be able to get their own space to hone their skills.” Cementoss nodded. “I’ll be able to create whatever you need to work through these next ten days.”

Midnight smirked. “This exam will also test your will and your ability to fight. It’s important to your future as heroes. If you are prepared, then you don’t have to worry. Creating an ultimate move will help you in this exam a lot more than you think. I’ll also help you pick good names for your ultimate moves, too!”

“And my clones will offer additional assistance.” Ectoplasm crossed his arms, his eyes carefully scanning the group of aspiring heroes. “I suggest you listen carefully and take heed of our advice. As my fellow heroes stated, this exam will put you through the wringer for combat and rescue, but also remember that teamwork and information gathering is vital for any operation. Communication is key to keeping down casualties.”

“You heard them.” Aizawa’s eyes hardened. “Are we clear on everything?”

“Yes, sensei!!” A chorus of voices shouted.

“Good.” Aizawa said. “Let’s hope that these next several days will be fruitful for you. I expect each and every one of you to come up with two signature moves before the exam. Now pick a spot and get to work.” Aizawa stared at the Vice Rep. “Except for Yaoyorozu.”

She stiffened and her other classmates gave her tentative glances, but most scattered when Aizawa’s eyes flared red. Only Todoroki stood at her side, his serene expression not betraying the tightness

in his shoulders. Cementoss and Ectoplasm exchanged quick glances before they followed the other students around the gym. Yaoyorozu rubbed her arm as Aizawa approached.

“Sensei, did I do something wrong?” She asked.

“What?” Aizawa sighed. No wonder Todoroki stayed. “No, but I would rather have this talk in private.”

Todoroki shifted his weight between his feet, but stayed put.

“It’s okay.” Yaoyorozu smiled. “He can stay.”

Aizawa shrugged. “It’s about your parents’ upcoming trial. Nezu and I were informed that it will take place shortly after this licensing exam.” At that, both students went stone still. “You have unique circumstances, Yaoyorozu. If you choose to, you can decide to drop out of the exam and take it next year. Nobody would blame you.”

“I...” She looked at the ground, her brow pensive. Then, she took a deep breath, folded her hands at her stomach, and stood tall. She stared him straight in the eyes. “No, I’m going to take this exam with my classmates. I refuse to be cowed or remain stagnant just because of my situation. I won’t be emotionally compromised during the exam, I promise.”

Todoroki’s expression didn’t change, but there was a glimmer in his eyes as he stared at her.

“I see.” Aizawa huffed, but the proud smile crept on his face. “Then go on. You both have a lot of work to do before this exam.”

“Yes, sensei!”

They rushed around him and took their spots as Cementoss raised cement towers and plateaus tall enough to cast shadow over the rest of the gym. Ectoplasm created enough clones to work one on one

with them. It didn't take long for screams and shouts and the explosion of quirks to overtake the gym.

Midnight smirked at him.

He raised a brow. "What?"

"Nothing." She approached and elbowed him fondly. "I'm just glad that you're almost back to normal, after... you know." Her expression fell and Aizawa felt niggling guilt worm its way into his heart. "Mic and I were really worried. After Joker and the hospital, and then you didn't answer our calls for a while... we didn't want you to fall down that hole again, Sho. You know we care about you, right?"

"I know." He dragged out a long sigh as his shoulders sank. "I'm sorry about that."

"Oh, don't be." Midnight shook her head. "It's fine. Just let us know when you go out searching for him again. We'll come with you!"

He glared at her. "How do you know about that?"

"Oh, please." She said with a smirk. "You go out on patrol at sunset, stay out all night, and then come back before sun rise looking like something Marshmallow dragged in during a typhoon. No wonder you nap with every free minute you have-"

Aizawa held in an annoyed groan. Yes, he had been out at night, especially more recently when Tsukauchi tracked down a number from one of the Shinsous' phone records. It led to an abandoned internet cafe called the Raven's Nest. There were signs it was once inhabited several weeks ago, but that hole in his heart deepened as he picked through dusty cubicles and broken computers.

Nothing but ghosts lingered there now. That phone number was discontinued, and there were no other clues pointing where they went. Yet another dead end in his search for the kid. Aizawa just

wanted to make sure he was *okay* . Reluctantly, he tuned back in to Midnight's one sided conversation.

"You're too easy to read, Aizawa Shouta. You probably searched Musutafu high and low by now, but maybe we can-"

"I think I hear one of my students calling for me." Aizawa turned on his heel and marched through the maze of cement towers.

"You can't hide your feelings forever, Dadzawa!!" Midnight called after him.

Thankfully, his students were too loud for anybody else to hear.

"Did you see him?"

"Yeah, that dude's kinda hard to miss. If you ask me, he looks guilty."

"Are you kidding me? You think he's guilty just because he talked to Joker when he worked at that cafe?"

"No. Didn't you hear the rumors? Some people are saying that Shinsou was trained by Joker himself. No wonder the teachers are keeping such a close eye on him."

"But it's not like Shinsou did anything bad... right? I think being taught by Joker would be awesome."

"I'm telling you, Ectoplasm glared at us when my friends and I talked about Shinsou during math today."

"Sounds scary."

"Yeah! I totally thought we were going to get detention!"

Bang.

Bang!

BANG!

Hitoshi's heart pounded as a stream of smoke swirled from the barrel. The gun in his hands was cold and lifeless, much unlike Metatron's gun, where the silvery weapon thrummed with holy power. His hands tightened around the dead weapon, before he unloaded the empty clip and set everything on the counter. He removed his earmuffs and stared at Snipe.

Snipe whistled as he pushed the button to bring the target closer. Holes dotted the human shaped paper target, with one hole centimeters from where the heart would be. "Your stance is good and you did everything else right, but you definitely need more practice in accuracy."

"Thanks." Hitoshi said.

Snipe stared at him for a moment, his face unreadable under that tan gas mask.

Hitoshi raised a brow. "What?"

"Nothin'. It's just..." Snipe looked at the target, the gun, before he stared back at Hitoshi. "Joker really taught you all of that from one session?"

Hitoshi blinked slowly. "Yeah, he did. Why?"

Snipe shrugged. "Either Joker's a gifted teacher or you're a fast learner. Probably a mix of both if I'm bein' honest." Snipe waved his hand around U.A.'s range, carefully monitored and guarded by himself and Power Loader, "Getting a gun license for hero work is a mighty difficult thing to get. Come here after class every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for training sessions with me, and we'll see what we can do from there."

Hitoshi smirked. "Trying to steal me from Aizawa-sensei?"

"Who knows." Snipe chuckled. "It was Nezu's idea for me to test you on this, but you've impressed me. This was an eventful day for you, so you're dismissed. Try to get some rest, alright?"

Hitoshi nodded, and walked out of the range.

The door closed behind him, the heavy automatic lock clicking in place. Snipe put a hand on his chest and sighed in relief. He stared at the bullet holes dotting the target. Not enough damage to kill immediately, but to seriously injure or cripple. Maybe looking after Joker's student would redeem him from shooting the vigilante at the USJ, not that he wasn't going to formally apologize to the kid whenever he gets here.

Dread trickled up Snipe's spine at the thought of reporting Shinsou's success at the gun range. Why did the rat always choose the most terrifying students?

It took only a day after Snipe's session for the other teachers to start gossiping.

"So I tried staking out 1-C's building to get a look at Shinsou, and a robot totally blocked me! It said I would get detention from Nezu himself if I didn't leave."

"I didn't know the robots could do that. I've seen them all over the grounds lately. Ectoplasm's clones, too."

"They didn't do that last semester, right? I wonder what's got them so worked up."

"I dare you to go up to him and ask about Joker."

"What!? No way! The dude looks like a zombie."

"Scaredy cat-"

"Crap, he's looking at us! Act natural!"

"I'm just glad Shinsou decided to come back to U.A. to be a hero."

Other teachers in the lounge looked at Present Mic. Aizawa raised his brow from his bright yellow sleeping bag in the corner.

"As opposed to what?" Aizawa asked, his voice pointed like a knife.

"Well, you know..." Mic waved his hand. "The little Listener really looked up to Joker, yeah? I figured he'd jump at the opportunity to disappear with his mentor instead of returning to school!"

"But he didn't." Midnight looked up from grading papers, the red pen twirling in her hands. "Why do you think that is?"

"Because Joker cared for Shinsou's future." Aizawa shrugged as they stared at him, either in shock or confusion. "Sure, Nezu wants to set up the Vigilante Program, but getting into the Hero Course with a clean record is a lot easier than if Joker allowed Shinsou to go along with his heists and got caught red handed or something."

"That's pretty considerate of Joker." Thirteen said.

"None of you interacted with him like I did." Aizawa sagged into his plush cocoon. "But it's plain as day when you notice how much he cares for those around him."

"Joker took the initiative when it came to training Shinsou, too." Snipe flinched when Midnight jabbed the pen towards him. "You were pretty spooked when you came back to the lounge after your session with him. Is Shinsou really that good with a gun?"

Snipe leaned back in his chair. "I figured he'd been to a range before, but it was only his second time handling a gun!"

“Joker is incredibly smart.” Aizawa sat up and leaned against the wall. “He broke down the basics of using a gun and explained it in a way that is easily understood. Given Shinsou’s own intelligence, I’m honestly not surprised how well he handled it.”

“Oh yeah?” Vlad King raised a brow at him. “And how did he do with *your* training, Aizawa? You’re going to be the one training him the most.”

Aizawa deadpanned. “I’m keeping the details to myself.”

“Shouta, you’re no fun!!” Mic yelled.

Aizawa rolled his eyes.

“In any case!” Nezu chirped from the door. Mic gasped in surprise and a few other teachers flinched. A stoic Cementoss nearly dropped his coffee mug. “Shinsou is still our student, and we shall treat him as such. Placing any suspicion on him would be an insult to his character.”

“How long have you standing there?” Midnight asked.

“Long enough.” Nezu grinned as he fiddled with a some sort of multi-tool.

“We can treat him like a student all we want.” Vlad King frowned. “But it’s the other students I’m worried about.”

Nezu’s ears pricked. “Have we come across any problems?”

“I noticed how others in his class avoid interacting with him.” Ectoplasm didn’t look up from grading, the page a sea of red marks. That poor soul. “I don’t think it’s out of fear, specifically. Some of them seem star struck. Students clear the way for him in the hallways between classes, but its obvious how many point and whisper. Rumors are swirling and the semester just started.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about the ones who are brazen enough to do something stupid.” Vlad King sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “You know how my students are. I’ve heard them whispering in small groups, and the name ‘Shinsou’ cropped up a few times.”

“We’ll have to keep a close eye out.” Midnight’s eyes hardened. “The last thing we need are Shinsou’s peers isolating or tormenting him.”

“I increased the security around 1-C’s dorm to dissuade stalkers.” Nezu hummed and pocketed the multi-tool. “But I don’t think we have to worry about it too much. Shinsou’s skills have been honed by Joker and will continue to sharpen under our tutelage. I have no doubt that he’ll give anybody a good runaround if they were to do something... unwise.”

“‘Unwise’.” Vlad King sagged in his chair. “I can think of a handful of my students that would fit that word perfectly.”

“We’ll handle it if it becomes too extreme.” Nezu said. “But in the mean time, we will watch and wait. Whatever happens, I cannot wait to see how much Shinsou grows!”

The heroes winced under Nezu’s wickedly sharp grin. The mouse laughed as he turned on his heel and marched out of the lounge, leaving the room’s inhabitants with lingering dread.

The days passed reasonably fast for Hitoshi.

He fell into a tight schedule; Wake up at an ungodly hour for training with Aizawa-sensei, shower and eat breakfast, go to class and *don’t* freak out over his peers’ whispers or how they fell over themselves to move out of his way. Rumors were a dime a dozen, but he ignored them as best he could. Find a secluded place to eat lunch. Finish class and have training with Snipe every other day. Rush back to his dorm room, do homework, check Joker’s Spotlight, tinker for a while, and then pass out for the night. *Maybe* have a short dream with his

parents to catch up, but his dad looked too exhausted to do it every night.

Rinse and repeat.

It was after his third session with Snipe when he rushed through the school with a folder under his arm, headed towards the support labs. A familiar sensation prickled on the back of his neck. His hair stood on end. His breath caught in his throat, but he forced it out to try and stay calm.

There were no mirrors to check behind him, and the floor to ceiling windows lining the walls were too faint to catch anything concrete. Still, he heard the tell-tale sound of footsteps behind him. They stopped when he paused to look out the window, ears strained. He continued, and so did the footsteps. His heart pounded as he quickened his pace, hugging the folder to his chest.

Hitoshi turned a corner and scanned for an exit. The door at the end of the hall led outside, but if he just ran then he wouldn't figure out who followed him or why. He kicked open the exit door, but dashed through another door nearby. Darkness encased him as he silently shut the door to a supply closet and put his back against it.

"Dangit, he got away!" A female voice said.

"That door leads to the school grounds." Another female voice, a little bit deeper, said. "Who knows where he could be now!"

"I dunno about this, you guys." A male voice this time, "He seemed pretty spooked. Are you sure this is a good idea, Monoma?"

"We just wanted to talk to him!" The last voice, probably Monoma, shouted. "It's not like we were trying to hurt him."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that." The second female said. "We see how other people treat him around here. He probably thought we were going to beat him up or something."

“Why are you so stuck on this, Monoma? Can’t we just leave the guy alone?”

“You know why, Honenuki!” Monoma griped. “We can’t let 1-A snap him up like they do with everything else. This is our chance to get ahead of them!”

“By kidnapping Shinsou?” Honenuki deadpanned.

“*Befriending* him!”

“Right, because there’s no ulterior motive to get to know Joker better.”

“Guys, enough! Lets just get out of here.” The first female said, “Shinsou is long gone and the last thing we need is our Class Rep getting suspicious. She acts weird whenever we mention Joker now.”

“Probably because Seth saved her hide during the Summer Camp.” Monoma grumbled. “Fine, let’s go.”

Hitoshi bit his lip as he heard them walk through the exit. He counted several heartbeats of silence before he let out a breath, his head thumping on the door.

“Wow, you handled that better than I thought!”

Hitoshi denied that he yelped like a frightened grade schooler. The folder dropped from his arms as he backpedaled away from the voice, paper spewing across the floor.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!”

Hitoshi squinted. There was... a *face*... in the wall. A puff of golden hair and a pair of sea blue eyes that looked at home in an ancient pre-quirk cartoon.

“Who the hell are you?” Hitoshi said with a scowl. “Were you spying on me?”

“No! Well, not really?” The face beamed. If it wasn’t so dark, Hitoshi would be blinded by it. “My friends and I were in a nearby classroom when you zoomed by. We saw those other kids following you and... well, thought you could use some help. Turns out we were wrong. Oh, I’m Togata Mirio, a third year!”

Hitoshi snorted. He bent down to pick up the scattered paperwork. Hastily drawn pictures and measurements and forms to request certain gear for his future hero costume. Joker’s dagger had been in a secure locker in Power Loader’s classroom. A once neat and tidy file was reduced to mish mash of paper sticking out in every direction.

“Are you sure you don’t need-”

“Yes .” Hitoshi griped as he double checked to make sure he didn’t miss anything. He held the folder to his chest and marched out without another word.

“Shinsou, you’re okay!”

Hitoshi held back a groan as he looked down the hall. A girl with long periwinkle hair and another boy with dark hair and pointed ears approached, though the boy half hid behind his energetic classmate. He looked as if he’d rather be anywhere else in the world right now. It was a mutual feeling. He recognized them now, part of the ‘Big Three’ of the third year hero course. More specifically the girl; Nejire Hado.

Ryukyu’s intern.

There was something about the way she stared at him. Despite the bright smile and bubbly vibes, a ripple of compassion flowed through her eyes. The thorns in Hitoshi’s chest dissipated, but sourness still had a strangle hold on him.

“I’m not in the mood.” Hitoshi felt more exhausted as the hour went on. “Whatever you have to say, save it.”

“Wait!” She reached out to him as he turned towards the door, but didn’t touch him. He stopped and glared at her over his shoulder. Her smile stayed genuine and kind. “I understand, Shinsou. I’ve never met Joker first hand, but I know how much Ryukyu has changed for the better because of him. Joker really means a lot to her, and in turn he means a lot to me. You were his friend, right? I want you to know that we’ll have your back if anybody gives you trouble!”

Hitoshi studied her. There wasn’t any malicious intent in her voice, and her posture remained calm and composed. She didn’t want to use him like those other students. He relaxed and let out a long sigh.

“Thanks, I guess.” He muttered. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve had enough bullshit for one day.”

They let him walk away. Hitoshi marched outside as the sky bled orange and the first bite of autumn settled on the wind. He took a deep breath and turned towards the dorms, the long, deep shadows of trees protected him from prying eyes.

Power Loader told him to come in whenever he had time, to test out what Hitoshi knew about tinkering and gadgets. He figured he’d turn in the first version of his costume design while he was at it. He’s too burnt out to deal with anything else right now. He’d do it tomorrow.

In hindsight, waiting a day was the best decision he’d made that evening.

Ren poked his head into the kitchen.

They had everything they needed to whip up decent food for Magne’s patrons, good appliances and enough counter space for one person to move around with ease. Tobita stood at the stove, where a teakettle wafted with steam and a light, flowery scent took to the air. He turned to Ren, smiling.

“Did you need something? I’m about to whip up some of the tea Atsuhiro got for me, if you wanted to join in!”

Ren shook his head. “Actually, I was wondering if you needed any help around the kitchen?”

“I have everything covered.” Tobita gestured towards the door to the bar front. “It’s a weekday, so it has been rather quiet. I’ve heard Shuichi complain about how bored he is from in here.”

Ren pursed his lips as he stared at the door. What lay past there was still a mystery, for they didn’t want anybody to recognize him while the bar was open, and he had been too exhausted to bother on the days it had been closed.

And Magne. It felt as if she were avoiding him for some reason. Magne never came upstairs. She chatted with Shuichi and the others while the bar was open, but only when necessary. He wondered if their first encounter might have been responsible for her reserved behaviour. It wasn’t exactly *pretty*. Maybe he should apologize?

A soft hand on his arm made him jump.

Tobita flinched back, but his face softened with a warm smile. As it always does.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything? Perhaps a small bite to eat before dinner? There are some leftover chocolate chip cookies I made last night.” Tobita winked. “I won’t tell Manami.”

A sheen of silver caught Ren’s eyes, and he stared at the cuff on Tobit’s wrist. A reminder of everything he put these people through since he stepped foot in this world. Conflicting twisters of guilt and remorse nearly ripped him apart from the inside.

Ren forced a smile, but he shook his head and fled the kitchen. He felt Tobita’s worried eyes on his back before the door closed behind him. Soft voices trickled down the stairs. Ren ignored them and dove

into the bathroom down the hall. The dingy, cramped bathroom was what you could expect from a bar. The only differences from the shabby bathrooms up front was that it was significantly cleaner thanks to Kaito and Manami's efforts, and it had a deep tub to relax in. Ren ignored the tub. He placed his hands on the sink and looked into the mirror.

His reflection stared back, as pale and sickly as it had been since he woke up. The deep circles under his eyes didn't help any. His hair lacked the usual lively floof to fall drab around his forehead and ears. 'Death warmed over', as Shuichi said the other day. Manami smacked him for it, but Ren had to agree. He felt like a hollow shell of himself. His knuckles tightened on the cold porcelain.

"Please... If you're still in there..." He whispered to nobody.
"Somebody answer. *Please* ."

Ren stood there, peering back into his own reflection in expectation. Silence. Ren forgot how eerily *quiet* a person's mind could get. Complete and utter lack of any voices or familiar presences comforted him. No golden spark flickered in his eyes, no warmth or flame to light the barren mindscape that had gone cold. Ren tried to keep that suffocating glob of emotion locked tight in his chest, but it eluded its confines to climb up his throat.

Tears came into his eyes as a suppressed sob escaped. Ren ducked his head, biting his lip so he wouldn't make any noise. His body trembled as he tried to keep it all in. The strangle hold of emotion lasted until black spots appeared in the corner of his eyes. Eventually, he buried it enough to where he could gasp for breath.

There was a scratch at the door.

"Merp?"

Ren wiped his eyes with his sleeves. "I'm fine, Stubbs."

“Merp?” The scratching intensified. She must’ve noticed the rawness in his voice. “Merp!”

He swore under his breath and opened the door. Lady Stubbs squeezed in and skittered onto the sink. Ren closed the door and turned to the cat, who’s ghoulish eyes were narrowed.

“What?” He said as his shoulders sagged. “I’m fine. I will be fine.”

“Merp?”

“I know Atsuhiro said I had to learn to forgive myself, but... it’s a lot harder than it sounds.”

“Merp.”

“No, you don’t need to tell the others. I don’t want them to worry. Please?”

She snorted. Lady Stubbs purred as she put her two front paws on his chest and licked his nose. He couldn’t help it. He smiled and ran his fingers through her thick fur and over the golden handkerchief tied around her neck. Morgana had a similar handkerchief in his Metaverse form.

“I’ll be okay, really.” He whispered. “I just need a minute.”

Her eyes, far too intelligent for any normal cat, softened. She butted her head against his chin before she hopped off the sink, and Ren opened the door to let her out. He closed it with a muted sigh of relief. He stared back at his own expression, his eyes red rimmed and puffy.

“Damnit...”

He washed his face, the cold water shocking the oily emotions back to their cage. Ren patted his face dry and took another moment to breathe, before he left the bathroom. He ventured up the stairs. At least he regained enough strength to go up and down by himself,

without getting winded halfway through. And unlike Atsuhiro half the time, he remembered to duck under the beam.

The others were scattered around the spacious attic. Atsuhiro used his quirk to clear out the clutter, and moving everything down into the storage room more than doubled their living space. The floors were scrubbed clean and the colony of empty cobwebs in the rafters were gone. Ren didn't know why they waited until now.

Maybe they were so worried over his health that they didn't even think of their own comfort.

"Check mate." Kaito said as he and Atsuhiro played chess in the corner, one of many board and card games Magne picked up last time she went shopping.

"How!?" Atsuhiro clutched his head. "I thought you said you never played chess before!"

"Well, / haven't." Kaito smirked as he tapped the silver band on his wrist. "But I used to know someone who did."

"What?" Atsuhiro's eyes flicked between the band and Kaito's expression "What does that even mean!?"

Ren huffed at Kaito's sudden fascination with teasing Atsuhiro. Maybe it was because in a strange, twisted sort of sense, he and Atsuhiro were related. Somewhat. Ren... decided not to think about it too much. He went to the opposite corner where everyone stashed their things, swiped his phone and book from his bag, and went to the window.

Manami stopped typing as he walked by. Morgana sat by her, and Ren couldn't meet his eyes, either.

"I just need some air." He told them before he stepped out onto the rooftop.

The final rays of the sunset had long cooled into deep purples and blues. Ren planted himself at the edge of the rooftop and watched until the black of night threw a curtain over the city. Few stars glinted over the city's golden glow.

Ren closed his eyes and took in the scents and sounds of a bustling city, of the wind that corded through his hair. He knew it was Morgana's, yet he didn't feel the magic in it anymore. He opened his eyes and stared at the heavens.

Six familiar stars twinkled at him. No, that wasn't right. A seventh star joined the strange constellation, but whether he just noticed it now or if it had always been there, he didn't know.

"What am I supposed to do, you guys?" The breeze carried Ren's whisper into oblivion. The familiar weight of his phone sat in his lap alongside the book, but he didn't have the courage to open the Phantom Thief chatroom yet. "What am I supposed to say? 'Hey, it's been a while since I last checked in! I died several times and killed a megalomaniac almost as bad as Yaldabaoth. I destabilized an entire world and Akechi told me off about it when my soul was in Limbo. He says hi by the way!'" His face fell in his hands as he fought against another wave of frustrated tears. "It'd probably just give me another stupid error. Yeah, Morgana would look at me like I'm insane."

Ren's hands fell and he picked up his phone to unlock it. The little message icon taunted him. No new messages. He swallowed the lump in his throat and fled to various news sites, absorbing a few of tonight's batch of colorful headlines.

Silver Falcon's Guilty Verdict: Was it a fair trial?

Joker's 'Quirklessness': Clever ruse or Malicious Lie!?

Three HPSC Board Members Resign Following Kunikazu's Shocking Arrest!

Yaoyorozu Trial Date Set!

Vigilante Numbers Skyrocket Amid Rise In Villain Incidents!

Ominous Howling Heard Throughout Japanese Alps!

U.A. Vigilante Program Deemed 'Promising' As Ryukyu and Gang Orca Vow To Follow In Nezu's Footsteps With Villain Program: Should Villains Be Redeemed?

Remembering The Kamino Disaster: Mayor To Unveil Statue and New City Centre.

Ren shook his head and set his phone face down next to him. He stared down at the book, and opened it to where he had put the familiar bookmark last night. The double sided bookmark flowed with intricate vines of the deepest blue, with glittering gold leaf tracing the edges. A bold 'V' was stamped in the middle.

"Don't forget that you're rehabilitation isn't over yet!" Caroline tapped her metal baton on the floor and leveled him with her signature glare. "One more thing, don't tell our Master about what happened here. You absolutely can't tell him we battled! You got that, Inmate!?"

Justine simply twirled her clipboard and chuckled softly. "Honestly, I do not feel particularly guilty about keeping this secret. Caroline, let's reward him for his substantial progress."

"R-right! I was getting to that!!"

Caroline shoved a whole mess of healing items in his hands, most of which they used during Yaldabaoth's fight. Justine, however, gently placed this bookmark on top of the pile. He'd kept it close ever since-

He frowned at that bookmark. "Lavenza..."

Ren heard the window slide open. He shoved the bookmark back in its place and closed the book as Morgana jumped out. He spotted Ren and approached, stretching before he sat at Ren's side. They both sat in companionable silence, with Ren not wanting to breach it. Morgana spoke first, albeit hesitantly.

"Are you okay? You looked upset when you came upstairs."

Ren sighed. He figured Morgana might see through it. "I've had a lot on my mind."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

It was an invitation. An offer. Morgana wouldn't force him if it came down to it, but his chest tightened at the thought of keeping silent now.

"I still can't feel them. Any of them." Ren put a hand on his chest. "Not when I meditate or try to talk to them. I can't summon my costume and trying to activate Third Eye just gives me an instant migraine. I just can't...." His voice simmered down to a cracked whisper, "Why would they abandon me?"

"Hey, don't think like that!" Morgana hopped onto his lap and stared into Ren's eyes. "You *know* they would never leave you like this! Mercurius agrees with me. Actually, we came up with a theory on why they're not here."

Ren blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah." Morgana's expression faltered, and he blinked rapidly to battle against tears. He curled in Ren's lap, his claws sinking into Ren's pants. Ren put his hand on Morgana's back as the feline trembled. "You were... Atsuhiro and I saw your *body* . You... you died... you *were* dead."

Ren's hands stilled over Morgana's fur.

“And I’m thinking maybe, just maybe, your Will Of Rebellion died with you.”

“*What ?* But that’s- Is that even *possible ?*”

“I don’t know, but it makes sense, doesn’t it? You can’t even don your costume, the symbol of our Will Of Rebellion.” Morgana turned to face Ren. “It’s not like we could test that back home, and we both know the rules of this world are different.”

“But what about you? You can’t turn into your other form, right?”

“Yeah, but I still have Mercurius *and* I can turn into a bus.” Morgana sighed. “Maybe my other form is still with me, somehow, and I just don’t know how to use it yet.”

“So... do you think we can reawaken it? My Will Of Rebellion?”

“Maybe, but awakening to your powers back home was an incredibly lucky coincidence. I don’t think we’ll be able to force one this time around.”

Ren scowled. “So what? We’re supposed to wait and hope for another chance? That I’ll be completely powerless until we figure out a way home?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Morgana sighed. He closed his eyes and lay his forehead over Ren’s beating heart. “We’ll just take it day by day, okay? We’ll figure this out. We always do. I *know* we’ll get past this, we just have to be patient. In the mean time we need to lay low and wait for you to recover, Akira. ”

Ren flinched.

Morgana pulled his head up, brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“I think it’s time the others knew my *real* name.”

Morgana’s eyes widened. “So you *are* taking Atsuhiro’s advice.”

“And snippets from Gentleman Burglar. It all makes sense to me.” Ren looked down at his hands. “Maybe... maybe accepting my old identity again will help us reawaken my powers? We could try putting a picture on Spotlight, too.”

“It might be a long shot, but it can’t hurt to try.” Morgana smiled at him, as sad as it was. “When did you want to do it?”

“Soon.” Ren unlocked his phone and checked the date for the Kamino Memorial. Morgana tilted his head as he read the headline. “I want to check something out first.”

“It’ll be hard convincing the others to let us go out.”

“The Memorial is only a few days away.” Ren said. “I’m sure we can manage if we let everyone tag along.”

“Why do you want to check out this statue anyway?”

Ren grimaced. He hasn’t told Morgana about his encounter with Akechi, or the truth of just how many times he’d died while under the heroes’ watch. The footage from Kamino and the hospital, of watching himself pass away in Aizawa’s arms... it was too much for the both of them. Morgana didn’t show it, but Ren knew he loathed the heroes now more than ever.

“Ren?”

He shook his head. “I just want to confirm something. You need to trust me on this, okay?”

“Okay.” Morgana’s eyes softened, and it sent a sharp pang through Ren’s heart. “I’ll leave this to you.”

Ren nodded. But something was bothering him since the others caught him up on the news in the weeks following Kamino. He *knew* Morgana wouldn’t like the idea. It was better to rip off the band-aid and have it out in the open, though.

“Morgana, there’s something else.”

“What is it?”

“If... if this doesn’t work, and I can’t get my powers back, then I think we should go to U.A.” Morgana stiffened, but Ren pressed on.

“Maybe they could figure out something we can’t-”

“No!” Ren’s jaw dropped, and Morgana blinked rapidly, as if surprised by his own outburst. “I-I... I don’t trust them. After what the police and heroes put *all* of us through. You... you *died* under their watch!”

“What if something worse happens?” Akechi’s words haunted him.

“We don’t know if Yaldabaoth can find a way here, or if the Metaverse will affect the school and surrounding areas. Shouldn’t we be there to prevent something from happening?”

Morgana flattened his ears. “And if you *don’t* get your powers back? Mercurius and I aren’t strong enough to protect you against something like Yaldabaoth on our own! I couldn’t even protect you during the Summer Camp!”

“So we should just abandon them to the Shadows in case something does happen with the Metaverse?”

“N-no, that’s not what I-”

“You heard Nezu’s words in that interview, he said we could go there if we wanted to find our *home* . He has to have figured it out, and he promised he would let us go to the USJ before the Summer Camp.” Ren’s words tumbled over each other as Morgana looked appalled, his fur standing on end. “Maybe we could find out what happened to the others and-”

“I can’t lose you again!”

The resulting silence turned thick with stewed emotions. Ren's brain stopped functioning as tears flooded Morgana's eyes. The wind whipped around them, and Morgana ducked his head to pull himself together. Several seconds passed before the breeze returned to normal.

"Morgana, I'm sorry." Ren's heart sank when Morgana trembled. "I didn't mean to upset you so much."

"N-no, don't be. I miss the others too, but I felt so helpless when we were separated a-and the next time I saw you was in the morgue-" Morgana's voice wavered as a few tears plopped onto Ren's pants. "I *can't* handle another Summer Camp or Kamino incident. I-I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't trust the heroes *not* to hurt you anymore. Just... let's wait and see what happens before we make another big decision, okay? Please?"

"Okay." Ren wrapped his arms around Morgana and held him close. "Then we'll wait."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Morgana tucked his face into Ren's shirt. They stayed that way for several minutes, holding one another. The groan of the window sill finally made them move, as stiff as their muscles were in their embrace.

"Hey, we're about to eat dinner." Manami's head popped out of the window. "You guys better come inside before it gets too cold. You know how Kaito will get if you try to skip out, Akira!"

"W-we're coming!" Morgana called as he untangled himself from Ren's arms. "Sheesh."

"Go on, I'll just be a minute."

“Okay,” Morgana whispered, his voice a bit hoarse. “Don’t be too long or Kaito might really come out and drag you back inside.”

Ren snorted as Morgana went back inside. He looked up at the small cluster of stars. Their brilliant light flared and it was almost as if he could reach out and touch them.

“Just wait a little longer, everyone.” He whispered.

As if the stars could do anything but.

Hitoshi checked over his shoulder.

No footsteps or ominous whispers haunted the hallways he crept through. Though as usual, Aizawa-sensei asked every morning if he had any troubles with the other students. Hitoshi denied of course, but for some reason Aizawa never believed him. The man didn’t push it, and they continued training as normal. Hitoshi knew somebody followed him earlier today before lunch, only for his pursuers to vanish after a flash of periwinkle hair appeared in the corner of his eye.

He dragged out a harsh sigh as he pushed forward. The folder under his arm had been rearranged into the neat and tidy pile from yesterday before the... *incident* . Unfortunately, keeping his papers in order wasn’t in the cards.

The large steel door to the support lab was down this hall. Strange vibrations rumbling from the lab slowed his steps, and he stared at the door as streams of smoke wafted from it. Panicked voices shouted from behind.

“Wait, don’t-!”

Hitoshi was blown off his feet as the door burst open, torn off its hinges by an earthshaking explosion. He groaned and rubbed his head as he sat up. Thick clouds of smoke fumed from inside, but his

eyes latched onto the tangle of limbs splayed out on the floor in front of him.

None other than Hatsume Mei's bright pink curls stood out at the top of the pile. Underneath her were familiar students. Midoriya Izuku, Uraraka Ochako, and Iida Tenya.

"Dang it, Hatsume!!" Power Loader burst through the smoke cloud. "Didn't I tell you to be careful!?"

"You did, Power Loader-Sensei!!" Hatsume beamed. Midoriya groaned as her knee jabbed into his stomach. "But I just-" Her eyes locked onto her next target, and her expression morphed into feral delight. "Shinsou!!!"

Midoriya made a noise between a gag and a pained yelp as she scrambled towards Hitoshi.

"It's you!!" Hatsume latched onto Hitoshi's wrist and yanked him to his feet. He stiffened when she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed the life out of him. "I was wonderin' how long it would take before you visited me!! Momma has been really worried-"

"Hatsume..." Power Loader facepalmed as Uraraka and Iida helped Midoriya to his feet.

"-Because you haven't visited us once since you-know-what!"

"Hatsume-"

"Momma will be so happy you're okay and I-"

"HATSUME!" Power Loader groaned as she whipped her head towards him. "Let the boy breathe, please."

"Oh. Right!"

Hitoshi gasped as her crushing weight disappeared.

“Apologize to Midoriya!!” Iida frantically chopped his arm. “That is the second explosion you’ve caused *and* the second time you’ve caused Midoriya either pain or embarrassment!!”

“It’s okay, Iida.” Midoriya clutched his abdomen. “It was an accident?”

“You can’t call that an accident!” Iida shouted.

“Iida, Deku said it was okay!” Uraraka blinked when she heard a crinkle under her foot. “What’s this?”

“That would be mine.” Hitoshi said dryly. He gestured towards the mess in the hallway. “*All* of that would be mine.”

Hatsume cackled, unabashed.

“Oh!” Uraraka smiled at him. “We can help you pick up!”

Power Loader crossed his arms and watched as they gathered the papers together. Midoriya suddenly froze, wide-eyed as he stared at one of the forms. Sketches of a dark costume, with a certain silvery symbol etched into the shoulder piece.

“A moon card?”

Hitoshi stiffened when he reached for the next paper.

Uraraka and Iida peeked curiously at the page. Midoriya lowered the paper and looked at Hitoshi with an odd mix of emotion. It was like something in Midoriya’s brain clicked. Realization, awe, and a tiny smidgen of grief fell over him.

“*You’re* the Moon?” Midoriya asked.

Iida and Uraraka looked confused for a moment. They startled as their eyes went wide, and they both gaped at him.

“That... that makes *sense*...” Midoriya whispered.

Hitoshi's scowl darkened. He snatched the page away and turned his back on them. "That's none of your business."

Midoriya rushed to his feet. "But-!"

"I think," Power Loader stepped in between them, "You should call it a day. Midoriya, Iida, Uraraka, we'll work on your new costume designs and let you know when they're done. You'll have them back before your exam. Capiche?"

"Y-yes, sir." Iida gently grabbed his classmates' arms. "Let's return to the dorms before it gets too late!"

"O-okay." Uraraka said with a shaky smile.

Midoriya stared past Power Loader, his gaze digging into Hitoshi's back. At Iida's behest, he and his friends walked down the hallway.

Hatsume tilted her head. "What the heck was that all about?"

"Are you alright, Shinsou?" Power Loader put a hand on Hitoshi's shoulder. "They didn't do something to upset you, did they?"

"No, I'm fine." Hitoshi sighed as he looked down to the messy folder. "I came here for your test and to turn in my costume design, but..."

Hatsume's eyes lit up like Christmas lights.

"Right, Nezu did want you to come in for that. Don't worry about how messy your paperwork is. I've dealt with worse." Power Loader held his hand out. "I'll take care of it."

Hitoshi handed the folder over.

Hatsume latched onto Shinsou's arm. "Sooooo, did you want to take a look at my babies!?"

"Hatsume!"

“What? He looks sad and I wanted to make him feel better!”

Hitoshi huffed. “Sure. I’ve gotten better at tinkering myself. Maybe we could make something together sometime?”

“Really!?” Hatsume gasped and looked at him as if he hung the stars. “You want to make babies with me!?”

“Th-that’s not what I meant!!” Hitoshi shouted, his face turning cherry red.

Power Loader chuckled as she dragged the poor kid back into the lab. The hero sent a quick text to Nezu explaining what happened. With luck, and maybe a bit of elbow grease, the lab could be one of Shinsou’s safe havens away from the constant rumors. He tucked his phone away and looked at the dirty folder in his hands.

“‘The Moon’, huh? I wonder what that means.”

He didn’t have time to think on it when another explosion shook the lab.

“Take this!”

Concussive forces struck Bakugo’s body through the veil of smoke and the smell of burnt caramel. The ringing in his ears faded as Ectoplasm’s clone splattered across the cement tower, surrounded by an array of deep craters. Bakugo panted as he stared at the stain. He scrunched his eyes shut and turned away.

The goop was not black. *It wasn’t* . It was just a stupid clone! There was nothing to panic about, despite how his heart pounded, and his brain snapped back to Akira leaking inky sludge from his eyes. About those strange dreams of *red skies and ancient bones jutting from the earth-*

“Bakugo.”

He whirled around to another of Ectoplasm's clones staring at him. That stupid mask hid his expression, but the slight narrow of Ectoplasm's eyes pinned Bakugo to the spot.

"Are you alright?" Ectoplasm clone number who-the-frick-knows asked. "You act strange whenever you defeat one of my clones. I didn't want to say anything, but it's been over a week."

"It's fine. I just need to fine-tune this technique, so can we just get on with it?"

"Bakugo," Ectoplasm sighed. "You went through a lot during the Summer Camp-"

"What the hell would you know!?" Bakugo snapped. He clamped his mouth shut and glared at the ground.

Ectoplasm studied him, the silence between them not tense, but strangely... sad.

"Let me show you something." Ectoplasm unbuttoned his cloak, revealing darker clothes striped with vertical gold lines underneath. Bakugo's eyes weren't drawn to them, rather to the two combat prosthetics. They looked like nothing more than strange peg legs, and Ectoplasm must've had considerable balance to even stand. "I was in a battle many years ago with a heinous villain. We won, but in the end I lost my legs."

Bakugo tore his eyes away. "What's your point?"

"I felt lost for a long time afterwards. I thought my life was over." Ectoplasm buttoned his cloak and shuffled his shoulders. "But because of the people who stuck by my side, the ones who encouraged me to continue hero work despite my... disability, I managed to stand back up on my own two feet. Well, *prosthetics* in my case."

Bakugo narrowed his eyes.

“My point is that there’s no shame in reaching out for help when you need it. Even the strongest of heroes need others to support them from time to time.” Ectoplasm knelt and stared him straight in the eyes. “You’re still young, Bakugo, but you’ve been through a lot more than others your age.”

“Whatever.” Bakugo scoffed. But the more he rolled Ectoplasm’s words through his brain, the more he wondered, “Actually, I want to ask you something.”

Ectoplasm stood to his full height. “What is it?”

Bakugo walked to the edge of his cement tower. Ectoplasm followed. Far down below, All Might walked around the gym. Though he was nowhere near *healthy*, at least he wasn’t a walking corpse that would give small children nightmares. The man eagerly gave advice to Bakugo’s classmates, despite the accident yesterday. If Deku didn’t charge in with that stupid new style he developed, then the man would’ve been reduced to bloody paste when one of Bakugo’s super moves dislodged a large chunk of concrete.

Bakugo clenched and unclenched his hands. He grit his teeth as if to chew through some invisible glue that clamped his mouth shut. Why was one question so hard to ask!? He ran a hand down his face as spat out the words.

“Joker healed a lot of people.” Bakugo growled. Ectoplasm’s expression didn’t change, but his shoulders tensed. “If you had the chance, would you ask Joker to heal you, too?”

The real Ectoplasm near the door stared up at him. Aizawa, who Ectoplasm spoke with, turned to follow his gaze. Over half the clones dotted around the gym hesitated, a few swiveled their heads in Bakugo’s direction. It only lasted a moment, and none of the other extras really noticed it. Except for Aizawa.

Bakugo couldn’t see it from here, but he practically felt the hobo raise an eyebrow. Bakugo’s heartbeat ticked the seconds as they

went by. At first, he thought the hero wouldn't answer.

"Why do you want to know?" Ectoplasm asked calmly.

"I've read the forums and watched the news. Hell, I looked up to heroes all my life" Bakugo's mouth went dry. "I want to be the top hero one day, but its so stupid that the public expects heroes to do everything for them while they sit on their asses. I want to see what an experienced hero thinks of it. Someone other than All Might or the hobo, since both of them have been healed by him already."

"I see. That's an interesting perspective." Ectoplasm turned on his... prosthetics? And walked to the center of the plateau. "I agree that it's unrealistic to place so many burdens on one person. Despite what the public thinks, such a thing is *impossible* even for one as powerful as Joker. But to answer your question," He looked over his shoulder, and Bakugo suppressed shivers as the hero peered at him, "While I'm glad Joker healed All Might and countless others, I would not want Joker to heal me. It would erase everything I've accomplished after that villain took my legs. I've grown comfortable and accustomed with how I am today. Does that make sense?"

Bakugo nodded, nearly dumbfounded.

"Good. Now, if you don't have any more questions, then why don't you take a short break? Or..." The clone widened his stance, "Do you want to continue training? The exam is close, but you know yourself best."

Bakugo huffed as he launched himself at Ectoplasm.

Toga clutched the vials of blood to her chest and grinned.

"You look creepy when you do that." Dabi said dryly.

"Shut up!" She stuck her tongue out at him and pocketed them. They both stared at the unconscious girl laying in the damp alleyway. "I'm

just excited, that's all!"

Dabi raised a brow. "Why?"

"Because," Toga smirked as she stared into the black sky. "I might be getting some answers tomorrow."

"Answers for what?"

Toga didn't answer at first, instead she crouched down by the unconscious student and played with strands of her long hair. Dabi raised a brow, but he wouldn't force her. He sighed and made to move, when Toga spoke.

"Why are we still with the League, Dabi?"

He froze. "... What?"

"We've had so many people come and go. Members who got arrested or killed, some who just disappeared without a trace." She looked up at him, her usual playfulness drowned by a somber expression. Lines in her forehead and under her eyes deepened. "You and Shiggy fight all the time, and you always storm off for hours on end. Twice is adorable, but he doesn't know what to do. Kurogiri is almost never around. Who's next on the chopping block? It doubt it'll be long before the next casualty in our group."

"What about you?"

"I've always wanted to live the way I want, but I don't *know* what I want anymore." Toga brushed the girl's hair with her hand, and stood with her arms folded behind her back. "Why are *you* sticking around with the League, Dabi?"

Dabi rolled his eyes. "Because of Dusty's sudden obsession with Joker."

"Ooh. You want something with Joker? You've been acting different since the Summer Camp. What did he say before your clone set

himself on fire?”

“That’s *my* business.” Dabi griped. “Just focus on yourself and don’t piss off Shigaraki with whatever you’re doing behind his back.”

“Aww, you’re no fun!”

Dabi rolled his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets. “If you’re done screwing around, we have to move this girl before she wakes up.”

“Fiiine.”

She skipped away, giggling as Dabi cursed under his breath and threw their victim over his shoulder.

Toga couldn’t *wait* for tomorrow’s exam.

The world is a bit hectic right now. Stay safe and take care of yourselves <3

If you want to see a full list of the Personas and their builds, as well as a list of confirmed Arcanas, then head to chapter 8 of the Thieves Den. It will continuously be updated accordingly as we continue our journey through this story :)

Run, Run, Run!

Chapter 68: Run, Run, Run!

“You know,” Ms. Joke lost her smile as she propped up her chin with the palm of her hand, “I met him at the Sport’s Festival.”

Aizawa groaned. “Who are you talking about?”

“Joker.”

“What?” Aizawa shot up in the chair. “Where?”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“It’s a tragedy!” The doctor’s voice ricocheted across cold steel and ginormous acrylic tubes. “That ingrate doesn’t know what he took from the world when he killed our master!”

The rows of floor to ceiling tubes were filled with viscous, translucent fluid, and although one couldn’t see directly inside, dark and monstrous shapes floated within. Kurogiri kept pace with the frantic doctor, ignoring how a Nomu’s palm suddenly slammed against the tube they passed.

“I know.” Kurogiri’s wispy body curled with indignation. “Shigaraki Tomura is not taking it well, either.”

The doctor stopped and leveled him with a look, the thick goggles made it impossible for Kurogiri to guess what emotions lay within.

“And Gigantomachia?”

Kurogiri sighed. “... Still inconsolable, but he knows his duty. He will come around.”

“I would hope so. You cannot keep moving him whenever he draws attention during his fits.” The doctor sank against the nearby tube, the Nomu within swimming closer to inspect. “The last thing we need are those heroes snooping around, or worse yet, that vigilante brat sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. If *anyone* could bring Gigantomachia down in his current state, it would be Joker.”

“Joker has yet to return to the public eye.”

“But for how long? It’s not smart to underestimate him. We learned *that* the hard way. I can’t even show my face in public since the raid of our Sapporo laboratory ruined any chance of anonymity.” The doctor waved a hand. “At least his absence gives me time to work. I’m not going to forgive him for taking our master away from us.”

“It’s not what our master envisioned, but maybe Gigantomachia and Shigaraki Tomura could find companionship in their grief.”

“Perhaps. The both of them want revenge.” The doctor hummed. “If they were to unite, and maybe with the additional power of our Nomu...”

Kurogiri studied the Nomu in the tank. Intellect and awareness sparkled in its eyes, but the slight dullness of it told him that it wasn’t completely conscious, either.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Kurogiri said. “Remember Kamino. After days of fighting, Joker still had the power to summon that gigantic demon and deal the killing blow to our master.”

“But not without great cost to himself. The heroes may have fooled the public with that little interview, but its clear to me that such a cost was too much for him. Perhaps he has lost that power altogether...” The doctor pulled himself from the tube and tapped his chin, “But we can’t count on *that* either. A united force of Shigaraki and his reminaing minions, my High Ends, and Gigantomachia may be enough to finish him if he’s weakened.”

“We may need more forces than that, I’m afraid.” Kurogiri’s wispy body sagged a little, “I do not want another tragedy like our master.”

“Then do some recruiting.”

“Giran used to handle that. It’s a shame he was lost.” Kurogiri narrowed his eyes, “But I will try. I’ll talk with Shigaraki Tomura and Gigantomachia, and then search for allies. I’ve heard that those in the Yakuza may be more inclined to join up.”

“That ruffraff.” The doctor scoffed. “But beggars can’t be choosers, I suppose. I need more time with my Nomu, after all the irreplaceable knowledge and resources we lost after that insufferable brat’s antics, and then our master...” He scratched his bald head, and he turned to face the tube. He ran his hand down the acrylic tube, almost fondly. “We’re lucky to have so many quirks copied, but raw materials are running dry. These High Ends require a lot more work than the brainless puppets we’ve used before.”

“I’ll see if I can rectify that.”

The doctor stared at him again, and Kurogiri felt strange prickles through his body at the intensity of it.

“Don’t run yourself dry, Kurogiri. You have your own duties to tend to, and we can’t afford to have you exhausted trying to keep everyone else afloat.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

Kurogiri bowed, and disappeared into his own mist.

The doctor grumbled. He pulled himself away from the tube and wandered down the rows, listening to the low gurgles of Nomu.

“I-it’s huge!”

Class 1-A stood outside their bus, staring at the building looming over them. Other classes from schools across Japan had arrived. Most kept their distance, but they all felt lingering stares within the tidal wave of people heading inside.

“Alright everyone, listen up.” The class stood at attention. Aizawa looked nonplussed by the nerves gnawing through the air. “If you pass this test and get your provisional licenses, then you novice eggs will become chicks. You’ll hatch into semi-pros and you’ll be one step closer to your goal. Do your best.”

“Yes, Aizawa-sensei!” They shouted in unison.

“How about we call out the usual?” Kirishima pumped his fists and grinned. “Plus-”

“PLUS ULTRA!!!”

Midoriya jolted at the intruder standing within their group, his fists to the sky and a near crazed grin on his face. He was taller than anybody else in the class and built with muscle. He wore a different uniform, a white collared shirt and dark pants, but the most eye catching piece was a navy blue hat.

“You shouldn’t just barge in on other people’s huddles, Inasa.” Another pair of students lingered a few steps away, the boy who spoke wore a similar uniform, his dark purple hair messy underneath the hat. “It’s rude.”

The other student, a girl with long auburn hair, watched on. A predatory look came in her eyes as she stared at 1-A.

“Oops! I... am...” Midoriya and the others back away as Inasa locked his hands at his sides, and bowed... head first into the concrete. “So very sorry!!”

“Uh, you okay there dude?” Kaminari asked with a sheepish smile. “I think you’re bleeding?”

“Oh!” Inasa righted himself so fast that Midoriya expected him to get a cramp. He didn’t, as if his infinite enthusiasm scared off any thought of one. “I’m okay!!”

“I-if you say so...” Kaminiari stuttered.

“Oh, blood...” The other girl by Inasa stared at the red splotched dripping down his forehead.

“Wait a minute...” Jiro narrowed her eyes, the her expression fell into shock. “I recognize that uniform.”

Iida pushed up his glasses. “Shiketsu...”

“U.A. is the most famous in the east,” Bakugo muttered, “Shiketsu in the west. It’s an elite school that rivals U.A.”

“You can stand there and gawk all you want,” The purple haired Shiketsu student muttered, “But we have some place else to be.”

“Right!” Inasa grinned wide at them, “Thank you for letting me join in!! I freakin’ love U.A.!!”

“We didn’t let you join in...” Sero said as the Shiketsu group wandered towards the massive building.

Aizawa simply sighed. “That’s the sort of competition you’ll have in this exam. Don’t let your guards down around them. Inasa Yoarashi scored first place on U.A. Recommendation exams.”

“F-first place!?” Sero shouted. “Then why go a different school...?”

“Right? What a weirdo.” Ashido said.

“Like you’re one to talk.” Kaminari smirked, but yelped when she playfully pinched his side.

“He might be weird, but he’s no pushover.” Aizawa deadpanned. “Don’t think that you should underestimate *any* of the students that

came here today. Doing so could put you in hot water.”

“Eraser!? It’s you, isn’t it, Eraserhead!?”

For the first time ever, they saw Aizawa’s eyes widen in panic. He stiffened as a woman with minty green hair marched towards him. She donned an orange bandanna on her head, and smiley faces on her belt. Her striped pants and gloves popped out against her black shirt.

“I *knew* it was you!” She said as her smile widened. “I haven’t seen you in ages, Eraser!!”

Aizawa’s eyes twitched. “Ms. Joke…”

She stopped in front of him and put her hands on her hips. “Let’s get married!”

“No.”

“Oh, c’mon Eraser! Stop being a tease!”

“Wh-whaaaat!?” Ashido flailed her arms. “I never thought Aizawa-sensei had a special someone!!”

“She’s *not* .” Aizawa glared, his eyes flaring red. “Don’t get any funny ideas.”

Ms. Joke walloped him on the shoulder, cackling, “That’s a good one Eraser!!”

“You’re hard to talk to, as usual Joke-” Aizawa clamped his jaw shut, as if he were about to say something else. His annoyance dissipated into something… inscrutable. Ms. Joke frowned. She opened her mouth to say something, but Midoriya blurted the words out before he could stop himself.

“The Smile Hero; Ms. Joke!!” Midoriya vibrated in excitement as the others looked in between their teacher, Midoriya, and Ms. Joke. “Her

quirk's Outburst! She forces those near her to laugh, dulling their thinking and reaction times! Her villain fights always end up having a lot of craziness!"

"Wow! This kid's good!" Ms. Joke smiled, albeit a bit forced this time.

"You seem to know our sensei really well, kero." Asui said.

"Our agencies used to be close together!" She jabbed a thumb towards Aizawa. "We fell in love-"

Aizawa jolted. "We *did not* ."

"He refuses to marry me, but my heart is set!" Aizawa face-palmed as a few of his students snickered. Ms. Joke gently nudged Aizawa with her elbow. "You're so worth teasing, Eraser!"

Aizawa inched away from her and crossed his arms. "Joke, since you're here, that means..."

"That's right!" She looked over her shoulder and waved. "Come here, everyone! It's U.A.!"

Another group of students approached. The one in the lead had messy black hair and matching gray eyes, eyes which reminded them all too much of somebody else. Aizawa noticed how some of his students' expressions changed as he smiled brightly at them, the others in Joke's class lingered a few steps behind. Bakugo in particular growled low and glared daggers.

"Oh, it's the real thing!" The lead student stated.

A girl behind him giggled. "Wow, that's so cool! I've only seen them on TV!"

Ms. Joke beamed, "Class 1-A, meet my second years from Ketsubutsu! Please be kind."

“Nice to meet you all!” The lead student approached Midoriya and latched onto his hands. “I’m Shindo! U.A.’s had it tough this year, huh? It must’ve been so rough for all of you!”

“Uh, y-yeah...” Midoriya took a step back, and Shindo blinked rapidly as he let go of Midoriya’s hands.

“What’s wrong?” Shindo’s plastic smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Aren’t you glad to meet another school that looks up to yours? You’ve beaten back villains many times and Joker even hailed you as the next symbols of peace! Boy, it must be hard to live up to such praise!”

“W-well, i-it’s not that,” Midoriya looked behind Shindo and stared between Aizawa and Ms. Joke, each equally confused.

“We can see past your fake smile, jackass.” Bakugo shoved his way to the front of the group, his nose inches from Shindo’s as he snarled. “You don’t fool any of us, so drop the act.”

Aizawa’s eyes widened as a few of the Ketsubutsu students gasped. Shindo himself blinked, caught off guard.

“Oh? I was just trying to be nice!” Shindo’s smile gained a cruel twist to it, his eyes narrowing. “How did you figure it out?”

Bakugo scoffed. “There’s someone else who was a lot better at it than you. You don’t even hold a candle to him, so back off jerk wad.”

The air around them became heavy as everyone held their breath.

“So the rumors *are* true.” Shindo, still face to face with Bakugo, chuckled. “I wonder, did your class always have this sort of bite, or is it because Joker favored your school over everyone else’s? He seemed close to you in particular. After all, he saved you in Kamino, Bakugo.”

Bakugo bristled, his hands curling into tight fists. Anger sparked many darkened expressions within Class 1-A, with a few like Ojiro and Mineta lingering at the back of the group, unchanged. Asui was the only one with a carefully blank expression.

“Shindo, that’s enough!” Ms. Joke appeared between them and gently pushed them away from one another. A hard line came into her brow as she gave her students a stern look.

Shindo held up his hands. “I didn’t mean anything by it, sensei. Just some light teasing is all!”

Ms. Joke shook her head. “Everyone, go inside and get ready. Save your eagerness for the exam, okay?”

“Okay, okay!” Shindo’s smile of fractured porcelain returned. “We’re going!”

A few of the Ketsubutsu students cast apologetic stares at 1-A as they ventured into the building.

“Sorry about that.” Ms. Joke looked between the class and Aizawa. “I dunno what got him so riled up all of a sudden! Must be pre-exam nerves, you know?”

“It’s fine.” Aizawa stepped up next to her, his eyes on Bakugo, who’s knuckles turned white. “She’s right. You need to prepare before it’s too late. I don’t want to hear about anybody starting fights and getting disqualified before the exam even starts. Am I clear?”

“Y-yes, sensei!” Iida stood ramrod straight. “I’ll be sure to keep everyone in line!!”

“Good. Now go.” Aizawa waited as his class flowed around him, a good majority disturbed by Shindo’s brashness. After they left, he sighed, long and exhausted. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Shindo means well, and U.A. went through a lot.” Ms. Joke patted his shoulder. “Anywho, I’m actually surprised! You’ve kept your *whole* class this year? That must be a record!”

Aizawa rolled his eyes as he turned towards the building. “They proved their worth as future heroes. That’s all there is to it.”

“Uh huh.” Ms. Joke chuckled as she fell in step with him. All other students had gone inside the exam building, and now only a few other teachers waited around. “I think you’re going soft, Eraser. You really *do* have a heart under your gruff exterior! Will you marry me after all!?”

“No.” He growled. “And I am not going soft.”

“Suuuure.”

Aizawa buried his face in his scarf as they went inside. The last of the students disappeared into one of the hallways to change into their hero costumes, but Aizawa went down another corridor. Joke followed him.

Aizawa paused halfway there, his eyes locked on somebody leaning against the wall as he stared down at his phone.

Gang Orca looked up as he felt eyes on him. They shared a mutual nod and went their separate ways. Ms. Joke raised a brow, but didn’t say anything as they finally made it to the stands.

Aizawa scanned the vast stadium. It was a city; complete with skyscrapers, a forest, and an industrial type area similar to one of U.A.’s own gyms. A smaller building nestled against the wall was where the students gathered for the exam, before the building would open up and reveal the true scope of the area.

There was enough room to where Joker’s golden dragon could float around with space to spare. A pang tugged at his heart, and he pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off an impending headache.

“Eraser, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine, Joke.” He shouldered past her and chose the middle of a random row to sit. Other teachers and heroes milled around, others on the opposite side of the stadium were mere specs. He glowered at the Hero Commission grunts in suits, who didn’t pay him much mind. “Just have a lot on my mind.”

“Hmmm.” Ms. Joke sat in the row directly front of him. She turned around and lay her arms over the back of the chair. “I know you, Eraser, and I know when something’s bugging you.”

He crossed his arms and sank into the chair.

“You know,” Joke lost her smile as she propped up her chin with the palm of her hand, “I met him at the Sport’s Festival.”

Aizawa groaned. “Who are you talking about?”

“Joker.”

“What?” Aizawa shot up in the chair. “Where?”

“In the first year stands. Some other heroes were bashing your class because news of Silver Falcon just broke out around then. He stuck up for your students when I asked him about it, said that they already feel pressure from society to be the best heroes they can be.” She shrugged as Aizawa stared at her, incredulous. “His answer was real interesting for a kid his age, so I committed his face to memory. I was completely floored when his real identity came out!”

Joker broke into the teacher’s lounge during the Sports Festival. It would make sense that he found a way to bide his time before then, but Aizawa never expected Ms. Joke to have an encounter.

“He’s a smart kid, Eraser.” Ms. Joke grinned at Aizawa. “I’m sure he’s alright, wherever he is.”

A hiss of steam echoed through the stadium before he could say anything, and they stared as the small building down below opened up like the petals of a flower. Hundreds of astonished cries reached their ears.

Ms. Joke whistled. “Hey Eraser, you told your class about the ‘Crushing of U.A.’, right?”

“Nope.”

Ms. Joke gasped as chaos ensued. A deep rumble chattered everyone’s teeth and broken earth splintered the testing ground. Great plateaus and cliff faces rose high into the sky, as if from nothing. It reminded Aizawa of Cementoss’ quirk, but with earth instead of cement.

“Of the 1600 students taking this exam, only the first 100 applicants are passing the first round this year, a tiny fraction compared previous years.” A terrifying smirk broke out on Aizawa’s face as his students became scattered. Others from different schools descended on them like a murder of ravenous crows. “My class shouldered situations far worse than what they’re facing today. They’ve grown so much between now and the Sports Festival, so these brats are in for a real surprise if they think they can underestimate my class.”

Ms. Joke cackled as she righted herself in her seat. “I guess we’ll see what our students are made of, eh Eraser!?”

Aizawa nodded, and got comfortable while his class fought tooth and nail for their right to be heroes.

The ground split open, and the deep rumble overtook the screams of his classmates. Shoto growled as ice bloomed around him, the snap chill stealing startled gasps of students from other schools. But even the crystalline sheen on the ground wasn’t enough to contain it, and

spires and platforms rose high over their heads, enough to where it cast shadows and sprinkled broken bits of ice on him.

“Shoto!” Momo rushed to his side.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She scowled as haughty laughter came from above. “They split us up, so we can’t stay here for very long.”

“D-don’t forget about meeee!” Ashido slid around an earthy spire, using her quirk over the ice. “Man, this exam really is intense!”

Shoto huffed as he stared down at one of the targets he placed over his heart. “We stick together and take out whoever we can. With any luck, we’ll be able to help out our other classmates, too.”

Momo put her hand out. “Together.”

Ashido cackled and slapped her hand on top. “Together!”

They stared at Shoto expectantly. He gently lay his hand over theirs, their warmth seeping into his.

“Together.” Ashido grinned and Momo smiled softly at him.

“I have a plan.” Momo said as she produced a pair of ice skates with her quirk. She talked while she slipped them on. “Mina, you’re good at skating, and I’ve had training since I was young. Shoto, you make our way forward with your ice, and Mina and I will cover you from behind.”

“Oh, I cannot *wait* to see their faces.” Ashido smirked as she tested the weight of the brightly colored balls that were passed around before their exam started. “Time for payback, baby!”

“Got it.” Shoto glanced in between them. “Ready?”

They both nodded, and the scenery exploded in a frosty cascade.

“There they are!!” Voices shouted from above.

Shoto took the lead, his breath coming out in a frozen cloud. Ashido cackled as she and Momo kept speed a few feet behind him.

It wasn't long before more screams rang out, and not from *their* classmates this time.

“Watch out!”

Iida's world became a blur as he tackled Asui, just in time to avoid a barrage from above. He skid to a stop behind some rocks and set her down. She nodded her thanks and they took off in a random direction, but the shadows of hostile students dogged their steps at every turn. Iida held back a desperate huff as they were surrounded on all sides.

A sudden, blood curdling howl echoed through the man-made canyon, and a dark shape bolted from a crevice. The other students screamed as Dark Shadow rose up and tore the earth out from under their feet, a shower of dust and chunks of rock fell down the spires like waterfalls.

Dark Shadow veered towards them with his arms held wide. Iida got the wind knocked out of him as the sentient quirk scooped them up, their escape covered by the lingering dust clouds. Dark Shadow weaved around the broken earth and set them down. Iida wavered on his feet at the sudden dizziness plaguing him, but he shook himself out of it.

“Are you two okay?”

Iida looked between Shoji and Tokoyami, Dark Shadow loomed over Tokoyami's shoulders like an ebony umbrella.

“Yeah. Thanks for saving us, kero.” Asui croaked.

Iida nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"Think nothing of it." Tokoyami snorted. "But we better come up with a plan to extricate ourselves from this dire situation."

Shoji, his extra limbs forming ears and eyes, nodded. "They're confused, and still can't see because of the dust, but it won't be long before they find us again."

Iida clutched the piece of his helmet covering his chin. A memory flashed in his mind. A dark alley drowned with the scent of sticky copper, the crackle of Midoriya's quirk, and the bright flames from Todoroki. The overwhelming windstorm that blew Stain out of that alley, and Joker-

Joker...

He commanded such authority that called for *teamwork*. Himself, Todoroki, Midoriya, and Joker took on Stain with a unified attack under Joker's leadership. An attack from all sides that left the opponent nearly helpless... but would it work on multiple targets?

"Iida? Are you okay?" Asui asked.

"Y-yes." Iida snapped out of it and looked at his classmates. "Did anybody get hit yet?"

They all checked the various targets stuck around their bodies.

"Not so far." Shoji said.

"Same." Asui nodded.

"I got Fumi covered!" Dark Shadow cackled, "Aaaand... I stole these from those kids!"

Tokoyami puffed up his feathers as Dark Shadow dumped a large pile of brightly colored balls at their feet.

"I almost don't want to know where you hid those, Dark Shadow."
Asui said with an innocent tilt of her head.

Tokoyami facepalmed. "We don't have time for this."

"Yeah," The urgency in Shoji's voice sent prickles across Iida's skin.
"They're getting closer. It will only be a minute or two unless we move."

"Are they the same students from before?" Iida asked.

"I think so." Shoji said as he looked over his shoulder at Iida. "Why?"

"Most of them would be unarmed thanks to Dark Shadow. If they're still approaching, then either they haven't noticed or they're severely underestimating us." Iida crouched down and snatched the ball at the top of the pile. "It'll be our chance to launch a counter attack with minimal casualties." Dark Shadow chirped in excitement, but the others looked at him in shock. "What?"

"Nothing." Asui poked her cheek. "I never thought you would suggest an ambush."

Iida shrugged, though something small twisted in his gut. "We have no choice, and it's our best bet of all of us escaping and finding the others. Any objections?"

They shook their heads and split the extra ammo between them. They stiffened as the sound of several pairs of footsteps echoed nearby.

"I'll use my speed to split them off in smaller groups." Iida whispered as they crouched together. "Tokoyami, you and Dark Shadow throw down cover fire and prevent anybody from escaping. Asui, climb up above and take out as many as you can. Shoji, see if you can get behind them and take them from that route. Everyone be on guard since we don't know what quirks they have. Understood?"

Determination sparked in their eyes and they nodded in unison.

Iida took a runner's stance as flames burst from the engines in his calves, "Let's go!"

Midoriya's heart hammered against his ribcage as he pressed himself against the wall. He was alone, surrounded by hostiles on all sides. His quirk buzzed just under his skin, and small serpents of green lightning crackled around his fingers. But he couldn't just burst away without attracting attention, stranded and without a plan he was-

"Izuuuukuuuuuu!!!"

He whirled around. It was that Shiketsu girl who had tagged alongside Inasa. Her hero costume was nothing more than a black skin tight suit. Midoriya felt a blush as it highlighted all of her curves, but snapped out of it when she slid down the cliff and sauntered towards him. He fell into a battle stance, a ball in his hand as he aimed for the target on her left shoulder.

She blinked and came to a stop. An easy smile slid on her face, but her eyes were hungry and full of bloodlust. It sent a chill down Midoriya's spine. That sort of look was familiar somehow, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"It's okay, silly!" She said as she put her hands up. "I just wanna talk!"

Midoriya didn't move. It could be a ploy to get his guard down, but the fact that she called him by his first name unsettled him.

"What?" He said as he kept his eyes locked on her, ready for any sudden movements. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

"Well..." She tilted her head and ran a finger under the rim of her Shiketsu hat. "You were friends with Aki-chan."

Midoriya's breath caught as ice thrummed through his chest.

"But he betrayed you, didn't he? I doubt he told you he was Joker all along. That must've hurt, huh? To live a lie where you're none the wiser." Her bubbly voice shifted into something darker, "Do you still consider him a friend, Izu-kun? Would you still reach your hand to him even when he broke the law? Aren't heroes supposed to bring criminals to 'justice'?"

"I-I..." Midoriya shivered. How in the world *did she know*? The girl's eyes dug into his skin like a predator's talons, and he wet his lips despite the sudden dryness in his mouth. "Akira did hurt me. A lot. It's not like I've forgiven him yet, but I... I understand his reasons. I would save him if I could, no matter what."

Her eyes widened. "So you think it's a hero's job to save *everyone*, no matter what they did in the past?"

"I do." Midoriya said, his expression hardening with resolve.

She giggled. "Ooooh, no wonder why Stain liked you so much."

"Wh-*what*?"

"Deku-kun!!"

Uraraka shot around the corner and threw a ball at the other girl. The Shiketsu student zipped away in a blur, the ball zinging through empty air.

"Better luck next time." The Shiketsu girl winked, "Ah well, later Izu-kun!!"

Uraraka gaped at her until she disappeared, then she rounded on him.

"Deku, are you okay!?" Uraraka asked. "You don't look so good. What did she say to you?"

“N-nothing.” Midoriya shook his head frantically. “I-it’s nothing. Let’s just focus on the exam, okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Uraraka studied him for a few seconds, but released a breath. “No. I’m okay.”

“We need a plan.” Midoriya peeked around the boulder, Shindo’s derisive laughter echoed from somewhere up ahead. “If only we could get a signal to the rest of our classmates, something we could-”

A beam of sparking light rose up and pierced the heavens.

“Aoyama!” Uraraka said.

“Let’s go while everyone is distracted!”

Uraraka beamed, “Right behind you, Deku-kun!”

“Do you think we’re the first in our class to pass?” Ashido said as she waited alongside himself and Momo.

Their targets had turned a soft blue, and they were given directions to a small waiting room located on the edge of the testing area. It was minuscule compared to the arena outside.

“It’s still early.” Momo said as she looked around. Her eyes passed over the delectable buffet, but ultimately landed on the large screen taking up an entire wall, showcasing Bakugo with Kirishima and Kaminari as they fought against that purple haired Shiketsu student. “I’m sure everyone will be here soon.”

“Yeah.” Shoto narrowed his eyes as they watched the destruction for a few moments, but he felt a prickle on the back of his neck. He scanned the area, it wasn’t difficult to locate the perpetrator.

“Shoto, we’re going to grab something to eat. You want anything?” Momo frowned when he didn’t answer. She exchanged a quick look with Ashido. “Shoto?”

“Go on ahead,” He said as he walked away.

“We’ll grab you something!!” Ashido shouted with an enthusiastic wave.

Shoto stared back at Inasa’s scathing glare. He stopped a few feet away from the towering giant, who had his arms crossed and chin raised. His hero costume was different to his school uniform. He kept the hat, but the rest of his burgundy suit was pinned together with yellow-gold buttons. A long cape fell down his back and fluttered at his ankles, and there were strange tubes sticking out of his legs. He wondered if it wasn’t a propulsion system for his quirk.

Inasa’s glare intensified as Shoto met his eyes once more.

“Did I do something to offend you?” Shoto asked calmly.

Inasa bristled. “Oh, I’m sorry, *son of Endeavor*,” The anger in Inasa’s eyes boiled over to something... dark. “But I absolutely hate you. You’ve changed quite a bit since I last saw you, but your eyes are the exact same as Endeavor’s.”

Shoto blinked as Inasa turned on his heel, his cape flaring with the movement, and walked away.

“They’re.... like Endeavor’s?”

“Shoto...”

He looked over to Ashido and Momo, their mouths wide.

“What the heck was wrong with that guy!?” Ashido muttered. “Should I go beat him up!?”

“Mina.” Momo never looked away from Shoto’s eyes, “Please go wait by the door. In case some of the others come here.”

“O-oh.” Ashido looked between the two of them. “Right. Sure thing!”

Shoto studied an interesting speck on the floor. He didn’t see how Momo pursed her lips and tightened her grip on the water bottles and snacks she held.

“Shoto-”

“I’m fine.”

“*Shoto* . Look at me.” He did, looking rather like a kicked puppy on the verge of turning feral. She shoved some food into his hands, and then placed her free hand on his shoulder. Something about her soft touch dumped a bucket of ice water on the quiet rage simmering in his heart. “I know you better than that. What that jerk said wasn’t true, not in the slightest. You’re *not* like him, Shoto, not at all, the same way that I’m not my parents, either.” He stiffened when she linked her arm with his. “And we’ll show him just how wrong he is when we pass this exam together.”

“Right.” He huffed, but smiled as the rest of the anger flooded out of his veins. “Thanks, Momo.”

Her smile crinkled her eyes and made them twinkle. “Any time, Shoto.”

“Only eleven more spots until the exam is over...” The tired voice over the comms gave Aizawa a run for his money, “Eleven spots....”

“Come on, kids...” Aizawa growled under his breath.

“Only ten spots left... ten...” A yawn overcame the comms. “... spots left...”

Several other teachers from separate schools watched as his class reunited. A veritable sea of pigeons stormed around Aoyama as he blasted his laser into the sky. Familiar quirks came out of the wood-works, from Mineta's ability to stick helpless students to the ground, to Ojiro's flowing movements and Hagakure's power to leave them blinded. Midoriya and Uraraka joined the fray as easy as breathing.

The resulting all out attack left *no* survivors. It would have been a bloodbath if the balls had been bullets or their quirks struck with fatal intent.

"Time's up." The tired voice called. "All 100 spots have been filled. Hooray."

Ms. Joke's jaw dropped to the floor.

"Geez, those kids scared me for a bit." Aizawa snorted, his terrifying grin returned with a vengeance. "I told you they would all pass."

"You totally did! I'm proud of the ones who passed in my class, but everyone from 1-A actually survived!" She turned her head and did a double take. "Eraser!! You're... SMILING!?"

"Shut up."

"Izuuuuu-kuuuun!" Midoriya stiffened as that Shiketsu girl ambushed him with a tight hug, nearly smothering him. "I'm soooo glad we made it together!!"

"Hey! Get your hands off of him!" Uraraka shouted with puffed cheeks. "Can't you see he can't breathe!?"

The girl blinked, and looked down to Midoriya, who had turned cherry red. "Oops! Sorry!"

Midoriya gasped as she let go, rubbing his throat as Uraraka glared at the girl and grabbed Midoriya's arm. The Shiketsu girl's giggle

slithered in their ears as Uraraka dragged Midoriya away, closer to the huddled group of Class 1-A.

“Midoriya!” Kaminari and Mineta were on him as soon as Uraraka let go. Kaminari glared. “How do you know her!? She gave you a hug, a-and you were *right* into her-”

“Tell us your secrets, Midoriya-kun!!” Mineta shouted as he clapped his hands together in a prayer. “Please!!”

“Knock it off, you two.” Yaomomo pinned them with a stern glare. “It’s embarrassing to yourselves and humiliating for Midoriya.”

“But-!” Kaminari and Mineta looked over their shoulders.

Iida had crossed his arms and gave them the same look, and Todoroki’s icy glare from behind Momo killed off their boyish desires. The two of them crept into the far corner and muttered between themselves.

“Geez, what’s their problem?” Jiro deadpanned.

“Although they have a point, kero.” Asui simply blinked as the others locked onto her with shocked glares. “Not about... *that*, but that girl seemed to know you, Midoriya.”

“She was with him during the exam!” Uraraka balled her hands into fists.

“N-no she wasn’t! Not like that!” Midoriya waved his hands frantically as his cheeks burned. His hands stilled and they fell to his sides as he scrunched his brow. “But she... she...”

Iida and Yaomomo exchanged a long glance.

Todoroki stepped beside them, frowning, “What’s wrong, Midoriya?”

“She knew about Akira.” Midoriya’s expression pinched “How I was friends with him before... She asked me if I would abandon him just

because he broke the law.”

Many in Class 1-A openly gaped. A few stared at the Shiketsu girl, who now chatted among her other classmates that passed the exam. Bakugo froze. The plate of food in his hands, which he had been eating as if the food itself insulted him, creaked ominously.

“Well, there are many rumors going around on forums still, but...” Todoroki’s eyes hardened. “How would she know you were friends with him? Do you think she visited the cafe and saw you there without you noticing?”

“I don’t know.” Midoriya shook his head. “I mean, it’s possible but I don’t think that’s it. Maybe she saw us during Kamino and took a wild guess?”

“Whatever the case, we shouldn’t let them get to us.” Asui gently rubbed Midoriya’s arm. “Both Ketsubutsu and Shiketsu students seem to know what makes us tick, so they’re just saying whatever they want to throw us off. We can’t let them get to us if we want to pass this exam.”

“That, and maybe they’re trying to prove something.” Todoroki scanned the room. “U.A. isn’t the only school Joker put on a pedestal.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Jiro said as she folded her arms. “But they don’t have to be so damn mean about it.”

“In a way, we have to get used to it.” Iida said, though his hands were curled into tight fists. “There will be plenty of rumors and naysayers about us when we become full fledged heroes. I agree with Asui, it’s best not to let their words get under our skin.”

“You know you can just call me Tsuyu.”

Iida flinched. “Right. Thanks, Tsuyu.”

“No problem, kero.”

Bakugo slammed his plate down on a table and stomped away. Kirishima nearly jumped out of his skin, but he trailed after Bakugo as the rest of their classmates gawked.

“What was that was about?” Uraraka whispered.

“I don’t know.” Midoriya said. “Maybe something upset Kacchan? He’s... not really one to let go of things easily.”

“I hope he can control his temper.” Tokoyami, who leaned against the wall, said. “The last thing he needs is to fail the exam simply because he couldn’t soothe his own inner demons.”

Todoroki grimly nodded, and his eyes went to Inasa on the other side of the room. Yaomomo took his wrist and gently squeezed. An alarm blared overhead before they got their wits together, and the giant screen switched to a city swathed in destruction.

“Attention, all heroes!” A voice rang overhead. “Villains have begun a large-scale terrorist attack! This is occurring in all areas of ‘City Name Here.’ Er...” The voice cleared its throat. “Due to the collapsed buildings and other hazards, there are many injured civilians!”

“Wait.” Tsuyu tilted her head. “This is the scenario for our next exercise? Isn’t it just like...”

“Kamino.” Iida muttered.

“Injured civilians...” Yaomomo’s eyes widened. “But many civilians were healed because of Joker.”

“Not all of them, though. Maybe that’s why they chose this.” Midoriya’s eyes hardened as he stared up at the screen, where ‘civilian’ actors had painted themselves with fake blood and pretended to have excruciating injuries. “They want to see what we

can do in a situation like Kamino without someone like Joker around to help.”

“Geez, they weren’t kidding around when they said it’d be a brutal exam.” Sero said.

Like the first exam building, this one trembled as the ceiling and walls opened up. Many shielded their eyes as sunlight blinded them.

The announcer continued, “Due to heavily damaged roads, the first group of rescue workers have been delayed! Until they arrive, the heroes in the area will lead the rescue efforts.”

They blinked as the destruction surrounded them. Midoriya, Iida, and the others who snuck into Kamino suppressed bone chilling shivers. The mass destruction was identical to when All For One blew half of Kamino off the map. Midoriya looked up, half expecting to see the sky streaked with countless shooting stars, and the descent of an angelic being.

Thankfully, it was sunny with only a few clouds. No stars, demonic villains, or over a dozen mythological beings in sight... yet.

“Bakugo, wait!!” Kirishima shouted.

Bakugo was the first to launch himself into the destruction after the announcer gave the green light. Kirishima rushed after him, and other students began to follow.

“Remember what Midnight-sensei said.” Yaomomo’s voice carried over to other student groups, who turned to stare at her. “This is a *rescue* operation, with a chance that a powerful villain will show up. We need secure communications lines as well as a base of operations, and split up into groups to handle specific tasks. One to protect the injured, one to launch a counter attack should this villain show his face, and the final group should be medics to look after the wounded.”

Other students murmured and Iida furrowed his brow. "Does anyone have communicators?"

"I'll make them." Yaomomo walked to the nearest table as her quirk sparked to life. It took only moments for her to make a large pile of ear pieces. Kaminari helped fine tune them. "Everyone! Please take one and break up into those groups. This city is counting on us!"

"Hell yeah!!" Inasa grinned. He was the first student not in 1-A to swipe up an ear piece. "Leave it to U.A. to take the lead!!"

Others in Shiketsu followed. The one girl winked at Midoriya as she took one and then pranced off in the same direction where Bakugo stormed away.

Shindo and his classmates from Ketsubutsu were next, and it wasn't long before the rest of them had the same earpieces.

"Will Bakugo and Kirishima be okay?" Kaminari asked.

"They can take care of themselves." Shoji said. "We just have to believe in them."

"I hope this works." Todoroki muttered.

"It will." Yaomomo said. The pure confidence in her tone eased their worries, and she stood tall and bore a smile. "Everyone, move out!"

"Bakugo, wait up!" Kirishima's footsteps pounded over debris as Bakugo skid into a landing, kicking up a small cloud of dust. Kirishima grabbed his arm before he could launch himself again. "Dude, what's wrong?"

"What's *wrong*?" Bakugo tore his arm away, and he refused to look Kirishima in the eye. "What the hell do you think is wrong!?"

Kirishima blinked rapidly. "Uh, are you upset because someone brought up Aniki?"

Bakugo snarled as he plowed his way through the destruction. Kirishima was at his heels, utterly bewildered.

"Dude, if you need to vent about something, then vent!" Kirishima half jogged to stay at Bakugo's side. Bakugo's eyes carried a heavy storm and his shoulders reached up to his ears in a predatory slouch, his lips curled sharply into a scowl. "I *know* something has been on your mind since... well, since we got to the dorms. I'm here for you dude, you just need to talk to me!"

Bakugo stopped. It was so sudden that Kirishima almost lost his balance and crashed into him. Kirishima kept eye contact as Bakugo just glared. After a tense moment, some of Bakugo's anger drained with a long sigh.

"Fine. *Fine.*" Bakugo growled. "You want to know what's wrong?"

"Yes! I do."

Bakugo opened his mouth when a shrill laughter came from behind them. That Shiketsu girl in the skin tight body suit stood on a pile of rubble, staring at them with a smirk. Her gaze stabbed them like a knife and every hair on their bodies stood straight up.

"I think it's obvious what 'Kacchan' is so mad about." She teased.

"Who the hell do you think you are!?" Bakugo snarled at her.

"It's pretty simple." The girl's lips were set in a pout, but the sharp edge in her voice remained steady. "This place looks exactly like Kamino, doesn't it? Except Joker's not around to save your sorry lives again."

Kirishima's mouth dropped open.

"You-!!" Bakugo snapped.

“Oh, but he didn’t just save you, did he?” She leaned forward, and the rim of her hat draped her eyes in shadow. “In return, you left him for dead. You decided to save your own sorry skin and left Aki-chan to die at the hands of that villain.” Her eyes roamed over Kirishima, “You’re just as guilty. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“We didn’t-” Kirishima tried, but she waved him off with a bored sigh.

“Some hero students *you* turned out to be.” She shook her head “You can’t even save people who are right in front of you. It’s no wonder Aki-chan won’t show his face, maybe the Kamino Disaster crippled him for good? You should really be ashamed of yourselves!”

“Shut up, SHUT UP!!” Bakugo threw a hand forward, the concussive blow reducing the rubble to ashes. The girl giggled as she jumped away and disappeared into the wreckage. Bakugo panted until the grit clogged his throat.

“Bakugo.” Kirishima fully faced towards his friend. “Don’t let her get to you, man!”

“No, she’s right.”

“She’s not!” Kirishima latched both hands on Bakugo’s shoulders and resisted the urge to shake him. “She’s just saying whatever the heck she wants to piss you off! She doesn’t know what she’s talking about!”

Bakugo knocked Kirishima’s arms away, his eyes red rimmed. “But she’s *right* .”

“I’ll say it again, she isn’t!” Kirishima cried. “I-I was there too! Aniki didn’t want us to stay there, he wanted us to get to safety! We didn’t abandon him!”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand!”

"I... I saw him, up close." Bakugo stared into his palms. "He was practically oozing black stuff from his eyes and mouth." Kirishima grimaced as Bakugo stared him in the eye, "We really left him *for dead*."

"I don't get it?" Kirishima's heart pounded in his ears. "The heroes said he was alive, right? That he just faked his death?"

"... Nevermind." Bakugo huffed as he turned on his heel and walked through an opening in the rubble.

"Hey!" Kirishima piped up as he fell in step with Bakugo again. "What do you mean?"

"Forget about it, Shitty Hair!" Bakugo snapped. "Let's just get this stupid exam over with so we can go home."

Kirishima studied Bakugo, but any comforting words were stuck in his throat. Instead, he smiled, or tried to. It came off a bit shaky.

"O-okay. But remember what I said. If you need to talk, I'll always be in your corner."

"Whatever," Bakugo growled. "Let's just locate the damn villain so we can kick his ass, alright? We'll show them that we don't need anyone to rescue us."

"That's the spirit!"

Kirishima threw on his brightest grin, despite how the falseness of it made his own skin crawl. But he'd push through for his buddy, no matter what.

Gang Orca stared down at his phone. *Hoping* . Waiting for a text from some unknown number, but he'd know who it was from. It never came. His phone creaked under his grasp as it remained silent. He

knew he gave the kid his personal number after the Sapporo incident, so why hasn't he called?

Did he not trust Gang Orca?

Did he simply *not* need help?

Or... was he in a state where he couldn't call for help, even if he needed to?

"Gang Orca, it's almost time for your villain debut. Are you in position?"

"Almost." Gang Orca grumbled as he put the phone in the locker and shut it, his claws lightly grating on the metal. He headed towards the exit. "How are they doing?"

"Reports are flooding in from the H.U.C. A majority are doing well, honestly a lot better than I expected. One class took charge and assigned tasks to groups, and they've even established a command center and first aid stations. Other teams are working together to comb through the rubble. A good chunk of the 'civilians' have been saved, but a lot more are still in the wreckage."

Gang Orca hummed as he walked through the hall. "Did something happen?"

"Well, we docked two students' points at the start because one taunted the other into attacking. Another student intervened before any real damage was done, but they'll probably fail if they don't get their act together."

"I see. I'll begin the attack in 60 seconds." He turned a corner, where many 'minions' in dark suits and masks waited for him. They were armed with cement guns, bombs, and other gadgets ready for mock combat. Gang Orca jumped into character. He wasn't one of the top rated heroes who looked more like a villain for nothing. "Remember

everyone, we're testing these heroes to the best of their abilities! Don't hold anything back!"

"Yes, Boss!!" Many voices chorused in unison.

Gang Orca laughed and cracked his knuckles. He faced the wall and threw on a wicked grin. He took a deep breath, and the wall exploded under his sonic blast. His thunderous footsteps echoed into the decimated city, followed by the rhythmic marching of countless minions. Other explosions rocked the city.

He emerged from the dust cloud, his dark cape flaring. Many young heroes looked at him in terror. He was less than half a kilometer away from the main control center, where a majority of the injured civilians were being cared for.

"Fight and save." He announced, his voice carrying like the smoke clouds hanging over the city. "Can you do both at the same time?"

Gang Orca sliced his hand towards the command center, and his minions charged with a unified cry.

"Villains have appeared and started their pursuit!" The announcer screamed. "Hero candidates at the scene should continue their rescue efforts while also suppressing the villains!"

"What will you do, little heroes," Gang Orca chuckled as his minion army continued to run past him. "Fight, or protect? Save, or run?"

Ms. Joke gasped as chaos erupted across the city.

"This situation would be difficult even for a seasoned pro." Aizawa said.

"Man, they're really not holding back this year." She said as she leaned forward.

“Yeah, I didn’t think they would push it this far.” Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose. Familiar words formed at the tip of his tongue. “This is really a trial by fire. It wasn’t enough to launch a full scale rescue effort.”

“A trial by fire, huh?” Ms. Joke hummed. “Isn’t that what Joker said ages ago?”

“Yeah,” Aizawa grimaced as Gang Orca directly assaulted the command center. He recognized a handful of his students standing between the ‘villains’ and the injured civilians, among a few from other schools. “I never thought the HC would take it so literally.”

“Especially coming from a kid vigilante.”

Aizawa sighed as he leaned back in his chair, “I doubt they’re doing this just because of Joker.” His eyes roamed across the stadium, picking out the groups of HC grunts whispering and pointing at the students below, “Sure, Joker had a hand in it, but maybe this shit system was always going to fall apart from the beginning, with or without him.”

“Maybe, but I’d argue that Joker made people more aware of the problems so they’d be prepared! People still have faith in heroes, especially when it comes to a certain group of top pros... and maybe a few students.”

Aizawa shrugged, he was about to reply when Ms. Joke suddenly gasped and shot to her feet.

“Shindo!!”

Shindo became paralyzed by Gang Orca’s debilitating sound waves. Todoroki and Inasa stormed onto the scene, wind and fire coiling together, but it wasn’t a unified attack. The sudden change in air pressure whipped Todoroki’s fire away from Gang Orca and directly towards a paralyzed Shindo.

Aizawa gripped the edge of his seat as Midoriya zipped by, clad in green lightning. He grasped Shindo by the back of his hero costume and shot away before the fire consumed them.

“What the hell are they doing?” Aizawa growled.

Ms. Joke gripped her head with both hands. “Those idiots! They almost got him injured, or worse!”

Aizawa buried his face in his capture weapon, hiding his grimace. The battle suddenly changed when Bakugo shot into the sky like an angry dragon, right above Gang Orca and his surrounding minions.

Gang Orca looked upwards, the sun's glare shielding Bakugo with blinding rays. Gang Orca smirked. *That* was a smart entrance.

“Dragon Cannon!” Bakugo screamed.

Streams of explosive fire burst from his hands, dozens of comets with long tails that streaked through the sky. They whistled ominously as they sped towards the ground.

“Get back!” Gang Orca shouted, but it was too late.

His minions' screams were overtaken by the bone deep explosions strong enough to gouge the earth. Bright flashes and thick smoke clogged his senses as the relentless assault continued. His ears rang and his eyes burned. A thread of explosive fire burst next to him, and he was thrown aside.

He rolled to a stop, his claws scratching the ground as he got to his knees. Silence permeated the grounds as the smoke lazily danced with the wind. His minions were splayed out around him, knocked unconscious by the concussive force. None of them have been hit directly. There were no gory injuries. Plenty of burns, his own skin steamed from the bursts of intense heat, and yet nothing indicated

that the attack was intentionally lethals. No stray comets were anywhere near the civilians.

Bakugo landed in front of his stunned comrades. The boy's hands streamed with smoke as he stomped towards Inasa with murder in his expression.

"What the hell was that!?" Bakugo snarled in Inasa's face. The other boy was several inches taller, but Bakugo wasn't cowed. "Are you trying to get people killed!?"

Inasa flinched, matching Bakugo's scowl with one of his own. "No! Todoroki was in my way! I was just trying to handle the villain and his attack messed it up!"

"Me?" Todoroki asked, his voice scarily calm. "You should know that heat changes the air pressure. I already launched my fire towards the villain before your wind redirected it."

"Don't blame IcyHot for your stupidity!" Bakugo jabbed Inasa in the chest and jerked his chin towards Shindo, who was still paralyzed as Midoriya set him down. "What do you think would happen if this were real, huh!? What sort of hero puts his own comrades in danger!?"

Inasa scowled. "Endeavor's son doesn't deserve to be a hero."

Gang Orca noticed heat waves warping the air around Todoroki, but he remained calm and in control.

"Gang Orca, what are you doing?"

"Perhaps this young hero needs to face the harsh reality of his actions." Gang Orca whispered. "I won't let it go on too long, but I want to see where this conversation goes."

There was a curious hum over his comm before it went silent.

"IcyHot isn't Endeavor, dumbass." Bakugo snapped. "Even Endeavor wouldn't be this stupid." Bakugo inched closer to Inasa. "I was at

Kamino. I witnessed what a *real* villain would do in a moment of weakness. You would have blood on your hands.” Bakugo jabbed a finger towards Shindo, “Could you look his family in the eye and explain why he died because of your ego? If you ask me, it’s *you* who shouldn’t be a hero!”

Inasa’s mouth dropped open. A faint tremble overtook the boy’s body as he glanced at Shindo, who glared back. The weight settled on his shoulders, but Bakugo didn’t give him any time to answer as he turned away.

“Hang back and let the real heroes do their work. Protect the civilians and the rescue heroes behind us!”

“Midoriya, are you okay!?” Another red-headed boy emerged from the rubble, panting. “I saw what happened.”

“Y-yes! We’re fine!”

“Easy for you to say.” Shindo grumbled as he tried to move, but couldn’t.

“Listen up, extras.” Bakugo said as he took charge. “I have a plan if-”

Gang Orca waited long enough. The rest of the smoke cleared and Gang Orca howled with laughter, pushing himself to his feet despite the pulling pain of light burns across his skin. The students whirled towards him, falling into battle stances. Bakugo, Todoroki, Midoriya, and Kirishima.

Inasa stepped back, his eyes still wide in terrified realization.

“Well done!” Gang Orca spread his arms wide. “But I’m not down yet! You’ll have to do better than that, heroes!”

Bakugo bore a malicious grin. “Bring it on, Fish Face!”

Gang Orca matched this boy’s devilish expression, and took a step forward. Suddenly, his hero intuition *screamed* . A spike of real

malicious intent stabbed his spine. He whipped around, fist outstretched. The *crunch* of a bone breaking crept into his knuckles, and a Shiketsu girl cried out as he knocked her away into the rubble. Something metallic shone in the sunlight before it was lost in the wreckage.

When did she-

Gang Orca didn't even *hear* her approach.

"Now!"

His attention snapped back to the U.A. students.

Kirishima charged, his whole body going rigid as he used his quirk. Gang Orca blocked the rapid fire punches from Kirishima, who smiled as their fists clashed together. They were locked in a battle of attrition. Gang Orca's bulk and strength would overpower him in time, but Kirishima wasn't backing down.

Gang Orca snarled when they were swallowed by a swirling storm of fire. The flames nipped at their clothes and Gang Orca's previous burns flared in pain.

Kirishima grimaced. His skin wasn't effected by the fire as long as his quirk was active, but his hero costume smoldered. Gang Orca felt his strength drain, and he was steadily losing ground. One of his knees buckled under the sweltering air.

"Now!" Kirishima shouted.

The flames cut off. Gang Orca's skin lightly bubbled. His costume helped shield his body, but most of the pain was around his face and chest. Viridian sparks appeared in the corner of his eye when Midoriya dove for them. The power of a freight train crashed into Gang Orca as Midoriya's kick threw him through the air.

"Die!"

Gang Orca grinned as Bakugo took a wide stance. He aimed at Gang Orca and pulled the pin on his grenade gauntlet. The world was consumed in burning light and the crack of thunder.

He felt himself crashing into a pile of rubble, the scent of his own injuries curling his nose.

“Th-the head villain has been defeated by the heroes!” The comms shouted as his vision wavered. “I repeat, the head villain has been defeated by heroes!!”

The world turned black, and the next time he opened his eyes a medic was crouched over him. He shifted, and the woman smiled.

“Take it easy, Gang Orca.” She said. “Those kids really did a number on you, huh?”

Gang Orca sat up. They were still in the testing city. Bandages and cool cream covered his injuries, and he didn’t hurt as much.

“The exam?” He said as he checked himself over.

“It ended a bit ago.” She said as she packed up her first aid kit. “The students cleared out while medics are double checking the testing site. Your injuries weren’t as bad as they looked and you should be able to move normally, but don’t stress yourself too much, alright?”

She made to leave, but he caught her arm. “There was a student... that girl from Shiketsu. Is she alright?”

The medic blinked. “A girl from Shiketsu? I’m not sure, she might still be around somewhere.”

He nodded. Gang Orca stood fully and scanned the decimated city, particularly the area destroyed by Bakugo’s surprise attack.

“‘Dragon Cannon’?” He whispered to himself. He remembered Seth’s battle with Ryukyu ages ago, and of the striking similarity of certain attacks. “I wonder if Bakugo was inspired by Seth?”

He shook his head and crossed the quiet battleground. It wasn't until he went inside, and had gotten directions from a few other medics, that he finally found who he was looking for. The Shiketsu student leaned against a wall in a forgotten hallway, her arm wrapped in a cast and bandages around her forehead.

She heard his footsteps and grinned at him. "Gang Orca!"

He stopped in his tracks. Something about her smile set off his predatory instincts. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, this?" She waved the cast. "I'm fine! It really hurt at first, but the medics here sure know what they're doing! I'll be fine in no time!"

"I want to apologize." He sighed when she raised a brow at him. "You snuck up behind me and I never sensed you. I used more force than necessary when I felt..." *Murderuos intent?* But that can't be right. He cleared his throat, "How did you do that?"

She giggled, the sound curdling his blood. "Oh, I've been practicing my stealth! I clear my mind of any thoughts and try to move as quietly as possible. It's really hard, and I've been getting better at it, but I guess it could still use some work."

"I... see."

"I want to ask *you* something." Gang Orca blinked as she pulled herself from the wall, and lowered her gaze so her hat shielded her eyes. "You want to do that program with Ryukyu, right? Do you really think villains deserve a second chance?"

Gang Orca peered at her, his gaze intense. He answered honestly. "Yes. Villains, especially younger ones, should have a chance at redemption should they want it. I don't expect every villain to go along with it, but for the ones that do-" He looked down at his clenched fist, "They should at least have a chance for a new lease on life."

“Hmmm.” She turned her back to him, her expression hidden. “I like you, Gang Orca. Maybe there is Hope for a decent future after all. This exam has been... enlightening.”

A pit fell in Gang Orca’s stomach as she walked away. “Young lady, wait.”

She stopped, but didn’t turn around to look at him. Her tense posture confused him, as if she were in flight or fight mode.

“I want you to answer me honestly, and I promise that whatever you say won’t get you in any trouble.” He said softly. “Do you need help? Are you in any danger?”

She giggled again. She turned to look over her shoulder and gave him a genuine smile. Something about it was a bit sad, though.

“I’m fine, I promise! I was just curious about your program, that’s all.” She tipped her hat and walked away. “See ya!”

Despite his instincts saying otherwise, Gang Orca let her go.

Several hours passed before they found the *real* Utsushimi Cami drugged and unconscious in a supply closet.

The sunset’s warming rays streamed in from the windows and painted the teacher’s lounge in a golden haze. Toshinori smiled at his phone. His successor sent a picture of himself beaming while holding up his provisional license. His smile faded as he thought of Aizawa’s texts.

Most of 1-A passed the exam: except for one.

Bakugo. One point away from passing, simply because a villain masqueraded as a student and taunted him into attacking her. Apparently he also yelled at a few civilians who weren’t so injured that they couldn’t move on their own. But he defended Todoroki and

led the final attack against Gang Orca. That should've counted for something!

It was ridiculous. That boy must be devastated and embarrassed. Maybe Toshinori could invite him for tea sometime? But then again, Bakugo hardly looked at him ever since Kamino.

With a long sigh, he congratulated Midoriya and went into his contact list. His finger hovered over Nighteye's number. Gran Torino was busy with other things, and Nighteye could teach Midoriya a lot. It's a bit early for the students to think about long-term work studies, but it wouldn't hurt to ask ahead of time.

Toshinori steeled himself and pressed the call button.

"Maybe this was a bad idea, after all." Kaito said.

"I agree." Gentle Criminal skimmed over the dark alley. "It's not wise for us to be out and about. Especially you, Akira."

"I told you, this is important." Ren said as he heavily leaned on the cane borrowed from Gentle Criminal. While he steadily regained strength, he still didn't trust himself to walk any great distance. Compress carried them with his quirk for most of the way, but he wanted to do the rest by himself. He *had* to. "We're not staying long."

Other shadows clung to the alley. Spinner and Lady Stubbs leaned against the cold wall, their gilded scarves adding a touch of warm color. Mr. Compress sat cross legged on a dumpster lid, twisting his cane around his hands, his expression indiscernible under that Arsene-like mask. Gentle Criminal and La Brava were glued at the hip, always within an arms length of each other.

"But why?" La Brava asked softly. "There are pictures of it online and the grand reveal has been replaying on the news-"

“It’s not the same.” Ren interrupted. “I just need to confirm something in person. That’s all.”

La Brava bit her lip, but relented.

“Well,” Kaito was the closest to Ren, holding the bag where Morgana hid. “Let’s do what you want to do and get out of here.”

Ren pulled the hood of his jacket tighter as the curious stares digging into his back intensified.

“Kaito and I are going with him.” Morgana said from the bag. “The rest of you stay here so we don’t draw unnecessary attention.”

Ren took the first step out into the street.

Kaito clenched his jaw as he followed. Ren felt Morgana’s nerves as he peeked through the slit in the bag. The light *clack clack* of Gentle Criminal’s cane echoed in the sleepy street. A low, thick fog clinging to the city hid them from anybody who decided to wander around this time of night, the coolness of it gracing their faces. Sunbursts of diffused light came from the streetlamps speckling the area.

Ren powered on towards the new square in the dead center of Kamino. Scorched and burning earth had been smoothed out by fresh concrete, shattered buildings replaced as easily as setting broken bones. Hell, he *knew* where each and every Persona had been birthed into the world under a united purpose to defeat an underground demon lord. Funny, how so much time could pass in the blink of an eye when you were ill.

He stopped suddenly.

Kaito froze, ready to catch him should he collapse.

“There,” Ren pointed at a building to his right, half hidden by the fog. “Is where Satanael came down from the sky. That building looks a lot smaller than he was, though.”

Morgana held his breath as Ren continued, and they stopped once more in the shadow of a statue several feet high.

All Might, in all of his muscled glory. Joker, coat tails flaring as he held a charming smirk. They stood back to back, with a larger Satanael posing with his arms and wings wide over them. Every detail of the statue was immaculate, so close to the real things that they could come to life and jump down from the pedestal. No smug grin was on Ren's face like his Joker counterpart, nor did Satanael whisper his thoughts in his desolate soul.

Cold candles and photos littered the base of the statue. Damp letters and cards with loving messages scrawled on them. Those who were lost to the destruction.

Ren's throat tightened.

Akechi was right.

This statue felt *wrong* . A diseased monument jutting out of the earth, an object that *never should have been* . Ren felt dizzy just looking at it. He longed for those brilliant azure flames that brought his Personas into reality, if only to reduce the fake Joker and Satanael to dust with rending claws. Only All Might deserved to be here.

"Akira?" Kaito whispered after a prolonged disquiet.

"Let's take the picture and be done with it."

Kaito looked around. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. We'll wait a while before we post it in order to cover our tracks. Morgana?"

Morgana stuck his nose out. "There's nobody around." He climbed out of the bag and jumped onto Ren's shoulder.

Kaito sighed as Ren handed the cane to him. Ren stood tall and pocketed his hands, and threw on a grin despite the shadow of his

hood. He thought it felt sharper than usual, or perhaps not as genuine. He hoped the hood would hide his sickly appearance.

Morgana took a breath and tried to look regal.

Kaito held up the phone, and they heard the snap as he took the picture. Morgana climbed down and hopped back into the bag as Kaito stuck his phone in his pocket.

“We’re done here.” Ren grabbed the cane from Kaito and turned his back on the statue. “Let’s go.”

The hair on the back of Kaito’s neck stood on end. He had never heard a kid sound so *bitter*. It twisted like a knife into his heart, but he kept his mouth shut as he followed with Morgana in toe. They returned to the darkness of the alley. Their Leader kept his head down as he walked past all of them, the *tap tap* bouncing from the walls.

“Akira-” La Brava said.

He stopped dead in his tracks, his back turned to them.

“No. Manami, you know that my name is not Kurusu Akira. It’s simply the one I gave you so you could forge a fake identity. I’ve never told you my real name.” Ren said as Morgana wriggled out of Kaito’s bag and climbed on his shoulder once more. Ren turned to face them fully, jamming the end of the cane in the concrete to rest both of his hands on. “But that lie died in the hospital.”

“*What !?*” Spinner screeched.

Mr. Compress shot up as if he had been electrocuted. “You mean...?”

“Yes. My name...” Everyone held their breath as their Leader, as broken as he had been these past weeks, raised his head with the

last dregs of strength. A new light glittered in his eyes like a silver flame rekindled. “My *real* name is Amamiya Ren.”

The World Arcana thrummed within Satanael like a fading heartbeat, and through him it sustained the others’ deeply slumbering forms resting within. Their one tie to life after the Trickster was brutally ripped away.

Without the World Arcana...

If he had been a moment too late to fully absorb the World Arcana’s powers and save the other Personas, if the wave of the Trickster’s final death struck them before... He didn’t want to think about it. But now they were stranded in a sea of caustic shadows with no way back to their true self. If he even lived. That terror froze Satanael to his core, but he forced himself to believe the Magician revived the Trickster in time, lest he go absolutely mad in this hellish void.

A small twinkle glimmered in the corner of his eye. He swiveled his head towards the tiny blue flicker of flame, glowing to spite the vast Sea smothering it. The writhing shadows recoiled away when it pulsed with faint strength, as if they were afraid. Satanael reached a clawed hand towards it, the warmth seeping into his body.

It sank into his palm, and Satanael gave off a subtle blue glow. It was there and gone within a moment, but the World Arcana drank deeply of it like the roots of a parched tree. A new vigor coursed through them as another small star burst to life within the void.

Satanael smiled.

Not much longer now :)

Also, here's a playlist of any DTESH related streams over on youtube. If you want to see the DTESH Personas in action, then feel free to check them out!

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?
list=PLlhgzsrNwArRNB12y01IMm5YcZiplmxFC](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlhgzsrNwArRNB12y01IMm5YcZiplmxFC)

Next update - April 9th

You Are Stronger

Chapter 69: Slight Change In Update Schedule

Hey guys, whats up. Like the title says, there will be a slight delay in chapters, but not for terribly long. Something happened and I need a little bit of time to recuperate.

Update schedule:

You Are Stronger - April 23rd

Mementos(Upper Layer) - May 7th

Anti-HERO - May 14th

We are extremely close to the next twist in the story, and while the next chapters would have been finished in the usual schedule, it wouldn't hurt to have extra time to polish them more. This bit will be deleted when the next chapter goes up.

Thanks guys. Much love <3

Mementos(Upper Layer)

Chapter 70: Mementos(Upper Layer)

Bruno said it looked like rain~

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tsukauchi rubbed the sleep from his eyes before he entered the little courthouse library. There were a few small cubicles concentrated in the middle, with a small kitchenette on the other side. Tsukauchi heard Nezu from a smaller room to his right, and looked in to see Nezu sitting next to Yaoyorozu.

Nezu looked at him and nodded.

“I won’t be gone long, but do send a message if you need anything.” Nezu said as he squeezed her hand.

“I’ll be alright.” She said, though her smile felt as exhausted as Tsukauchi was.

Nezu nodded, and walked beside Tsukauchi as they went out into the hall.

“Is she holding up alright?” He asked.

Nezu sighed, “As well as can be. It’s never easy in a situation like this, let alone going against her own parents. She’s strong enough to where it won’t break her.”

Tsukauchi nodded. They remained silent as they walked the rest of the way, their footsteps loud in the relative disquiet of the courthouse. Ryoto leaned against the door to a smaller courtroom, away from the main cluster of larger courtrooms down the hall.

“I got your message,” Ryoto said as he pulled himself into standing, “Come on, there’s no one else from our little group yet, so we can talk in here.”

This courtroom was a fraction of the size, with a few rows of seating. Ryoto walked towards the tables up front. Small pitchers of water, glasses, and an assortment of pens on the tables were ignored for now.

“I’m afraid this won’t be as entertaining as when you were in the Kamino hospital,” Ryoto said as he stared at the empty judge’s seat, “With Kunikazu out of the picture, and no objections from the rest of the Commission, this will be a cake walk.”

“I’m surprised no other Commission members came today.” Tsukauchi said.

“Some of them resigned,” Ryoto shrugged, “And those who are left are spineless without Kunikazu’s shadow to cower under. I handled most of Kunikazu’s business while he was still President, so running things has been second nature for me.”

“Speaking of Kunikazu,” Nezu exchanged a glance with Tsukauchi, “Do you know anything about the money that went missing from his accounts?”

Ryoto’s eyes widened, “Missing money? I managed his accounts before he got arrested, but I’ve been locked out since. How much went missing?”

“His accounts were practically bled dry.” Tsukauchi frowned, “There’s no trace as to who had access to his accounts at that time, as if it had been wiped.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know anything about that.” Nezu looked at Tsukauchi, who nodded. Ryoto was telling the truth. The man cleared his throat, “I’ll do some digging at the office when I get back, and contact you if I find anything significant?”

Tsukauchi smiled, "That would be appreciated."

Ryoto nodded. It was that moment when the doors opened, and Ryukyu and Gang Orca walked in together, with Hawks lingering right behind them. Hawks wore casual clothes, while Gang Orca and Ryukyu chose fine suits and ties, but Gang Orca's looks and Hawks' wings were dead giveaways no matter their wardrobe.

Ryukyu held a bulging folder under her arm, smiling as she placed it on the table at the front. "Are we early? They said 11, right?"

Tsukauchi looked at the clock, which read 10:40, "A bit."

Hawks sighed and draped himself over the nearest chair, "Figures. I should've gotten a snack before we came in. Maybe I'll shoot Rumi a text so she can nab something for me before she gets here."

Gang Orca snorted. "Maybe she'll bring you pancakes."

Hawks gasped, "She *wouldn't* ! Okay, she would. Maybe I should ask Jeanist instead."

"I can put in an order for your usual, if you want to." Ryoto said with a soft smile. Hawks' wings ruffled in happiness, "But you'll have to wait until this is over. The court doesn't allow food or drink while court is in session."

Hawks' wings drooped, and he sighed dramatically, "That figures."

"What's with the heavy folder, Ryukyu?" Tsukauchi asked with a subdued chuckle.

Gang Orca straightened up and Ryukyu's smile tensed. "I want to bring up the villain program that Gang Orca and I want to start. I figured we could mention it when we get Nezu's vigilante program approved."

Not if. *When*. Nezu wasn't the only one confident that they'd be successful today.

"I don't see why not." Ryoto said softly.

Hawks raised a brow, "You wouldn't have any objections? The rest of the Commission won't try to stop you?"

"Not personally." Ryoto sighed as he leaned against the table, "I want the Commission to be better. Citizens deserve a unified hero system that will support them, no matter what their background is. Having solid vigilante and villain programs openly available is one step towards that."

"I agree. It is important, now more than ever, to have them." Gang Orca grumbled as his expression fell, "At the exam, when Toga Himiko was right in front of me and I didn't know... she was practically screaming for help, but I let her go."

"Orca..." Ryukyu placed a hand on his arm. "You didn't know. Her guise as a student was flawless."

He snorted, "Maybe so, but it doesn't excuse my failure. If Ryukyu and I can be Councilors towards these wayward souls, then maybe I can make it up to her. Perhaps others who are misguided as well."

"That's a good goal to have, Orca." Hawks said, smiling softly. His eyes trailed over to Ryoto, "I still don't trust the rest of the Commission though. It doesn't have a new president yet, does it?"

"Not yet." Ryoto chuckled, "I might be younger than the remaining board members, but I have the experience and the drive to get what needs to be done. It's only a matter of time before I take the mantle."

Nezu grinned, "A fresh perspective and a new face may be what people need after Kunikazu's downfall."

Hawks wasn't the only one to shiver at their wide smiles.

Anybody would be better than Kunikazu, but maybe Ryoto as Commission President wouldn't be so bad.

Momo wrung her fingers together.

She was out in the hall now, moving around helped clear her mind. She grabbed a drink from the fountain and chose to sit at a bench near the courtroom. Her parents were right past those doors. She hadn't seen them since *that* night. It wasn't the thought of standing against them that terrified her now, but the agonizing wait made her heart pound and her blood run cold as the nerves slowly ebbed away her resolve.

Momo watched countless former servants and her parents' old cohorts come and go from the courtroom, but they barely gave her a glance before they turned tail and fled elsewhere. She took another short walk up and down the hall as time passed by, but the incessant pit in her stomach didn't allow her to relax. It was her fifth time down the hall when the doors opened and an unfamiliar woman marched out.

A fiery rain of rose colored hair fell down her back in thick braids, making her pale eyes stand out like a crystal blue river. She wore a dark, crumpled suit and slacks, but the leather gloves on her hands were brand new. The deep crease in her brow eased as she locked eyes with Momo.

The woman leaned in, "You're... the Yaoyorozu heiress, aren't ya?"

Momo stiffened, "Y-yes? And you are...?"

"Ah," The woman grinned and stuck her hand out, "I'm Hatsume Ichinose! Nice to meet ya!"

Ice flowed through Momo's heart as she shook the woman's hand. The leather hid it, but she didn't feel flesh underneath, rather it was hard and a steely coldness permeated into Momo's palm.

Hatsume pulled back and rolled her wrist. "I wish we could meet in better circumstances, young lady." Hatsume sat down at the same

bench Momo used earlier, “Why don’t we sit and chat for a while? Unless you’ve other things to do while you wait your turn through the wringer. Just got done with that myself.”

Momo bit her lip. The detectives asked her the same questions over and over. What her home life was like before and after her parents had money. The very first memory she had was her mother holding her on a beaten up couch, old cobwebs and cracks lining the ceiling. Then they asked if she ever suspected anything strange with the sudden change in their lives, and most importantly, that night with her encounter with Joker and of the calling card for her parents.

Hatsume raised a brow at the prolonged silence.

Momo decided to bite the bullet and sit on the edge of the bench, a good few feet from Hatsume. Maybe Hatsume felt the guilt radiating off of Momo, because she scooted closer and put on her warmest smile.

“I’m sorry.” Momo blurted.

“What are *you* sorry for?” Hatsume’s smile fell. “Are *you* the one that destroyed countless other businesses?”

“Wh-what?” Momo blinked rapidly, “No.”

“Are ya responsible for your parents’ actions?”

“N-no.”

Hatsume slipped off her right glove and showcased a sleek, golden hand, and Momo picked up the sound of ticking gears without the glove to dampen them. The metal was decked with swirling designs of ivy and bountiful leaves, with a dragonfly on the back of her hand. It moved as fluidly as a real hand, a masterwork so beyond Momo’s comprehension.

“Did *you* sic a wild contraption in the labs at I-Island, the same one that made me lose an arm and my spot there?”

Momo's eyes fell to the ground. “... No.”

“Then you have nothin’ to apologize for, darling.” Hatsume replaced her glove. “I’m not one to blame kids for their parents’ mistakes, and it’s clear as day that ya don’t support what they did either.”

“No, I don’t.” Momo hugged herself. “I’m testifying against them.”

Hatsume hummed. “They might be saving you for last. Keep your chin up, kiddo. You got this.”

Momo turned to her, eyes wide. “Thank you.”

Hatsume smiled, but that faded into another expression that Momo couldn’t decipher. The woman’s eyes peered into her own, and those lines in her forehead returned.

“Are you alright?” Momo asked.

“Right as rain, mostly. It feels so good to get all of that garbage off my chest, you know? But...” Hatsume blinked, and she stared down at her clenched hands with uncertainty. “You wouldn’t happen to remember an old pocket watch decorated with your family crest, would ya? It was a true work of art, the type of clockwork I haven’t seen in years.”

“An old pocket watch?” Momo scanned through her memory, “I remember my grandfather having something like that, but it was lost. Why?”

“I know where it is. Well, at least *who* has it now.”

Momo gaped as the woman retold her story. To fall into the hands of Joker was a brittle irony she had to swallow.

“I sold him all the parts he needed to fix it,” Hatsume said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it worked like a charm now. Maybe you can ask for it once Joker gets to U.A.”

“How do you know about that?” Momo asked.

Hatsume grinned, “I have my fingers in a lot of pies, darling. My own *Mei listens* when most people think she’s too busy tinkering. It’s not hard to put the pieces together.”

“Do you think he’d really give it to me? Clearly it wasn’t being taken care of before.”

“Joker is a gentleman.” Hatsume chuckled, “I’ve only met him once before I knew who he really was, but it was clear as day that he treated his friends with respect. I think he’d treat you the same, darling.”

Whatever Momo was about to say cut off as Hatsume’s front pocket bulged, and Momo witnessed a sleek shape crawl out and skitter down Hatsume’s sleeve.

“Flit!” The woman slapped her other hand on her arm. “I said you needed to stay in my pocket! Geez.”

“Um...”

“This one always gets excitable! Not as much as Whistler, but she’s still a feisty darling sometimes.” Hatsume cackled as she opened her hand.

A mechanical dragonfly rested on Hatsume’s palm, a beautiful shade of teal metal embellished with dancing silver, similar to the engravings on Hatsume’s mechanical arm. Its gossamer wings were made of translucent glass, its legs and chest showcased tiny ticking gears like the beat of a heart, and bejeweled sapphire eyes. Hatsume poked Flit’s back, and the dragonfly transformed with fluid grace. It tucked its legs and wings in and rolled lazily in her palm.

“Is that... a *pen* ?”

“Sure is! That’s only one of her forms! She can be a pen, or a decorative brooch, a lock-pick, a screwdriver, among a few other handy little things.” Hatsume smirked as she twirled the dragonfly pen(?) in her hands. “I was bored one night after writing down a bunch of new invention ideas, and the idea just came to me as I was holding a pen. My quirk lets me give life to anything mechanical I create.” Hatsume held out her palm. “You want her?”

Momo flinched. “Why would you give it- *her* to me?”

“Why not? I have a workshop full of them!”

Momo nodded as Flit shifted back into a dragonfly. Flit took off, her wings singing like pleasant wind chimes on a summer’s day as she darted around Momo’s head. Momo smiled as Hatsume gestured for her to hold out her hand. Flit landed on the tip of her pointer finger, the metal felt like tiny, cold pinpricks. Flit’s wings fluttered, the light made them akin to liquid gems.

Momo chuckled as she pet Flit with her other hand, “I’m going to start over after this. I will make up for what my parents did.”

Hatsume beamed, “Then take Flit as a sign of my goodwill! She likes you a lot. Hell, maybe we could work out a deal after you graduate, given my Mei agrees with it. I’m sure she won’t mind too much if she knows one of my darlings is with you. They’re a good judge of character.”

Momo smiled. “That would be nice.” She ran a finger down Flits back, and the mechanical wonder crawled into Momo’s palm and transformed into a pen.

“Ah, making friends, are we?” Nezu approached from down the hall, beaming. “Wonderful.”

“Yo, Principal Nezu!” Hatsume waved, “I hope my Mei isn’t racking up damage costs?”

“None that we can’t handle, though Power Loader loses his mind occasionally.” Nezu said.

Momo looked down the hall and saw Tsukauchi and a familiar group of heroes behind him. They stayed back, talking among themselves. Ryukyu and Gang Orca couldn’t hide their smiles. Hawks and Miruko playfully poked at one another, laughing. Best Jeanist watched them with a faint smile. Momo would recognize Iida’s older brother anywhere.

“Did everything go alright?” Momo asked.

“Indeed! My Vigilante Program is officially approved!” Nezu tapped the folder under his arm. “It was quite a simple procedure with certain roadblocks out of the way, and we managed to get a good word in about other programs.”

The courtroom doors opened and people streamed out. Hatsume stood and grabbed the sleeve of the closest reporter.

“What’s going on?”

The man with mismatched pupils stared at her, before his gaze lingered towards Momo. Nezu cleared his throat, and the man jumped.

“They’re taking a lunch break. They’ll reconvene in an hour.”

“Perfect timing, I’m famished!” Nezu turned towards Momo, “Shall we step out for a bite to eat? You can bring your new friend with you, of course!”

Momo nodded. Flit shifted and took off, hovering musically by her ear. As she got to her feet, familiar voices froze her to her core.

“Momo?” Her mother gaped from the courtroom door, her father right behind her, blinking wildly. “Momo, we haven’t seen you in months!”

Momo stiffened. She looked at her parents head to toe. They had always been perfectly dressed, perfectly groomed, not a single hair out of place. But now, they looked harried, and mother’s make-up wasn’t flawless as it usually was. Father had no color in his face and heavy bags wore under his eyes.

Her mother stepped closer, and Momo took a step back. The ball of ice hardened over her heart as her mother gave her a pained look. Momo placed her hands over her stomach and raised her chin, her heart pounding.

“Mother, the next time I see you will be when I testify. Goodbye.”

“Momo?” Her mother flinched, and tears welled up in her eyes, “How can you say that? Momo!”

Momo turned on her heel and walked down the hallway, her footsteps echoing across the dead silent hallway. Flit landed on her shoulder, facing Momo’s parents as her wings rattled and she gave off a shrill metallic hiss. Joker’s heroes let Momo pass and formed a wall behind her.

Momo never witnessed the cold, calculating glare Nezu gave them that stopped her parents dead in their tracks, nor of the too-quiet words that struck them like a whip. Endeavor, who had come out behind them, put a deceitfully gentle hand on her mother’s shoulder, and she sagged under the number one hero’s grip.

Thankfully, the lawyers separated them before any blood was shed.

Ryoto was swamped in stray papers and files, of reports and documents galore. He’s been filtering through the Commission’s library since the hearing with Nezu’s program, with only a few breaks

to eat and cat nap. But it was clear that everything dealing with Kunikazu had been... tampered with.

Dates, names, entire pages of certain files, all missing or blacked out, and with no backups to boot.

It couldn't be recent, as some of these files were many years old, old enough to predate Kunikazu Hiroto's time as Commission President. Confusion swirled in Ryoto's mind as he opened another bundle of folders, his other hand rubbing at his temple. Something within him buzzed with deep seated dread, and maybe small hints of betrayal. He had been Kunikazu's right hand for years, so how had he never looked through these files? Kunikazu kept him busy with other affairs, and perhaps the man pulled the strings behind everyone's back while they were preoccupied.

Ryoto cursed when these reports didn't reveal anything significant.

"Kunikazu, what the hell are you hiding?"

He looked up, trying to blink the strain from his eyes. He still had mountains of paperwork to rifle through. Joy.

Cracking this puzzle would take much longer than he thought.

In truth, Momo barely remembered the rest of that day. She vaguely recalls exchanging a few words with her classmates, their eyes full of questions she couldn't answer or unspoken concerns she had no energy for. Word of the successful Vigilante Program spread around Japan like wildfire, not that she gave it much thought. She collapsed face first in her bed and was out like a light, unaware of how Flit explored her new surroundings before going dormant on the nightstand.

Now, finally walking into that courtroom after days of stillness, her own footsteps matched the pounding of her heart. The glare of heavy camera lenses prickled against her skin like cold waves,

leeching the heat from her clammy hands. For some reason, she felt as if she were a foreign viewer and somebody else controlled her body. The rest of the world was showered with a strange fuzziness. She remembers swearing that she would tell the truth out loud to the judge, sitting down in the hard chair, of Flit's glittering body as she clung to Momo's sweater as an unassuming brooch.

Her parents and their lawyers were blurred figures in the corner of her eye, her main focus was upon Shoto's mismatched gaze from the back of the room. Fuyumi smiled at her, and Natsuo threw her a bright grin and a thumb's up. Endeavor, as stoic as rock, sat tall with his arms crossed. Nezu was a tiny white smudge beside him, but the raw power and confidence they all exuded bolstered her own strength of will.

She smiled, sat up straight and held her head high as the examination began.

Ectoplasm finished writing the equation on the board, a string of numbers and variables he knew by heart. He turned to Class 1-A expectantly.

"Who would like to come up and solve this example?" He asked.

Ectoplasm waited in dismal silence. The students were downcast and unfocused. Their books were open, but some lamely scribbled in their notebooks or fidgeted quietly in their seats. Even Iida, as studious as he was, stared off into space with pensive eyes. Ectoplasm glanced between the empty seats, the cause of such behavior.

"How about we save this lesson for later." Ectoplasm capped the marker and sighed, drawing curious gazes. "It's clear that you'd have trouble absorbing the lesson with other things going on."

Iida flinched out of his stupor. "I apologize, sensei!"

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Ectoplasm waved his hand and took a seat at his desk, “You’re all concerned for Yaoyorozu, especially with the verdict looming. Why don’t we spend the rest of class as free time?”

Books closed as murmurs bounced around the room. Phones were whipped out and it was obvious what they searched up, Ectoplasm decided to check in on the trial. It was the final day, and he rewatched Yaoyorozu testify against her parents twice. They couldn’t show her face, but he could imagine her expressions as they questioned her. Funny, how her parents’ lawyers obviously expected a shy, sheltered girl who’s words could easily be twisted in their favor. Instead, she stated the truth with merciless efficiency, and gave those lawyers a real run for their money.

He wondered how proud Nezu was of her.

Ectoplasm went to a familiar news site, the words ‘BREAKING: VERDICT REACHED FOR YAOYORZU TRIAL!’ were at the top of the page. That... didn’t take as long as he thought it would.

Ashido slammed her hand on her desk, “Everyone!! The verdict! It’s-”

“Guilty for all charges.” Iida’s voice became heavy. “I knew it would probably be that with Japan’s legal system, but still...”

“They must own up to their acts of injustice.” Tokoyami whispered, “There’s no escape from their evil deeds.”

“Poor Momo,” Asui said, “I can’t even imagine how she’s feeling right now.”

“Hey, Todoroki and Nezu are with her!” Kirishima’s grin was shaky at best, “She’ll be okay!”

“I hope you’re right,” Kaminari scrolled through his phone, “But I wonder what it’s like to have criminals as parents- YEOWCH!”

“Idiot.” Jiro’s ear jacks stabbed repeatedly into the boy’s arm and shoulder. Ectoplasm made no move to stop her. “Do you have *any* tact in that static you call a brain?”

“I’m sorry!!”

“You *should* be.” Jiro snapped. “Don’t you dare say something like that in front of Momo, or I swear to whatever gods are out there that I’ll do worse than *this* .”

lida facepalmed as their voices steadily grew in volume.

Momo didn’t feel her footsteps over concrete as they stepped into U.A. Seeing her parents, now *convicted criminals*, being handcuffed and led away from the courtroom, their eyes dug into her as they called her name...

She shook her head.

After the trial, Endeavor had pressed a card into Fuyumi’s hand and disappeared, much to Natsuo and Shoto’s relief. They went to dinner at a hotel buffet in Tokyo, driving rather than taking a busy train, to do so. The place was high end, full of crystal chandeliers and divine food, and an actual orchestra played somewhere in the lobby. She didn’t want to imagine Endeavor’s face when the bill came through.

Natsuo especially piled on the most delectable food.

She nodded along and took small bites, the ever curious Flit moving around in her pocket. Shoto gave her a strange look when he noticed, not that she was really coherent to explain. Now, back within U.A.’s walls, she walked as if she were in a dream, leaving everything else in a muted fog.

“You can find your way from here?” Nezu said.

“Yes, sir.” Shoto stared at her for a moment, “I’ll make sure we get back.”

Momo blinked. She could’ve sworn they were at the entrance to the school a second ago, now there were only a few turns in the cobblestone pathway to reach their dorm building.

“Very well.” Nezu folded his paws together and smiled at her, “I’m proud of you, Yaoyorozu. Not many would shoulder something like this so well, but I am simply one phone call away if you ever need to talk! I’m sure your classmates would love to help you, too.”

“Thank you, Nezu.”

He squeezed her hand, before he turned down the fork in the road towards the teacher’s dorms.

Shoto walked a few steps the other way, but stopped, frowning, as she simply stood there and watched Nezu disappear out of sight.

“Momo?” She jerked, “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes.” She hugged herself and stared at the ground. “I’m alright.”

Shoto approached her. Warmth seeped into her hands as he gently grabbed both of her palms and placed them together. She jumped when he sharply clapped his hands over hers, the light pain and sudden shock jolting her from her daze.

“Does that feel better?” He asked.

“Yes,” She blinked rapidly and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Natsuo told me to do that since you were...” He tilted his head, “Well, pretty out of it. I should’ve done it earlier.”

“Thank you.” She smiled as her surrounding turned sharper, and she could focus on the rising trees and pale moonlight around them. “I’m still in shock over everything.”

“That’s natural. It’s going to take a while to accept it.”

She nodded, and they continued down the path.

“Maybe we could have some cold soba for dinner tomorrow.” Momo smiled at him, “We still need to celebrate passing our exam.”

“We could wait until the picnic for that.”

She blinked. “Picnic?”

“Yeah, the others wanted to do something to cheer everyone up. If I remember right, it’ll be after our last class on Saturday.”

“Oh.” She smiled, “A picnic with everyone sounds nice.”

They walked inside and just took off their shoes before a thunder of footsteps echoed from the common area.

“Momo!!” Ashido tackled her into a hug, “You’re finally hooome! Are you okay!?”

“Mina...” Momo smiled as she wrapped her arms around the girl, bright pink hair tickling her chin, “I’m alright, I promise.”

Ashido pulled back, sniffing, “A-are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

At that moment, Flit squirmed out of her pocket and buzzed around them.

Ashido gasped as Flit landed on the top of Momo’s head, “What is that!?”

“Ashido!!” Iida puffed his chest and chopped both of his arms, “Let her have some breathing room!”

“Fiiiine.” Ashido pulled back, but gently grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the common area, the others making way. “Do you need anything? A snack, a pillow, maybe a foot rub?”

Momo chuckled as Mina made her sit on the couch, then plopped down next to her. The other girls surrounded them. Flit’s head swiveled to get a good look at all of them. Iida sighed, but he hung back as Shoto sat on the couch arm.

“I’m just a little tired.” Momo smiled as they all stared at her, “It’ll take some time to come to terms about what happened with my parents, but I’ll pull through. I’m glad it’s over. In all honesty... I barely remember what I said when I testified. It all went by in a blur.”

“Bravery courses through you,” Tokoyami nodded from the other side of the room, “As expected from our Vice Representative.”

Asui sat at the coffee table and placed a hand on Momo’s knee, “But don’t take it all on by yourself, kero.”

“Yeah!” Uraraka nodded, “We’re totally here for you!”

Kaminari nearly blurted something, but a pointed glare from Jiro made him clam up.

“Hey, I have a cake in the kitchen!” Sato said, “Did you want some?”

“No, but thank you.” She said, “I think I’ll call it a night soon. I’m going to classes with you all tomorrow.”

Iida flinched, “You don’t have to force yourself. Nobody will bat an eye about you taking an extra day to recover!”

“Thank you, I’ll think about it.”

“Now, can you tell us what this is!?” Ashido pointed at Flit, “It looks sooooo cool!”

“I thought I saw something move in your pocket at times. I thought it looked like that dragonfly brooch you wore earlier.” Shoto blinked, “Did you have it the whole time?”

Momo laughed as she explained how Flit came to be in her possession. She reached up and pet Flit, then the metallic dragonfly darted around her classmates as Momo introduced her to everyone. But as the conversation went on, the more she found herself yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“I think you should call it a night, kero.” Asui smiled, “We can talk more later. Flit is always welcome too, of course.”

Flit buzzed in appreciation as she landed on Momo’s shoulder.

“I think I will,” Momo said as she got to her feet and bowed her head, “Good night, everyone.”

“Night!” Ashido waved.

They all breathed a collective sigh of relief after Momo went upstairs.

“Man!” Ashido fell over the couch and sighed dramatically, “I don’t know how Momo is so strong.”

“No kidding.” Kirishima crossed his arms, “I’d be totally wrecked if my parents did something like that!”

“She was terrified when she walked into the courtroom to testify.” Shoto said, “But once she got to the stand it was like something clicked in place for her. They questioned her about her encounter with Joker and then his calling card to her parents, but it was the final nail in the coffin.”

Tokoyami cleared his throat, “We do not know what we are truly capable of until we experience something that harrowing. The USJ, Summer Camp, and Kamino were harsh battles in their own right,

but standing your ground in a court of law, against the ones who raised you, is a whole other ordeal.”

Iida firmly nodded. “Now that Yaoyorozu is back, its time for everyone to get to bed. It’s getting late!”

“Nooo!” Ashido splayed her arms, “I’m not even tired yet!”

“Come on, Mina,” Asui croaked, “You don’t want to be tired during class tomorrow.”

“I can never pay attention whether I’m tired or not!”

Shoto shook his head and stood from the couch arm, when his phone went off in his pocket. Curiously, they heard trills and rings all across the common area from everyone’s phones, too.

“What, did someone send a text to the group chat?” Hagakure asked.

“Maybe Bakugo or Midoriya forgot somebody’s trash?” Kaminari said.

“No, they took everything out hours ago.” Jiro stated as she got out her phone, “It must be something else.”

“You guys!” Kaminari shouted, “It’s-”

“This... this is...” Kirishima couldn’t find words, his eyes went wide as his mouth dropped.

“Uh... I’m gonna go check on Momo in case she sees this.” Uraraka bolted from the room with Asui on her heels.

Shoto couldn’t tear his eyes away from the Spotlight notification. His stomach turned as he tapped it, and it opened to a brand new update from Joker. It was a simple photo, just Kurusu in casual clothes with Mona on his shoulder, right under the shadow of the

grand Kamino Memorial statue. He refreshed the page, and already it had hundreds of reactions and comments.

Texts from his siblings flooded to his phone next.

“Everyone,” Iida’s expression sobered as he clutched his phone, “I’m serious when I say we should all go to bed now. I think... we all need some time to digest everything that’s happened this week.”

“Y-yeah,” Ashido shut off her phone and got up from the couch, “Night everyone!”

They split from there, everyone bearing a variety of expressions. It wasn’t until he and Iida were alone on their floor that they spoke in hushed whispers.

“First Bakugo and Midoriya, then Yaoyorozu and her parents’ trial, and now this...” Iida sighed, “I remember what we talked about, Todoroki. I thought about it all the time, and now I feel nothing but relief.”

He nodded, “We finally get confirmation that Joker is alive, and everyone from our class is in one piece. That’s all we can ask for.”

“Right...” Iida shook his head and turned away, “Good night, Todoroki.”

“Night.”

Shoto sighed when he shut his door behind him. Headlines already sprouted across several news sites, and the class chatroom blew up. A few people were absent, like Bakugo and Midoriya. Momo, too. He sent a text to Midoriya asking if he was alright, but he never got an answer.

Shoto didn’t sleep well that night.

Hawks splayed his wings to slow his descent, ignoring the excited cries and flashes of cameras as he landed beside the Kamino Memorial statue.

Miruko bolted to his side, "Anything?"

"Nothing from the air." Hawks' lips formed a thin line. "How about you?"

"Nope," She gestured towards the statue, "Not a note, or a calling card, or even a lick of evidence to where he went off to after the picture was taken."

"So he posts the picture and disappears," Hawks hummed. His eyes went to the police tape surrounding the square. It was hardly 7 in the morning and the crowd was enormous. Did these people have nothing better to do? "What was his aim? There's no caption or anything on the photo."

"I dunno." Miruko's snow white hair bounced as she shook her head. She leaned closer and whispered, "Have you noticed anything with the Yaoyorozu trial? Barely a day after the verdict and people are already forgetting about it."

Hawks blinked. He double checked his phone, and she was right. Any articles and malicious gossip about that family went out the window, and now there was nothing except news of Joker's first Spotlight update in months. The tabloids were literally on fire.

"Maybe covering for the Yaoyorozu heiress was part of his goal, but its clear he doesn't want to be found yet." They turned to Ryukyu, who had finished her half dozen turns around the statue.

"Why couldn't he reach out to us?" Miruko growled under her breath, wary of the cameras pointed at their backs. "He knows we'd have his back!"

"I don't know." Ryukyu dragged her hand down her face. "I'll make the report and say we found nothing significant at the statue. You two update the others."

"R-right." Miruko said as Ryukyu walked away. She muttered to Hawks. "I'll text Orca and Jeanist."

"I already updated Iida." Hawks said as his wing feathers twitched in agitation. "He's keeping a close eye on Joker's Spotlight, too. It already broke record numbers, even compared to top hero posts."

Miruko grumbled and typed on her phone with more force than necessary. She was worried. That much was obvious. But she wasn't the only one, Hawks thought as he walked towards the base of the statue. He stopped in the same spot where the kid posed for the picture, the shadow of the overbearing statue smothering him like a heavy storm cloud.

He shuddered at an unknowable weight in his chest, and ran his fingers down the square dais lifting the statue into the sunlight. Hawks cast a glance at statue Joker's smirking expression, and frowned.

He stepped away before the lump in his throat strangled him.

"He did *what* ?" Nighteye asked as he facepalmed.

"Yeah! It spread around the school before morning classes that day, and we all saw the smoke from the training ground! I was curious, so I decided to get a look at Midoriya for myself." Mirio, his pride and joy, chuckled, *"I think I scared him though, because he dropped the trash everywhere. I kinda felt bad!"*

"I can't believe Yagi asked us to take him on." Nighteye sighed as he leaned back in his chair, his eyes occasionally scanning his office full of All Might memorabilia, "How can we trust him to follow orders if he can't even follow school rules?"

Nighteye felt the smile leave Mirio's face when his voice became somber, *"I think you should give him a chance, Sir."*

"Why? We shouldn't waste our time with someone who won't listen."

"It's not that. He's someone All Might himself recommended! Shouldn't that be worth something, Sir? I would be excited to have a kohai, and you know Bubble Girl and Centipeder would say the same! Come on, Sir! Pretty please?"

Nighteye pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn't say no to Mirio, he just couldn't. After a moment, his hand fell and he sighed, although a reluctant smile formed on his face.

"Fine, I'll give him one chance." Nighteye said, "But I am going to test him. If he can't pass, then he has no business working at my agency."

"Yes! Oh! Aizawa-sensei wanted us to talk to the first years about work studies. I know Nejire and Tamaki wanted to get a good look at the other students too, even if they don't say it out loud. I know Tamaki would never admit it!"

"Alright, let me know how it goes."

"Yes, Sir!!"

Mirio hung up, and Nighteye set his phone on his desk with a long sigh. He stared at his computer monitor, the current tab open to Joker's latest update on Spotlight. The Yaoyorozu case had been all but forgotten on the sidelines, and the number of people flooding to Joker's page nearly caused the site to crash more than once. More rumors broke out about U.A.'s program, and the lack of a renewed arrest warrant for the teenage vigilante since.

Those fools.

“U.A.’s program, Joker, All Might...” Nighteye clasped his fingers together and rested his chin on them, “And now Midoriya. Will I get answers I’m looking for if I take Midoriya on? Joker interacted with Class 1-A, perhaps that bond is where the truth hides. Is it truly just Joker who’s able to change the future, or can he be a catalyst for other unforeseen changes?”

He shut off his monitor, though Joker’s dagger sharp grin half hidden in shadow was seared into his mind.

Perhaps Mirio was right. He would never find answers if he stayed stagnant and unmovable, but Midoriya would have to earn his place if he wanted to work at Nighteye’s agency.

In the future, he’d look back on this moment and curse everyone’s blessed ignorance to the truth. He’d wonder why he never saw how that small, unsuspecting rabbit hole opened up into an endless, all-devouring chasm.

“Cheer up, Tamaki!” Nejire fondly elbowed her friend as they walked down the hallway towards a certain classroom, “It won’t be that bad!”

Tamaki paled, and stared at the ground as if he wished it would swallow him, “Easy for you to say. You love being in front of a crowd. I don’t.”

Mirio grinned, “Don’t worry! Just let me and Nejire do most of the talking! You don’t have to say two words past introducing yourself!”

Tamaki withered, but didn’t say anything as they reached the door and Mirio knocked.

“Come in,” A familiar tired voice said. Mirio opened the door and they marched in. Class 1-A gaped as Aizawa gestured to them. “The three third years at U.A. who stand at the top of all current U.A. students- also known as The Big Three.”

Nejire smiled as the younger heroes in training whispered excitedly. Midoriya gaped at Mirio, and she wondered if he pulled off the same trick he did with Shinsou.

“Quiet down,” Aizawa sighed, then he stared at them, “Why don’t we do a quick introduction, starting with Amajiki.”

Sweat broke out on Tamaki’s forehead, and the look in his eyes turned rabid. The air changed in the classroom, and many in 1-A flinched back by the sudden intensity.

“I can’t do this,” Tamaki turned his back on the class and bowed his head, “No matter what I do, even if I imagine them as potatoes, I can’t see them as anything other than human. What should I do? I just want to go home...”

Nejire lightly sighed as the first year with the tail spoke up.

“Um, I thought you were supposed to be at the top of U.A.’s hero course?” He said.

“Oh, don’t mind him!” Nejire smiled bright as she waved her hand, “Amajiki is really strong, but he has a weak heart when it comes to talking to people. This poor little flea is Amajiki Tamaki!” She put a hand to her chest, “And I’m Nejire Hado! As your sensei said, we’re going to talk more in depth with you about work studies. But wait...” Nejire bounced to someone in the first row, a big softie with 6 arms and a face mask, “Why do you wear that mask? Are you sick?” She blinked, and jumped to another, “Oooh, you have cute horns! Can you actually feel something from them, or are they just for decoration? If they break, do new ones grow in!?”

Ashido cackled as Nejire felt them, “They’re a bit ticklish, so please be careful!”

“Todoroki, how did you get that scar on your face!?”

Todoroki frowned, “That’s-”

“Oh, Asui-chan! You’re so cute!!”

“Please call me Tsuyu, kero.”

“Tsuyu! What an adorable name!”

“Yaoyorozu!” The girl flinched as Nejire bounced on her heels in front of her desk. “How did it feel to meet Joker!? I haven’t met him face to face yet, but Ryukyu has and I’m soooo jealous!!” Nejire whipped around to Iida, “Oh, and your brother too! How lucky!”

Aizawa glowered as Yaoyorozu and Iida’s faces went pale. His eyes turned red and his hair floated around his face. “Hado, knock it off.”

“Sorry sensei!” She beamed and hopped to the front of the room.

Mirio beamed, “Don’t worry, Eraserhead! I’m going last to speed things up, right?” Mirio stepped up to the podium and put his hands on his hips, “I’m Togata Mirio! Aizawa-sensei originally wanted us to explain more about work studies, even though they aren’t required in U.A.’s curriculum. You guys just got your provisional licenses as first years, right? I can see it in your expressions. Tamaki, Hado and I didn’t place very high in this year’s Sports Festival, and you all think we’re pretty weird, right?”

“Gee, how did he know?” Sero stage whispered to Kaminari, who chuckled.

Mirio raised his fist into the air, “Why don’t you all fight me at once!?”

“Wh-what!?”

Panicked clamors rang around the room as Mirio looked at Aizawa, smiling.

“It would be the most rational way to show how much more experience I have. Right, Sensei?”

Hado blinked as Aizawa stared blankly at them. Did Mirio not tell him the idea before hand? Silly Mirio. Even Tamaki pulled his face away from the wall and studied Aizawa's expression.

"Do what you want." Aizawa glanced at the class, "Everyone, change into your gym clothes and follow him."

"Y-yes, Sensei!" Iida was the first out of his seat, his other classmates following tentatively.

Mirio gave Tamaki a pat on the back as they followed the students, but she stayed behind.

"What?" Aizawa droned.

"I want Shinsou to watch the fight!"

Aizawa scrunched his brow, "Why?"

She giggled, "Because he's going to be a hero in training! Don't you think he should observe it, too?"

"He's in the general class."

"But not for long, right?" She bounced between her heels, "You're training him up to move into the hero course, right? C'mon, it'll be fun! Pleeeeease, sensei?"

Aizawa sighed, "Fine, just stop smiling at me like that. I'll shoot Cementoss a text, but if he says no then that's the end of it. Capiche?"

"Kay!"

Aizawa grumbled to himself as he whipped out his phone.

Hitoshi idly twirled his pen around his fingers. Akira showed him how to do it ages ago, but he was only just getting the hang of it now. The

class was nearing its end and he had his homework done already, now he was staring at the phone in his other hand.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from Akira's sharp smile. Morgana tried to look regal on his shoulders, but his fur had been ruffled in strange places, almost as if he was stressed out. Akira looked...

Hitoshi frowned as he put his pen down and zoomed in on the picture. The slight graininess of the picture made it hard to tell, but Akira had a pale, almost sickly complexion, all too similar to when Emiyo-san had dragged him into their cafe after the Musutafu Raid. His stomach sank. Akira pushed himself too hard during Kamino, had he only *just* recovered from it?

Hundreds of comments were buried just as fast as they were posted, but one of the top comment threads left him with mixed feelings.

Japaneasy27: *Wow, after all of this time and we don't even get a caption or anything? How lame.*

Anon28577: *@Japaneasy27 - Bruh it's not like he owes anybody anything?? We should be thankful we even got this much.*

Perororo: *@Anon28577 - Eh, maybe, but my soul craves more Joker content. This isn't enough! I NEED MOAR*

Ubukk: *@Japaneasy27 - Oh, I know! How about 'I saved everyone's asses at Kamino and all I got was this shitty statue with All Might'?*

Hitoshi's lip curled. After everything Joker did, after all of what he went through, people think they can just joke about it? He couldn't bare checking in on his Herocord server, either. The number of members in it blown up recently, but he just didn't have the energy to manage it like he once did.

"Shinsou."

Hitoshi jumped as Cementoss' shadow draped his desk. "Y-yes?"

"Come with me, and bring your things too."

"O-okay?"

His classmates all stared and whispered as he hastily threw his things into his bag and followed Cementoss out the door.

"Am I in trouble?" He asked.

"No." Cementoss closed the door, "I wanted to ask if you wanted to observe a duel between a third year hero student and class 1-A. You don't have to, but I thought I would ask... away from prying ears."

"Uh... sure?" He hugged his bag to his chest. It was better than staying in that classroom and being stared at after the bell rang.

"Cementoss-senei!" Nejire skipped towards them, her periwinkle hair bobbing to and fro, "Did he agree?"

"Yeah, I did." Hitoshi sighed, "Was this your idea?"

"Yep!"

Cementoss nodded, "Run along, then."

Nejire grabbed Hitoshi's elbow and whisked him down the hallway.

Nezu's words replayed in the back of his mind. Why bother protecting him from other students? Why go through so much trouble for *him* ? Ah hell, he was falling back to old habits now that Akira... wasn't around at the moment.

Nejire must've sensed something was off.

"You okay, Shinsou?" She asked when they stepped outside. "You've been quiet!"

“Just peachy,” He deadpanned, “Why did you drag me into this?”

“Aizawa-sensei wanted us to explain what it means to be in a long term work study, but Mirio thought it was better to show the skills he earned instead!” She hummed, “Real world experience makes you learn a lot faster than simple training exercises, and I thought you should watch too! You know, since you’re going to be a hero one day!”

His stomach fell to the ground. “But I’m not ready to fight anybody.”

“You’ll just be observing! Besides, Mirio will wipe the floor with them in no time.”

Hitoshi swallowed. “The *whole* class?”

Nejire grinned as they arrived at the gym. She opened the door and swept him inside. He internally winced as Togata Mirio stood in front of Class 1-A, wearing that same sunny expression as when he scared the crap out of Hitoshi in that closet.

Class 1-A didn’t notice their entrance, too entranced in whatever Mirio was saying to them. Except for one. Nejire waved him towards the wall, where Todoroki Shoto waited. She walked away towards Amajiki a couple of meters down the wall.

Todoroki blinked at him, “What are you doing here?”

“Observing, apparently.” Hitoshi said, “Why are you standing over here instead of with your classmates?”

Todoroki tilted his head, “I want to observe, too. I’m not dumb enough to think that we could take someone like Togata on.”

“Oh?” Hitoshi turned to stare at Class 1-A, but Todoroki’s eyes never left him. After another few tense moments, he relented, “What are you staring at?”

Todoroki squinted, as if trying to see something Hitoshi couldn't, "You're the Moon."

"*What ?*" Hitoshi whipped his head towards Todoroki, "Did Midoriya have to tell your whole damn class about that?"

"No, Uraraka mentioned it by accident a couple days ago... during lunch." Hitoshi scoffed, and was about to walk away when Todoroki spoke again, "I'm the Hanged Man."

Hitoshi stopped. He looked over his shoulder as Todoroki's eyes fell to the ground. "... What?"

"Momo is the Empress, and Bakugo is the Tower." Todoroki stared at his classmates as Togata was almost finished talking, "Tokoyami guessed others, like Midoriya being the Chariot or Kirishima being the Sun. We've guessed that All Might is Judgement, given what happened in Kamino. I've been doing research and trying to guess who is what Arcana, but I've had no luck." Todoroki blinked at Hitoshi. "I still don't even know what this all means, and how it ties to Joker."

Hitoshi scowled. "You can ask him when he gets here."

"Right," Todoroki's expression turned thoughtful, "When Joker gets here, to U.A..."

Hitoshi ignored him and turned back to Togata.

"All right!" Togata beamed and held his hands up, "Who wants to come at me first?"

"I'll go first!"

"Midoriya!!" Kirishima cried as Midoriya stepped to the front of the group, "Be careful, dude!"

"Oh, the Problem Child!" Togata said, "That's good! You're really energetic, huh?"

The hairs on the back of Hitoshi's neck stood on end. Midoriya fell into a low stance. Snakes of green lightning danced around his body. *That* never happened during the Sport's Festival.

"Everyone, be careful!" Yaoyorozu called from the back, "Any close combatants should assist Midoriya in a frontal assault! The rest stay back and provide support!"

"Got it!"

Kirishima, Ojio, and Sato fell into a line behind Midoriya. All others in Class 1-A got into familiar stances, their quirks hovering at their finger tips. Midoriya shot forward first like a bolt of green lightning.

Hitoshi held his breath when Togata didn't move. He simply stood there with that stupid smile on his face, but all confidence drained away into horror as Togata's clothes... fell off. The girls screamed as Togata noticed his birthday suit.

Midoriya wasn't phased as Togata picked up his pants, and reared back for a kick-

That just went through Togata's head as if he wasn't there at all.

Togata turned as Midoriya skid to a stop. "Wow, you really went right for the face, huh?"

"They already lost." Hitoshi heard Amajiki say, his forehead against the wall. "It's all over for them..."

Hitoshi frowned as other quirks went through Togata's head and shoulders. Midoriya leapt out of the way before the attacks hit him, sending a choking dust cloud through the gym.

"S-stop!!" Iida shouted, "Our attacks aren't working!"

"Wait, where did he go!?" Uraraka said.

The cloud cleared, but Togata was nowhere in sight. He shot out of the floor behind the long ranged attackers in a blur, and took them all out with a punch to the gut. Midoriya leapt into the air as Togata disappeared into the ground again, but the experienced third year took him out as easily as the others, despite Midoriya predicting where he would come out next.

It wasn't long before the rest of Class 1-A were all on the ground, clutching their stomachs. A few looked green in the face. Hitoshi didn't feel sorry for them as Togata struck a pose in the center of the downed students.

"Power!!"

"Told you..." Amajiki muttered.

Nejire chuckled. "I think he's even stronger than before. What do you think, Tamaki?"

"He was always strong since we were kids," Tamaki muttered, "But he should really learn to hold back."

Togata redressed as 1-A scraped themselves off the floor, unbothered. "What did you think of my quirk?"

"It's way too strong!" Sero screamed, "We didn't know what the heck was going on!"

"It's not fair!" Hagakure waved her invisible arms.

"You can just slip through things and warp around!?" Ashido cried with tears in her eyes, "Are you a hybrid like Todoroki!?"

Hitoshi stared at Todoroki, who scoffed.

"Nope, I've only got just the one!" Togata placed his hands on his hips, still beaming that insufferable smile, "But it took years of hard work and practice to get where I am now-"

“Oh, I know what his quirk is!!” Nejire flew to Togata’s side. “It’s Permeation!”

“Hado, let him explain his own quirk.” Amajiki whispered.

“That’s right! My quirk is Permeation! What you called a warp is just an application of that.”

Midoriya’s hands twitched oddly, “How do you warp?”

“If I activate my quirk through my entire body, then my body can go through *everything* . Then, if I release my quirk while I’m underground, something really strange happens. Apparently, things that have mass can’t overlap, so I get repelled to the surface in an instant.” Togata nodded, “I can change directions based on the angle my body is in when I deactivate my quirk.”

“That’s a really powerful quirk, kero.” Asui said.

“That’s not true.” Togata’s smile turned... sad, “I *made* it into the powerful quirk it is today. It’s not invincible. While my quirk is active, my lungs can’t take in oxygen, and no light can go into my retinas to see. It’s the same with sound vibrations and my eardrums. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Hitoshi frowned, his eyes going to Aizawa. Todoroki didn’t say anything as Hitoshi walked over to Aizawa, the man regarded him with a slow blink.

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

Aizawa shrugged. “Sure.” The man led him outside the gym, and the cool breeze flowed over them, “What did you think of Togata’s little demonstration? It was Nejire’s idea to bring you here.”

“Yeah, I know.” Hitoshi sighed, “He really kicked ass, didn’t he?”

“Language,” Aizawa hummed, though a smirk was hidden beneath his scarf. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Something occurred to me after Togata was done fighting.” Hitoshi looked Aizawa in the eye with a raised brow, “We’ve just been doing physical training, but what about my quirk? Togata said it took years to get his quirk to where it is now, but we haven’t practiced at all with mine.”

Aizawa nodded, “Not yet, but we will. You’re still behind when it comes to physical training. Be patient, Shinsou, and we’ll work on your quirk in due time. I promise.”

Hitoshi stared at him, looking for the lie, but he found none. “... Okay. I’ll trust you.”

“Sensei!” Nejire popped her head out the door. “We’re almost done in here!”

“Alright, give me a minute.” Aizawa sighed, then he glanced at Hitoshi, “Do you want to call it quits here? School is almost out for today anyway. Or... would you rather go back in and face my class? I don’t think they even noticed you were there, aside from Todoroki. I’ll have to get on them about situational awareness.”

“I’ll call it quits.” Hitoshi muttered, “I’d rather not get put under the microscope right now.”

Aizawa gave him a strange look, but Hitoshi walked away before anything else could be said. He debated on whether he should head towards the support lab or just go to his dorm to relax.

Mei *would* be disappointed if he didn’t show up today since they were close on a breakthrough with one of her inventions (he refuses to call them babies) yesterday...

With a sigh, he headed towards the main building. He was almost to the entrance when prickles trailed down his spine. Hitoshi paused by the door and glanced over his shoulder, eyes narrowed. Nothing was there. And yet, as the wind rustled the nearby trees and washed over him, something deep within him shuddered at its touch.

He put a hand over his chest and shivered.

“I wonder if its supposed to rain soon.” He muttered as he looked up to the crystal clear sky.

With a shake of his head, he shoved the feeling away and ducked inside.

“What did you guys think of Togata?” Kaminari asked as he smoothed down one of the blankets in the dorm gardens. “He was totally crazy, right!?”

They recovered from their last class and would spend the afternoon eating and chatting. They might as well enjoy the blue sky and fresh sunlight while they had the chance. The breeze was cool and pleasant, but it would only get colder as autumn fast approached.

“We totally got our asses kicked!” Ashido yelled from another blanket, “How can somebody be that powerful and not even graduate high school yet!?”

“Time and practice,” Tokoyami sat cross legged in the shadow of a tree, “Dutiful study under a pro and real experience are the best teachers one could have.”

“Speaking of which,” Sero looked across the yard, where most of 1-A prepared blankets and baskets of food that didn’t need to be cooked beforehand, “What do you guys think about the work studies?”

“I don’t know, honestly.” Ojiro frowned as his tail swished back and forth, “It would take a lot of work, and Aizawa-sensei even said we could miss whole days here at school for them.”

“But it’d be worth it, kero.” Asui said from another blanket, “Actually. Uraraka and I got approached by Nejire.”

Uraraka clapped her hands together, “We’re going to work under Ryukyu! Isn’t that exciting?”

“Really!?” Kirishima grinned, “Amajiki offered to introduce me to Fat Gum! I’d totally be down for real work experience with him!”

Tokoyami crossed his arms and looked at the sun rays filtering through the branches above him, “Dark Shadow and I have asked Hawks to take us under his wing, and he agreed.”

“Man,” Kaminari splayed himself out on the blanket, “Ryukyu, Hawks, Fat Gum. Those are all awesome pros!”

“I heard Midoriya is going on one, too.” Iida said.

Midoriya looked up, turning red, “Y-yeah! Togata offered to introduce me to Nighteye.”

“All Might’s previous sidekick?” Kirishima whistled, “That’s wild, man!”

Asui opened her mouth, but closed it and fidgeted with the corner of their blanket.

“Tsuyu?” Uraraka put a hand on her shoulder, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, kero.” Asui blinked, “You know how I always state what’s on my mind, but maybe I should keep this to myself. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“You can say whatever you need too!” Iida stated.

“Okay...” Asui scanned her classmates scattered around the garden. They all stopped when they sensed her unusual hesitation, and stared at her. “I just think that maybe this could be one of the last times our class is fully together like this for a while. Those of us who are going to work studies won’t be here all the time anymore, so the class will feel smaller.”

“Oh.” Uraraka mumbled.

The others fell silent, exchanging concerned expressions with one another.

“That may be so, but we still have a powerful bond as a class.” Tokoyami bowed his head, “Even if some of us are away on work studies, that will never go away.”

“Yeah!” Uraraka cheered up, “Plus, we’re still only first years! We have two and a half years left, and we can still work together when we are pros!”

“I suppose you’re right.” Asui said, “Sorry if I dragged down the mood with that.”

“Not at all!” Kirishima beamed. “It’s totally understandable!”

“We’re all growing into our own.” Iida pushed up his glasses, “It’s only natural that you would feel that way, Asui.”

“Call me Tsuyu.”

“R-right!”

“BE MORE CAREFUL MORON!!” Bakugo’s voice boomed from the open door leading into the dorm kitchen, “YOU’LL CUT YOURSELF IF YOU HOLD A KNIFE LIKE THAT, ICYHOT!”

Kaminari snickered, “Well, at least we know Bakugo’s temperament will never change.”

“Yeah, Kacchan seems to be a lot better since...” Midoriya trailed off, and his eyes wouldn’t meet any of theirs.

“Since Joker’s Spotlight update?” Iida asked, frowning.

“Yeah...” Something replayed in Midoriya’s eyes, perhaps a certain memory of the night of their fight. Midoriya shook it off. “A-anyway,

the food should be done soon and we can all relax!”

“Everyone!” Yaomomo popped her head out from the door. Flit followed, her metallic body gleaming in the sunlight. “The rest of the food is almost finished on our end, but we could use a couple more hands to carry everything out.”

“Right!” Iida stood ramrod straight and chopped his arm, “Midoriya, Kaminari, Kirishima, and myself will help!!”

“Eh, why me!?” Kaminari whined.

“Just do it!” Ashido said as she jabbed him with her elbow, “The sooner we put the food out the sooner we can all eat!”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Tokoyami watched as the other boys went inside, and the rest of his classmates finished their picnic duties. The hot food was brought out and divided evenly between the blankets splayed out like bright flower petals.

He stood and went to join Ojiro, Koda, and Shoji’s blanket, a light breeze gracing the garden. Tokoyami normally would have enjoyed the wind caressing his feathers, but Dark Shadow recoiled.

“Dark Shadow?”

“Fumi! Something is wrong with the wind!!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tokoyami?” Shoji said, “Is something wrong?”

Tokoyami blinked. Over half of his classmates already started devouring their food.

“Does anybody feel something strange?” Tokoyami asked. “Dark Shadow says there’s something on the wind.”

“I don’t feel anything.” Todoroki said as he held a bowl of cold soba.

“Me neither?” Kaminari sheepishly grinned. “Boy, you must be hungry if Dark Shadow doesn’t feel well! Is it supposed to storm soon?”

“I looked at the weather report this morning!” Ashido said with a half eaten bun in her hand, “It’s supposed to be clear skies all the way up until tomorrow night!”

“I see.” Tokoyami shook his head, “It must be my imagination, then.”

Tokoyami sat down between Koda and Shoji, the former smiling at him.

The food was delicious and bountiful, at least by student standards. Bowls of soba and rice, diced fruits and vegetables, tempura, fish, and staple favorites like Midoriya and his katsudon, were splayed around the collection of blankets. Cups of tea and carbonated beverages were passed around by the dozen. Sweet and savory buns were laid out alongside other pastries and delicacies baked fresh by Sato.

His classmates laughed and chatted away without a care in the world, and the mood of the whole garden lightened as the afternoon wore on into early evening.

Tokoyami could only take small bites as his stomach churned, earning concerned looks from his friends.

Dark Shadow refused to come out at all, despite the fact that their blanket was placed in the shade. He grabbed an apple pastry when Yaoyorozu passed them around with Flit at her side. Tokoyami tried to tempt him to come out with it, but Dark Shadow wasn’t paying attention.

It wasn’t until most of the food was finished off that Dark Shadow *screamed* .

Tokoyami bolted to his feet, barely hearing Koda shriek as his haste knocked over a bowl of fruit.

“Dark Shadow, what’s wrong!?”

All motion stopped in the garden and everyone looked at him with wide eyes.

“Fumi, it’s coming...”

“Explain yourself! What is coming?”

“Tokoyami,” Iida approached with obvious concern on his face, “Are you alright? Is there something wrong?”

Tokoyami opened his mouth to respond, when the sunlight became blotted by heavy clouds and the garden was draped in shadow.

“Oh come on!” Ashido screeched, “I swear the weather people are never right!”

“It looks like it’s gonna rain, kero.” Asui poked her cheek, “Should we put everything away?”

Tokoyami flinched when the first drop plopped on his beak, burning strangely like winter ice on bare skin. He shook his head and wiped his face as the pitter patter of rain fell onto U.A. Startled cries echoed across the garden as everyone rushed to gather everything.

Tokoyami felt a chill as a sharp gale cut across the garden, feeling foul and wronged.

“G-guys!?” Kaminari shrieked.

Others paused to stare at him, and followed his slackjawed gaze into the heavens. It was like a horror movie. The end of the world as everything gained a crimson shade; the swirling clouds, the bleeding light shed on every surface, the rain puddling under their feet like freshly spilled blood.

Bakugo dropped the bowl he carried, glass shattering at his feet.

“S-something is...” Midoriya whispered. “L-look over there!”

The eye of the storm swirled on the other side of the school grounds, in the direction of the USJ. Then, a voice, or something of the like. It wasn't the wind whistling or the tree leaves scraping together, it was a sound that Tokoyami didn't know how to describe. Ethereal and mystical in the ways of deep whale song, yet the metallic and bone-chilling timbre ground against their very souls. A song that no mere human should ever hear. It sang across U.A. mercilessly, as if announcing its divine presence to the poor mortals caught in this bloody rain.

Dark Shadow cowered in the furthest reaches of his mind as Tokoyami's whole body trembled.

Then, as fast as it came, the rain stopped and the clouds parted. Sunlight draped the garden once more, and the redness faded away to natural colors, but nobody felt the sun's warmth as they were all locked in a stone cold terror. Tokoyami couldn't put a finger on it. The world around them suddenly felt perverse in a way, the same, yet *different* after everything had been coated in a hellish red.

Bakugo was the first to move, bolting from the garden and into the dorm. Tokoyami had never seen such fear in his expression before.

Iida's phone chimed, and he looked at it as if he wasn't fully there. He blinked several times before he read it. “E-everyone,” Iida's voice shook, “Aizawa-sensei wants all of us in the dorm ASAP. Let's clean up and meet in the common room!”

Everyone moved at once, through in a silence born from urgency, confusion, and terror.

“*Fumi...*” Dark Shadow whispered as Tokoyami held a bundle of damp blankets. The water was clear now, and yet he still pictured it

as blood. *"I still feel it on the wind. It's only gone dormant... for now. This is only the beginning."*

Tokoyami frowned as he looked over his frightened classmates, *"We'll get through this, no matter what foolish villain stamped their unnatural presence on U.A. It will not go unpunished."*

"I'm scared, Fumi."

"Me too, Dark Shadow." Tokoyami admitted as he stepped into the dorm with his load, *"Me too ."*

See you again next week ;)

Also DTESH's second anniversary was earlier this week! I did a Tycoon stream for it, and you can check out that stream and my others where I play through P5R (Up until Yaldy) with DTESH only Personas!

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlhgzsrNwArRNB12y01IMm5YcZiplmxFC>

So Happy World(s)

Chapter 71: So Happy World(s)

Oh, why hello there ;3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Makoto jolted awake when someone grabbed her shoulder.

“I figured you would be here.”

Makoto rubbed her eyes, “Hawkeye...? Where am I?”

The woman smiled, “You don’t remember falling asleep in the Grand Central Library?”

Makoto blinked. She sat at a table, surrounded by piles of old books and scrolls, with scrap pieces of parchment where she wrote notes. Drawings of transmutation circles littered the pages of the book she fell asleep on.

“Right.” She closed the book and sighed, “What time is it?”

“The library was about to close, if that’s any indication.”

“Oh.” Makoto fixed her hair and packed everything away, but paused when Hawkeye gave her an odd look. “What?”

“Are you alright, Makoto?” Hawkeye had a worried crease in her forehead, “The only other people I’ve seen go this hard in a library are the Elric brothers. It didn’t end up well for them. I don’t want you going through something similar.”

"I'm alright." Makoto looked at the book on the table and slowly ran her fingers down the cover, "I'm just... trying to find some answers to something. That's all."

Hawkeye stared at her a moment, "Alright, but you should go home and get some rest, okay? I've seen what obsessive study does to certain people." She leaned in with a soft smile, "Why do you think Edward is so short?"

Makoto chuckled, "Don't let him hear you say that."

Amusement shown in the woman's eye, "Wouldn't dream of it. Come on, before they kick us out."

Makoto nodded. She grabbed her bag full of books and they walked together towards the entrance. A familiar, cool voice echoed in her mind.

"You see her as a replacement for your sister."

"What!?" Makoto staggered, but caught herself before she fell and made a fool of herself in front of Hawkeye. If the woman noticed, which she undoubtedly did, she didn't say anything, *"I do not. I just-"*

"Just miss our world. I know, you've thought so a hundred times. But you've also started to give up hope of ever going home. Never lose sight of our goal, Makoto. I did not choose you just so you could waver on the path."

"I won't." Makoto raised her chin. *"I promise."*

Her Persona hummed, then went silent. Hawkeye studied her from the corner of her eye, but as usual she kept her thoughts to herself. It was always a fine line with anybody in this world, and Hawkeye was one of the most perceptive people she's ever met. If it wasn't for a few close calls, then Makoto doubted she would be walking free right now.

Even after everything she's been through and the people she's befriended, they could not divulge their secret. No matter the cost. They learned the hard way that a corrupt government was the *least* of this world's problems.

They made it outside, the sky dark and air heavy with the scent of rain. Makoto turned to Hawkeye.

"I can make it from here. Thanks for checking up on me, Hawkeye. I didn't disturb you from your duties, did I?"

"No. It's not a problem, but be more careful, alright?" Hawkeye was giving her *that look* again, the one that stated she knew something Makoto couldn't place, "I just don't want you getting hurt."

"I'll be careful, I promise." Makoto looked up at the black sky, Hawkeye followed her gaze.

"I better get back to Mustang before it storms. After all, he's-"

"Useless in the rain." They said in unison.

Makoto chuckled. She waved her goodbye and they parted ways. Thunder lazily rolled across the city. Makoto frowned as the first drops of rain pattered on the sidewalk. Something uneasy stirred in the wind, and Makoto shivered as a chill overcame her. She hurried towards the apartment on the other side of town, and was nearly halfway there when it started down pouring. She cursed as she quickened her pace, the puddles under her feet rippling under her footsteps. The pavement became painted with streaks of light from the lamps. She ducked into the usual alleyway and-

"STOP!"

Makoto froze. "*What's wrong?*"

"The rain... this is..."

“*The rain?*” Makoto glanced at the puddle behind her, her stomach dropping to the ground. “*The rain is red. Yusuke!*”

She broke out into a sprint, the rest of the way became a blur. Makoto burst into the apartment, her soaked clothes dripping water onto the floor. Relief flooded her when she saw Yusuke, who’s chair screeched as he bolted to his feet.

“Makoto, what’s wrong!?” He went to her and put his hands on her shoulders, “Susanoo says he senses something strange, and yet... familiar.”

“Yusuke, the rain is *red* .”

His eyes widened. “We need to investigate the source as soon as possible. Shall we?”

“We have no choice.” Makoto shook her head and let her back fall in the floor with a heavy *thud* . “Let’s just hope Fullmetal won’t get in the way again. This will no doubt draw attention.”

“I can always encase him in another block of ice. He cannot do anything as long as his hands aren’t together.”

Makoto snorted, “The last time you did that he ranted about it in headquarters for three days straight.”

At that moment, the sky sang, not with thunder, but a familiar heavenly call. Makoto and Yusuke both flinched as the metallic sound echoed all across the city. To her, Yaldabaoth’s cry sounded... triumphant. Then, as quick as it began, Yaldabaoth’s victorious howl faded like a roll of thunder.

Yusuke stepped outside the door, “The rain is stopping. What does this mean?”

“I don’t know, but let’s not wait around to find out. This could be our chance to *finally* gain more information about how to get home.”

Every twist and turn so far led to nothing but dead ends. Makoto hands balled into fists and a determined gleam entered her eyes, "Let's go."

"Right. And if we encounter any Shadows..." Yusuke's hand went to his hip, where his katana was sheathed on his Metaverse costume.

Makoto made sure the apartment was locked and they ventured further into the maze of alleyways before donning their costumes with brilliant flames. Their Personas hummed in agitation as they leapt towards familiar rooftops.

Mephisto swirled his tea around in his ivory cup, taking a delicate sip to tame his wicked smile. The girl in front of him had the same taste in decor. Their afternoon tea together became a staple in his daily schedule, he always lavished they way she outmaneuvered others with a natural grace he doesn't often see in regular humans. But she and her partner *weren't* regular humans. To think, they both could summon such powerful demons without an incantation or binding spells.

And the blue flames, their unusual costumes that appear under it...

He took another sip. Mephisto set the cup down and grabbed a tiny sandwich from the platter on his desk, "Tell me, how is Rin fairing under Panther's guidance?"

Noir smiled, pretty as a rose with poisoned thorns, "Oh, you know how he is." She giggled, "He was frustrated at first, but Panther is more patient than people give her credit for. I believe he will do just fine."

"His control over the blue flames isn't as good as I would like," Mephisto sighed dramatically, "But you two seem to have a good handle on the power, for humans. I wonder why that is?"

Noir tilted her head, her smile saccharine, "I wonder."

He blinked when she said no more. She took a delicate sip and didn't seem to care how he stared at her, waiting. The tip of his tail, so delicately curled under his clothes, twitched. He opened his mouth to make more 'light conversation', when his door slammed open. He jumped, dropping the delicious sandwich onto the floor. A pity. These were his favorite!

"Noir!" Panther had sweat on her brow, and panted as if she had sprinted here. Rin was behind her, looking equally unsettled. "It's... It's..."

"Panther?" Noir put her cup down and stood, "What's wrong?"

"Oi!" Rin glared daggers at Mephisto, "Open your damn window and see for yourself!"

Mephisto blinked. He twirled his chair around and threw open his lavish curtains, a thrill of excitement shooting up his spine. The lost sandwich was forgotten as he leapt to his feet, a grin sprouting on his face.

"Ooh? What's this?"

His office was one of the highest points in True Cross Academy, so they got a good look at the swirling crimson sky and the rain dripping down the window like freshly spilled blood. He looked over his shoulder. This was one of the few times he's seen Noir's facade break completely, an expression of pure terror worth savoring.

An odd sound rang in their ears. A resonant tune that plucked fibre of their beings, a battle cry belonging to no demon he knew. In fact, he didn't think this was demonic at all, by the way it soured his blood in insult. This was... *something different* altogether.

He turned back to the window and put a hand over his face to hide his joyous expression.

Finally, things got far more interesting.

"I told you a hundred times!" Futaba griped from within the safety of Prometheus, "You can't come in!"

"But why, Futaba-chan?" Urahara whined. "If I could get a look at the inside of your... *friend*, then I might see something that you don't!"

Yoruichi, who floated in cat form beside Futaba, chuckled, "You're just jealous that Prometheus actually likes me, Kisuke."

"I am not!"

"Are too." Yoruichi stuck her nose up, her fur alight from the plethora of monitors and glowing symbols within Prometheus, "Now, stop being a child and get back to work. Futaba can't do all of it for you."

"I probably could," Futaba said, snickering, "But it would take a lot longer."

"Ugh, would you guys stop fighting!" Ryuji called from the foot of the stairs. "You're giving me a headache."

"If you're that bothered, Skull," Urahara grinned at him, "You could always help Ururu open the store."

"No thanks." Ryuji muttered.

Futaba sighed.

They were in the strange basement of Urahara's store, a wide open space that somehow had its own blue sky and warm sunlight. It was dusty and rocky and plain, perfect for training battles or testing out new abilities. She couldn't even tell that the sun was just rising now. Did they really spend another long night here? She and Urahara were running calculations with Prometheus' help, and hours felt like minutes with Urahara and Yoruichi's banter.

Two white pillars rose into the fake sky in front of them, connected with bits and bobs and thick wires. No matter how much they tried, or how much data Prometheus provided, they could not open a portal back home. But Futaba and Ryuji's phones worked just fine despite this world's human technology being a decade or so older. They could text and call each other, but whenever they tried to contact the other Phantom Thieves or someone else from their world, all they got was an error.

It didn't make any sense!

"Calm yourself." Prometheus' soft, child-like voice echoed in her mind, *"We'll figure this out."*

"I know," She pursed her lips as she reached over and pet Yoruichi, her mind trailing to another feline, *"But I'm just frustrated! We still don't know what Yaldabaoth did, or how he even managed to do something like this! What kind of power lets him mess with whole other worlds!? I miss the others so much it hurts, Prometheus."*

Prometheus sent a wave of comforting warmth, *"I know how deeply you care for your family, but we will see them again. Have faith in our abilities, and of the man who has risked much to help you and Numbskull."*

Futaba chuckled, *"It's just Skull."*

"Hmmm, I'm not so sure anymore. You've seen what happens when he and Kurosaki band together." Prometheus teased, *"Oh, the not-Mona is looking at you again."*

Futaba glanced at Yoruichi, sharp golden eyes peering into her instead of a glacial blue. Futaba pulled her hand away and stared at the myriad of screens around them, streams of data flowing steadily. A sudden stab of panic flowed from Prometheus when the screens turned red and alarms blared.

Ryuji shot to his feet when Futaba screamed. "What's wrong!?"

Yoruichi's ears twitched as Futaba frantically typed on the holographic keyboard, "Skull! Go outside and check something for me!"

"What? Why?"

"Just do it!"

He flinched, but ran up the stairs despite his bad leg.

"What's wrong, Futaba?" Futaba glanced at the screen showing Urahara, who had lost all playfulness in his voice. The shadow of his striped hat covered his eyes, "Is something happening outside?"

Ryuji suddenly shouted over Prometheus' comms, "*Oracle! I-its raining red! This is-*"

"The Metaverse!" Futaba's voice shook, "But how? Why does it show up now!? Wait, these readings..."

Another screen gave an alert as a strange sound leaked in from above. Futaba gasped and shoved her hands over her ears at the familiar call. It was worse than the screams of the Hollows in this world, far more terrifying and soul piercing. Yoruichi's fur stood on end and Urahara grasped the sword at his waist.

"What is this?" Yoruichi growled as the cursed sound ebbed away, "It doesn't feel like any Hollow I've ever encountered."

"I-it's not a Hollow." Futaba whispered, "It's... It's..."

"Yaldabaoth?" Urahara asked.

"Y-yeah."

"*Hey, the rain is stopping.*" Fear laced Ryuji's voice too, "*How does it look on your end, Oracle?*"

“Um...” Her hands fell away from her ears and she looked at the screens, “It I-looks like its going back to normal, mostly, but small traces from the Metaverse are still there.”

“Maybe Yaldabaoth gave up?” Yoruichi said, her eyes blazing gold from the light of the screens, “But from what you’ve told us, he wouldn’t stop so easily.”

Urahara clutched his chin, frowning in thought.

“I-I dunno.” Futaba took a deep breath at Prometheus’ behest, “From what I understand, Metaverse signatures are now layered over this world. It weakened significantly since the rain stopped, b-but its still there.”

“Not strong enough to mess with our reality for an extended time?” Yoruichi asked.

“No, the rain must’ve just triggered the change.” She said.

“I see.” Urahara walked in small circles, “So Yaldabaoth was most likely preparing for this from the start.”

“*Uh... meaning?*” Ryuji asked.

“*Meaning* that this was just the beginning.” Futaba’s eyes widened, “I-it’s gonna keep happening until-”

“Until the natural boundaries erode away,” Urahara stopped in his tracks. His back was turned to Prometheus, but the power readings from him shot up significantly. Futaba’s skin crawled, “And he has control over all of the worlds he sent you and the rest of your squad to. But why now? Something must have changed on the other side if he’s suddenly confident in his success. Oracle, what would it take to make Yaldabaoth certain he would win? What are the victory conditions?”

“W-well...” Futaba swallowed, but her mouth was still bone dry, “J-Joker was our l-leader, and he was the s-strongest out of all of us. H-he alone could probably stop Yaldabaoth, s-so if something bad happened to him... th-then maybe Yaldabaoth could win.”

Her chest tightened and it became harder to breathe. N-no, nothing could happen to Ren! He was their fearless Leader! He was strong and always came out on top! If... if something happened to him-

‘I guess the drugs were too strong. Wake him up.’

Ren, tied to chair, bruised and bleeding with the glint of several needles on the floor around him, was doused with a bucket of ice cold water. She had to cover her eyes after they kicked the chair and that one detective stomped on Ren's leg-

Yoruichi gently kicked her legs and floated in front of Futaba, blocking some of the screens. The black cat gently head-bumped her on the forehead. Yoruichi's silky fur snapped her out of it.

“Take deep breaths like we practiced, Futaba-chan.” Yoruichi said softly, “Everything is alright. We *will* get this figured out, and Kisuke, myself, and everyone else is on your side.”

“R-right. You're right.” Futaba took a few more breaths under Prometheus and Yoruichi's guidance. “We need to focus.”

“Would it be possible for him to invade with an army of his own?” Urahara asked.

“Possibly, he had these metal angel things guarding the path we had to go up to confront him.” Futaba said, “Shadows are a lot different than Hollows, and I don't know if you guys would be able to fight them off.”

“Well,” Yoruichi flicked her tail in an elegant motion, “Zanpakuto Spirits and your Personas have quite a lot in common. This Yaldabaoth might be surprised if he thinks he can trample all over

different worlds with no consequences to himself. What a foolish god.”

“Hey, it looks like Ichigo and the others are coming!” Ryuji said.

“Yeah, they just showed up on my radar.” Futaba frowned.

She still remembers the complete disaster that was her and Ichigo’s first meeting. Urahara and Yoruichi mercilessly teased him about it. Rukia was cool though, and she was glad she came to the shop with Ichigo. Maybe she could drag Rukia into drawing more cute pictures with her.

“They’re a rowdy bunch.” Yoruichi sighed, “I better go and meet them with Kisuke. What do you want to do, Futaba?”

“I’ll stay down here and continue running diagnostics. M-Maybe we could use all of this new data somehow. I’ll let you know if anything else pops up.”

Yoruichi nodded, then gracefully pounced downwards. Prometheus let her out with a faint glow. Urahara resumed his usual antics and complained about it as Yoruichi dragged him upstairs.

Futaba turned the rest of the comms off on her end. She interlaced her hands in front of her hurting heart and curled into herself, her hair splaying out like a fan behind her. Prometheus whispered small comforts to her as she floated there in silent agony.

“Ren... Sojiro... everyone...”

Sojiro sneezed.

He grumbled as he placed the box of recyclables at the front of his store. Sojiro should have been used to trudging through the waist high water, pretend that the redness of it and the constant rain didn’t send his brain into panic mode every time he jolted awake in the

empty attic. He glanced up to the swirling red sky, with the occasional giant bones and spikes jutting from the buildings and roads. People resumed their daily routines as if nothing was amiss, and Sojiro and the others had to act like everything was fine, too, lest they be thrown in the loony bin... or worse.

As far as they knew, time didn't move. No more day or night cycles, just endless rain, and endless *red*. And the occasional monstrosities they had to pretend not to see, unless they wanted a one way ticket to the afterlife.

"Sojiro."

He blinked and looked down the street. Sae Niiijima approached, as studious as ever. Though their situation was beginning to wear on her too. Bags were under her eyes, and her silver gray hair was never neatly done since this nightmare started. She clutched her bag like a lifeline. He knew it was one of Makoto's.

She stopped in front of him, "Am I late?"

"No," He rubbed the back of his neck with a long sigh, "Some of the others can't make it today, but you're just in time."

"Good, I-"

Sojiro should've known better than to look at the black pool forming behind Sae. It pulsed and bubbled until it burst like a diseased boil, revealing one of those angelic eyesores. A humanoid shape all crafted from gleaming silver metal, it's face was a blank, smooth mask. It's appendages ended with impaling spikes. The small blades of metal jutting out of its back were a sorry excuse for wings.

It whipped around to him with a screeching hiss.

Sae noticed the fear blatant in Sojiro's face, her own eyes going wide as she went rigid. Sojiro forced himself to relax. The angel floated soundlessly towards them. It's metal limbs grinding together

as it knelt next to Sojiro, its face inches from his. He cleared his throat, "Nice day today, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Sae had nerves of steel. The angel lurched towards her when she spoke, making strange noises in its throat, and she didn't even bat an eye. "I was just stopping by to have my usual cup of coffee after work. Has the cafe been busy today?"

"My regulars stopped by earlier, but it's pretty much empty now. You know how it is. Come on inside and I'll get your usual straightened out."

That's it. The angel tilted its head and slowly floated backwards, as if doubting itself. They turned and walked side by side to the door. He reached for the handle, his heart pounding as they were close to home base, when the door burst open, the bell clanging loudly.

"Guys!" Mishima was panicked, "Something is happening!"

Mishima looked right at the angel, the color draining from his face.

The angel shook in rage, and reared up to skewer Mishima with its sword. Sojiro pushed Mishima back into the cafe, and Sae cried out as the angel became a silver blur. Sojiro scrunched his eyes shut, expecting the inevitable, but nothing happened. Slowly, he peeled his eyes open.

The angel was frozen, the tip of its blade prodding into his apron.

A bone-chilling call rippled through Tokyo. The angel shuddered as it pulled away and leapt into the sky.

Sojiro collapsed on the door frame, gasping for breath.

Sae rushed to his side and steadied him, "Are you alright!?"

"Y-yeah," Sojiro straightened his glasses and fixed his apron. There was a small hole in the middle of his apron now, but at least he was alive. "I'm alright."

Sae nodded, and looked to the sky as hundreds of silver angels zoomed over Tokyo, all headed towards Shibuya.

“Let’s get inside before anything else happens.” She said as she pulled them inside. Mishima leaned against the counter, looking horrified. “What were you thinking? You know how we must act whenever we’re outside. Sojiro almost died!”

Mishima flinched, “I-I’m sorry! I just...”

“Go easy on the kid.” Iwai grumbled from one of the booths, “You’re alive, ain’t ya?”

“No external injuries from what I can see.” Tae Takemi slowly blinked from her spot on the counter. She leaned back and crossed her legs, throwing Sojiro a smirk, “Unless you need a more thorough examination?”

Sojiro facepalmed, “It’s fine.” He dragged his hand down his face and looked at Mishima, “Just be more careful, okay?”

“R-right.” Mishima sunk into himself, head lowered, “I won’t make that mistake again.”

Sojiro nodded, “What got you in such a panic, anyway?”

“O-oh, right!” Mishima brightened up, turned on his heel and bolted up the stairs.

Takemi sighed as she pulled herself from the stool, “I take it he wants us to follow.”

Iwai muttered under his breath as they all went upstairs. Thankfully, that red water didn’t reach the attic. Sojiro wasn’t the only one to show relief as they set foot on dry wood. Sojiro glanced at the Phantom Thief banner hanging on the wall, before his eyes trailed over to the various decorations. Glowing stars, a string of lights, a plant and posters, tiny figurines lining the top of his work desk and

bigger things lining the shelves by the bed. They were all pieces of Ren. It bruised Sojiro's heart just looking at them.

Others lingered around the attic.

The kid with a strange hat sat at the end of Ren's bed, and the shogi prodigy sat primly on the old couch. Everyone who Ren had a bond with could see the truth, resisted the strange brainwashing or whatever the hell infected their world. They did whatever they could to keep in touch with one another, and visited Leblanc in small groups every single day. Or the equivalent of a day. It was hard to keep track.

Mishima had a laptop on Ren's desk, typing frantically. Familiar books about hacking and other computer nonsense towered around him. Sojiro hoped Futaba would forgive him for lending them out... if she got back.

No, *when* she and the rest of the the Phantom Thieves came back.

"What do you have?" Sojiro asked as he looked at the computer screen.

"I got footage of Shibuya," Mishima said, "Those angel things are gathering there, but it looks like they're waiting for something to happen. The ones that arrived first are just... floating there."

"We all heard it." Shinya muttered, "That big guy must've called them, right?"

"That's what I'm guessing. We're lucky that he summoned them when he did, otherwise Sojiro would be-" Mishima cut himself off.

"I don't understand." Togo said with a frown.

"What don't you get?" Iwai asked.

Togo shook her head, "That... thing has to know about us. We were all connected so tightly with Ren." She stared at the hole in Sojiro's

apron, "So why hasn't he ended us? Surely, after all of our support for the Phantom Thieves, he would have taken us out."

"It's because we aren't a threat." Shinya said as he scuffed his shoe into the wooden floor. "We're like maggots to him. The big bad evil guy doesn't pay much attention to the useless npc's."

"We're not even pieces on the board?" Togo said sourly.

"Maybe he's just toying with us," Takemi scoffed, "He's throwing our failure back at us every time we look outside or step into that red water. But I've noticed those angel things watching my clinic every once in a while. If we're not a threat, then certainly we're guinea pigs to be poked and prodded for his entertainment."

"It's no use speculating," Sae said, not unkindly as she stared at the computer screen, "What do you make of this?"

"He's preparing for the endgame, but I'm not sure it's checkmate." Togo wrung her hands together, "I've run through countless strategies and that's the conclusion I come up with."

"They're still gathering." Mishima said, "We might have some time before he does anything."

Iwai scowled, "We can wait around all we want, but we can't do anything about it! We can't fight them like the Phantom Thieves could!"

"They'll come back." Sae turned towards the Phantom Thief banner, the others' eyes followed. "We have to believe in them. Mishima."

"Y-yes, ma'am?"

"Contact the others and tell them to avoid going to Shibuya as much as they can. We can't risk losing anyone. We've come this far without casualties."

Mishima frowned, "But-"

“I can’t abandon my son.” Iwai shook his head, “Or my shop. I have to get back there.”

“Iwai...” Sae whispered, “It’s too dangerous.”

Iwai scoffed. He turned around and marched down the stairs. Sae made to chase after him, but Sojiro grabbed her arm.

“Let him go. He knows what to do to avoid getting hurt. I would do the same thing if I were in his position.”

“I guess you’re right, but it doesn’t make me feel better knowing he’s surrounded by those *things* .” Sae said.

“I’ll keep tabs on him as much as I can.” Mishima’s smile was tense. “In the mean time, we should keep doing what we normally do.”

“He’s right.” Takemi sighed, “I should head back to my clinic before I’m missed. Keep me updated?”

“We will!” Mishima said with forced cheer.

Takemi’s eyes lingered on the banner. She left without another word. Shinya hopped off the edge of the bed and did much the same thing. The kid was never one to mince words.

“I’ll stay and help Mishima.” Togo said, nodding gracefully. “Perhaps we can figure out their plan or find clues to where the Phantom Thieves disappeared to.”

“Don’t wear yourselves out too much,” Sojiro said with a sigh, “I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

Sae hesitated. She watched Mishima’s screen for a few moments before she followed Sojiro down the stairs. She scoffed when she stepped back into the crimson water.

“Your usual?” Sojiro said to fill in the silence.

“Please.” She sat on the closest stool and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Sometimes I think we won’t make it through this. Other times I think this is just a nightmare that’ll go away if I just *wake up*, but it never does. I’m worried sick for my sister.”

Sojiro didn’t say anything as he prepared the coffee. Thankfully the red water didn’t ruin any of his appliances or spoil any ingredients. How did this stuff work, anyway? He shook away that thought and placed the hot cup of coffee in front of Sae. He made one for himself, too.

“I know. I’m worried too, but those kids will find their way back, and when they do that giant thing lording over Japan won’t last a minute against them.”

Sae raised her cup. “To the Phantom Thieves.”

“To the Phantom Thieves.”

They downed their coffee in one gulp. He was half tempted to go for something a lot stronger just to take the edge off, but getting drunk wouldn’t help anybody, especially as the others treated him as a leader of sorts. Deep down Sojiro knew that the kids were alive and fighting to get back home. He only hoped that they returned soon, otherwise there wouldn’t be anything left to fight for.

That tiny hole in his apron was proof enough.

Yes, there will still be another chapter on Saturday!

IMPORTANT EDIT: Also yes, once this main part of DTESH is over, I will be writing the other stories from the PT's POV. So you will see all the full scenes that are heavily hinted at in their smaller parts in this chapter!

Anti-HERO

Chapter 72: Anti-HERO

“Aizawa, sit down.” Nezu said coolly, though the slight edge in his voice skittered across their skin, “I’m not treating you like children, although you are currently acting like one. If anything, I’m doing you a favor.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[Aria](#) on Twitter!

Aizawa watched Nezu sip his tea with a wavering sense of calm, the conference room abuzz with grave or slightly frantic voices.

“What are we supposed to tell parents?” Midnight said, “We can’t just ignore this.”

“There are no reports of the red rain outside of U.A.’s boundaries.” Vlad King countered, “It only happened within the walls of our school. Nobody even saw it from the outside.”

“But why?” She frowned, “This doesn’t make any sense!”

“Everyone, calm down,” Yagi held up his hands, “I’m sure there is an explanation. I’m more worried about the children. Recovery Girl, did this red rain affect any students’ health?”

Recovery Girl pursed her lips, “I got an unusual amount of headaches the following day, but nothing severe or life threatening.”

“It’s not like any rain I’ve ever smelled,” Hound Dog growled, “It smelled... wrong. Like metal and blood, and I got the distinct scent of bones, too.”

“I didn’t even know what happened until *after* .” Power Loader said as he facepalmed, “I was too busy in the lab.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Power Loader.” Thirteen said, “I didn’t see it first hand either.”

Aizawa’s piercing gaze drilled into Nezu’s skull.

Nezu’s ears twitched, “It’s lucky that almost all students were indoors, that most didn’t even know something strange occurred. Some students thought that eerie voice was thunder.”

“‘Almost all students were indoors’!?” Aizawa slammed his fist on the table. The other teachers jumped when teacups and mugs clattered on the table, “My whole class was *outside* when it happened! They were scared to death when I met them in their dorm, and I couldn’t even answer any of their questions as to what the hell was going on!”

“I agree with Eraser. Nezu, you must know something we don’t.” Ectoplasm’s ghostly white eyes peered into Nezu’s glossy black. “Why wait nearly two full days after the red rain came to have this meeting? Why in the world did you invite that journalist here, instead of having an emergency meeting right away?”

“Ah, Taneo.” Nezu took another sip, ignoring the teachers’ jittery nerves. “Juzo News wanted to do an article on the aspiring hero students! Interviewing 1-A, the sole witnesses to the red rain, was a good distraction for them. They are our future after all!”

“Get to the point!” Aizawa snapped, “What was the real reason he came here?”

“Why, to send a secret message as T-san! I invited him to my office and told him about the red rain, and of the strange voice we heard over the grounds. As per our agreement, he won’t be able to share the information with just anybody.”

Aizawa raised a brow, “A message to who?”

“Who else? Joker!”

The room went silent. Most of the staff gaped at him, others look at him as if he has lost his mind. Maybe he has. He had long discarded it in Aizawa’s book.

“Wait, now hang on a second...” Snipe muttered.

“Y-you’re saying that-” Present Mic was cut off.

“Nezu,” Aizawa leaned forward, his expression grave, “Are you implying that the red rain is somehow connected to Joker?”

“I *know* it is connected to Joker.” Nezu set up cup down and folded his paws on the table, “In fact, I believe the red rain is integral to Joker’s first appearance at the USJ!”

“... You’ve officially lost me.” Vlad King said.

Yagi, however, went bone white as sweat broke out on his forehead, “Nezu, you’re not *seriously suggesting* -”

Nezu held up a paw and Yagi clamped his mouth shut. “I have known that something was off with the USJ since Joker’s first appearance. There have been strange readings ever since the incident with the League of Villains, and I have confirmation that it was the center of the storm.”

“And you neglected to inform us because...?” Cementoss asked calmly.

“Because you are not ready for the full truth of Joker and Mona’s origins.”

“*What ?*” Aizawa’s expression turned dangerously sour, “That’s bullshit! If you figured something out, then we need to know!”

Present Mic put a hand on Aizawa’s shoulder, “Shouta, calm down!”

“No.” Aizawa stood, glaring at Nezu. “I’m done with you acting like this is just a game when the rest of our students could be endangered. Stop treating us like children and trust in us for once!”

The atmosphere became icy. The other teachers stiffened as they stared between Aizawa and Nezu, who had lost that playful gleam to his eyes.

“Aizawa, sit down.” Nezu said coolly, though the slight edge in his voice skittered across their skin, “I’m not treating you like children, although you are currently acting like one. If anything, I’m doing you a favor.”

Aizawa’s scowl deepened. “Explain, *now* .”

Nezu sighed, “You will know the truth, the *full* truth, in time. Believe me when I say we *need* Joker and Mona to be present before we continue this conversation.” Nezu picked up his teacup and swirled it, idly watching the dregs on the bottom, “I will not debate on this.”

Aizawa ground his teeth, but sank back in his chair and crossed his arms, glaring at nothing.

“So...” Thirteen said after a tense silence, “What’s the plan now?”

“The USJ will remain on lock-down, and I will assign more robot and teacher patrols around that general area.” Nezu said, “As for the rest of the school, we will retain normalcy as much as possible. Like with the initial USJ attack, we must show that we will not be felled by any threat. If any students have questions, then tell them that we

teachers have it handled. I will immediately inform you if the readings spike like they did when the red rain came.”

“What about work studies?” Ectoplasm asked.

“Everything will proceed as planned.” Nezu said.

“But what if T-san can’t contact Joker?” Midnight tapped her fingers on the table, “What if Joker doesn’t come here before the next red rain?”

“Then I will make a public announcement asking for Joker to come to U.A.” Nezu looked across the table, absorbing a myriad of mixed emotions, “I won’t splurge all of the details publicly of course, just enough for Joker to put two and two together.”

“Why not do it now?” Cementoss asked. “It would save time.”

“... He might not trust us after what happened in the Kamino aftermath.” Nezu said, frowning. “It’s imperative that he hear it from T-san and make the decision for himself. If ever you put stock in my leadership at U.A., then trust me on this.”

“Alright,” Thirteen spoke first after a long, stilted silence, “I’ll trust you, Nezu.”

Cementoss nodded. Ectoplasm copied, albeit a bit hesitantly.

Midnight sighed, “Okay, as long as the students are okay and we get the full details eventually.”

The other teachers slowly came around. Aizawa was the last, barely a nod as he refused to look at Nezu.

“Good! Everyone is dismissed.”

Nezu hopped down from his chair and left the room.

“Dear, are you okay?” Recovery Girl asked Yagi, “You look like you’re about to be sick.”

“Yeah!” Present Mic yelled, “You totally know something, don’t you!?”

“W-well, that’s...” Yagi stood from his chair, his eyes not meeting any of theirs. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

Yagi practically ran out of the room, leaving the rest of them with more questions than answers.

Snipe collapsed face first onto the table, “Just what in the hell did we get ourselves into?”

Aizawa dug out his phone and pulled up a familiar Spotlight post. He grimaced at Akira’s razor sharp smirk, the pang in his chest sharpening until he could barely breathe. “I don’t know.” Aizawa growled as he stood and pocketed his phone, “We must remain alert. I don’t know what the hell Nezu is thinking, but the students will be our first priority if something else happens.”

That, at least, was something the teachers agreed on.

Nighteye stared Midoriya down.

Despite Midoriya’s failure to make him laugh, his knowledge of All Might was nearly pristine. Mirio and Bubble Girl, one of his sidekicks, exchanged glances with one another as Midoriya stood tall before Nighteye’s desk.

The boy... he had fire in his eyes. That *quirkless middle schooler* had grown, honed a quirk that should never have been his, and had numerous victories under his belt. Even if a few weren’t legal. His arms were littered in scars, the most notable was hidden on a compression sleeve on his right arm.

“Mirio. Bubble Girl.”

“Y-yes?” Bubble Girl said.

“Leave the room. I’m going to test Midoriya now.”

“What!? But you-”

Mirio put a hand on Bubble Girl’s shoulder. “Okay, Sir! We’ll just be right outside!”

Midoriya paled when Mirio gave him a shining smile and a thumbs up.

“So, in order for this to work, you brought the contract from the school-”

“O-Oh, right!!” Midoriya reached into the bright yellow backpack he brought with him, “I-it’s in here!”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking with you.”

Midoriya clamped his mouth shut and produced the contract.

It was a standard contract, all the terms and protocols the school laid out for the work study. All it needed was his stamp for approval. Midoriya held his breath as Nighteye reached into his desk for it, pressed it into the ink pad, and hovered it a few inches from the blank space.

“You know, I can’t believe All Might chose *you* to be the next wielder of One For All. Given the circumstances, you may very well be the last seeing as how you allowed somebody else to finish your fight for you. It doesn’t matter to me how many times All Might talked about you, or how your feats always passed expectation.” The boy’s face went white as a sheet as Nighteye stood and rounded his desk, spinning the stamp between his fingers. He stopped a few feet away from Midoriya, not looking at him, “And now you think you deserve to work under me? Why? Surely you know that I only allowed you inside because All Might asked me to, right?”

Midoriya squared his shoulders. “At first, I studied directly under All Might. Those 9 months before the U.A. exam were some of the toughest in my life. Then, I-I got into U.A., and made friends, survived the USJ, and-”

“I didn’t ask for a grocery list of your meager accomplishments.”

“I know, Sir.” Midoriya took a breath, his expression softening. “But when I studied under Gran Torino, he taught me things about this quirk that I never would have otherwise. I made this power my own and passed the licensing exam because of it.” Midoriya looked at his clenched hands, “But I still have a lot to learn! And I believe that *you* would be the perfect person to help me reach the next step. Togata looks up to you, and he told me how much he’s learned since he started here.” Midoriya’s eyes sharpened as Nighteye finally turned to face him, “I will get stronger here, Sir!”

“I see.” Nighteye tilted his head and held out the stamp. “Here’s your test: Get this stamp from me, if you can. If you cannot get it within three minutes, you fail and will never take another step in my agency.”

“Fight!?” Midoriya looked around the office splurging with rare All Might merch. Posters, statues, things that die-hard fanboys would *kill* for. “*Here!?*”

“We begin....” Nighteye dangled the stamp between his thumb and pointer finger. Midoriya tensed. “*Now .*”

Nighteye dropped the stamp.

Green lightning sparked around Midoriya. What a fool. It was a diversion, a distraction. Nighteye saw Midoriya’s next move from a hundred miles away.

Nighteye got in position to throw him off, while at the same time it would be an opportunity to use his quirk-

Something in the back of his mind screamed at him to stop. In his anger and impatience about Midoriya and One For All, he had forgotten the other key factor as to why he invited Midoriya here.

But it was already too late.

Midoriya leapt for the stamp as it dropped, and Nighteye naturally fell into position. He tapped Midoriya's shoulder at the same moment he met eye contact.

The world went white.

"Shigaraki Tomura."

Shigaraki huffed as Kurogiri materialized beside him. "What do you want? Is that crybaby ready to talk more?"

Kurogiri huffed, "Not yet, but Gigantomachia seems to have calmed some after your... conversation with him."

Shigaraki rolled his eyes. Some 'conversation'.

"Hey... this has got to be some joke..." Shigaraki scratched his neck as the giant's wailing howls pierced his eardrums. The towering trees did nothing to help dampen the noise. He looked back at Kurogiri, who urged him forward. "Hey..."

"M-master, why!?" Fat tears dropped from the giant's chin, "Why did you leave me behind!?"

Shigaraki's finger's twitched, "I'm talking to you-"

"WHY!?"

"Shut up!!"

Shigaraki put his hand on the nearest tree. The bark grayed and cracked until the whole tree turned into a twisted, withered husk.

Decay leeches through the roots and into other trees in the area. Birdsong was brutally silenced, and any avians nesting in the trees fell to the ground, dead and crumbling. The soil under his feet turned ashy as he glared up at the giant, who finally stopped crying to look at him in stupefied shock. Vibrant green was replaced with gray as the air became speckled with ash and dust. It almost looked like snow.

“You’re supposed to be one of Sensei’s most treasured assets?” Shigaraki growled as death rained around them. “Don’t make me laugh! Would Sensei want you to sit around here and cry all day!? No! He’d want you to stand up and destroy the one who did it! Joker’s still out there you know, skulking in the shadows like a coward.” Shigaraki turned his back on the silent forest, “I don’t need a weak party member who can’t even do that much. We’re leaving, Kurogiri!”

“Shigaraki Tomura?”

“What ?”

“I asked you where the others ran off too... but you seem preoccupied.”

Shigaraki scoffed. “They went out to get food.”

“Ah, I see.” Kurogiri looked around the abandoned shack, and straightened his uniform. “Have you eaten today, Shigaraki Tomura?”

“What does it matter?”

“You need to have a balanced diet in order to-”

“Just get on with it! What do you want?”

Kurogiri sighed and produced a card. “I managed to get in touch with the Shie Hassaikai. They said they would be willing to meet you.”

“When?”

“They... did not say. They will contact us when the time is right.”

“That’s bullshit.” Shigaraki dusted the card, “They can’t even give us the decency of choosing the time or place? We don’t need them.”

“Shigaraki Tomura,” Kurogiri narrowed his yellow eyes, “This may not be an ideal situation, but the Shie Hassaikai have extremely powerful quirks in their midst. This could be a blessing in disguise.”

He glared, “What do you mean?”

“The doctor is almost done with the first High End Nomu. You may have not swayed Gigantomachia yet, but he has made progress. We must use their power to bolster our own forces before we meet with this Yakuza group, as to not look weak. If we ever have a hope of getting revenge for our master, we must form a... party with them.”

Shigaraki paced the filthy room.

Kurogiri had enough tact to stay silent as everything stewed over in Shigaraki’s mind. Finally, after several minutes of going in circles, Shigaraki’s shoulders relaxed.

“Fine. *Fine* .” He glared at Kurogiri, “Tell the doctor to hurry the hell up. We’ll show those bastards that we aren’t to be trampled on!”

Kurogiri bowed his head and disappeared.

Nighteye gasped as he shot up.

“Sir!” Bubble Girl waved her hands, “You’re awake!”

Nighteye blinked. He was still in his agency, on a couch piled with blankets and pillows.

“Ugh.” He massaged his temples as his head threatened to split open. It felt like he got hit with a sledge hammer. “What happened?”

“Uh... that’s what I was going to ask you, Sir.” She wouldn’t look him in the eye. “Mirio and I waited outside, I-like you wanted us to.”

“And?”

“W-well, that’s... you see...” She fidgeted in her chair.

“What is it?”

“Mirio and I were only outside for a minute before we heard you screaming-”

“*Screaming* ?” He cast the blankets off and swung his legs over the couch, “What are you talking about?”

“Uh...” Bubble Girl sighed, then looked him in the eye. “We ran in as soon as we heard you screaming, y-you were on the floor, *convulsing* . We didn’t know how to help you and Midoriya was freaking out! And then you just... stopped. Mirio is in another room trying to calm the kid, a-and I waited here to make sure you were okay! We didn’t know if we should call an ambulance or-”

Nighteye pinched the bridge of his nose. “How long was I out?”

“A-about an hour.”

“Bring Mirio and Midoriya here.”

“A-are you sure? You don’t look so-”

“Yes.”

Bubble Girl hesitated, giving him a pitiful look, before she dashed out of the room.

Nighteye shook his head and forced himself to stand on shaking legs. At least he should have the decency to talk to Midoriya while he was seated at his desk. He stumbled towards it and sank down in his

chair. The stamp and the form were both on his desk. The contract still had the empty space.

Midoriya didn't even use that golden opportunity to get what he wanted.

Nighteye sighed as his head throbbed, and he barely heard the door open.

"Sir?" Mirio walked in first, his face paler than Nighteye had ever seen it. "Are you alright?"

"Yes." Nighteye looked at Midoriya, who flinched. He waited until they were lined in front of his desk, before asking Midoriya. "Do you know what my quirk is?"

Midoriya opened his mouth, then closed it.

Nighteye sighed. He pushed away a sudden bout of nausea as he explained. "When I touch someone and look into their eyes, I can see their future. To me, it's like watching a movie reel. I used my quirk at the start of our fight. Normally, I would've seen your future, and what moves you would've pulled off before you even thought about them."

"Sir," Mirio frowned, something Nighteye never wanted to see on his boy's face, "It was a lot worse than the other time it happened."

Midoriya gaped at Mirio, "It happened more than once? Is something wrong with your quirk?"

"No... at least, that's what I would've said before all of this happened." Nighteye clasped his hands together, "The only other time was right before the Sapporo Lab Incident. You know the one, Midoriya?"

"Y-yes."

"Can you happen a guess at *who* was present during that raid?"

“What do you-” Midoriya’s eyes went as wide, his pupils shrinking, “Are you talking about... Joker?”

“So you knew.” Nighteye leaned back in his chair, “My quirk has never reacted like that before then. At first, I thought it was jumping the gun by assuming Joker was the cause of it. Until recently.” Mirio and Midoriya leaned closer, their expressions turning serious, “Long ago, right after All Might fought All For One the first time, I begged All Might to give up his title and retire in peace because I looked into his future and saw how he would die. No matter what I did, what different methods I tried, the future always happened in the exact same way.”

“What are you getting at, Sir?” Mirio asked softly.

“I never saw Joker in All Might’s future. Not once. Not in the USJ, that Musutafu Raid *never* happened, and Kamino...” Nighteye frowned, “It was never supposed to be like that. It was only supposed to be All Might versus All For One. Alone. No Joker, no Satanael, and All For One was meant to *survive* and be taken to Tartarus.” Nighteye looked up at Midoriya, his eye critical, “What would you make of this?”

“W-well,” Midoriya clutched his chin, “I might think it’s a flaw with your quirk, or that Joker somehow has a power to avoid being seen in quirks like that. But...”

Nighteye raised a brow, “But?”

Midoriya hesitated.

Mirio playfully nudged Midoriya’s shoulder, “You can share anything with us, Midoriya!”

“W-well... there’s a lot about Joker we don’t know.” Midoriya said, “Something weird happened at U.A., and Aizawa-sensei told us that it had something to do with Joker. He wouldn’t explain how or why, but he and the other teachers refuse to talk about it any more.”

“Oh, the rumor about the red rain?” Mirio asked.

“The... red rain?” Nighteye said.

“Yeah! There was a strange rumor going around the school! Apparently we had a freak storm and the rain looked red? Myself and my other classmates never saw it, though.” Mirio blinked at Midoriya, “We were only told that your class went through something again, and to not bother you about it. The teachers were really strict on that.”

“Y-yeah. I’m not sure what’s going on myself. My class was outside, and it was sunny, and then it just... rained out of nowhere. But it was *red*, and then we heard this strange voice.” Midoriya shook his head, “If that’s related to Joker, and your quirk is acting weird because of him...” Midoriya hesitated, and was looking strangely at Nighteye, “Either something *is* wrong with your quirk, or something is wrong with Joker. Maybe your quirk considers him an anomaly or something?”

“An anomaly?” Nighteye’s frown deepened, “Maybe he is. My hypothesis is that Joker may have changed the very strings of fate that binds us all. Since my quirk reacted worse than the last time, we can guess that he’ll do something drastic to enact a future that never should have existed. And *soon* .”

The blood drained from Midoriya’s face.

Nighteye sighed. He grabbed the stamp and firmly planted it on the contract’s blank space. Midoriya sputtered as Nighteye handed it to him.

“Return tomorrow morning with Mirio.”

“Sir!” Mirio looked as if Nighteye had hung the stars, “Does this mean...?”

“Yes, it does. Congratulations. And Midoriya.” The boy looked at him, almost dazed. “What happened in this agency, and what we just discussed, will stay within these walls unless I give the green light. Understood?”

Midoriya frantically nodded.

“Good.” Nighteye waved his hand, “Mirio will make sure you get back safely. You have a lot to think about.”

Midoriya rushed out of the room. Mirio hesitated, concern clear on his face, but Nighteye waved him away.

He sighed when he was alone. “The only other person to witness that reaction was Hawks.”

Nighteye reached into a drawer for his phone.

“I admit, this isn’t what I thought we’d be doing on our first outing.” Tokoyami said as they walked through the too-white halls.

“A lot of heroes skip out on this part.” Hawks smiled, “But it’s just as important! Visiting the people you’ve rescued can go a long way in their recovery.”

“Ah, I see. Soothing the spirit by seeing your savior would be an incredible boost.”

“That’s one way to put it!” Hawks stopped in front of a set of double doors, turning to Tokoyami, “Follow my lead. You don’t have to talk to anyone if you don’t want to, but learning how to interact with them is a valuable skill. You follow?”

Tokoyami nodded, and Hawks opened the door. The visiting room was spacious, with plenty of windows to allow bountiful sunlight. Plush couches and coffee tables were scattered around, and shelves full of books and board games lined the rest of the walls. The walls

were a calming shade of blue, and carpet on the floor instead of cold, hard linoleum. Hawks felt Tokoyami tense as the small group of people noticed their entrance, and they were surrounded in an instant.

Tokoyami stayed back, watching aptly. Hawks hugged and chatted and joked around with patients from the organ harvesting ring. Some were able to go home by now, but others needed a little extra time and care.

“Mr. Hawks!” Yumi, the small girl that madman used as a hostage, tugged on his sleeve. “I have something for you!”

“Oh?” Hawks beamed as he knelt in front of her. She had something behind her back, her doe eyes melting his heart. She had made so much progress in her time here, and it might not be much longer before she could go home, “What do you have there?”

She smiled and held up a piece of paper. It was a drawing. Of *him* . His wings were vibrant shades of orange and red, contrasting the clear blue sky around him. At the bottom, in wobbly hiragana, read ‘My #1 Hero!’. Hawks felt a surge of warmth in his chest, but underneath lied an old twist of disappointment that had no right being there any more.

Anything his fans gave him previously was disposed of by Kunikazu. A ‘waste of energy on useless trinkets’ the man had said. His smile widened as that twinge of disappointment burned away with Kunikazu’s words.

“You know, I have just the perfect place on my fridge.”

Her eyes lit up like stars, “Really?”

“Of course!” He booped her nose, earning an adorable giggle, “It’ll hang in a place of pride, and I promise to look at it every single day!”

Hawks enjoyed a few more minutes of talking with them, Tokoyami gained an unimaginably soft look in his eyes, before they were interrupted by a knock on the door. One of the doctors looked at Hawks expectantly.

Hawks smiled at everyone, "I'll be back in a moment."

Tokoyami was at his heels as they went back into the hall with the doctor.

"What's up?" Hawks asked.

"I wanted to double check something," The doctor said as he waved a hand towards the door, "We received an email from your agency, explaining that you wanted to take care of their medical bills?"

"Oh, right!" Hawks clapped his hands together, careful not to damage the drawing, "Yes, I did have my assistant whip up something like that."

His assistant! Someone *he chose* to work at his own agency, rather than just another HC goon working behind his back. Hawks was slowly weeding those out those soulless husks and hiring people *he* wanted, people who he could bond with that didn't have ulterior motives.

"I see," The doctor frowned, "That will be very expensive."

"I can handle it." Hawks turned to stare at the door, frowning, "These people have been through enough. They should focus on recovering without medical debt hanging over their heads. Yumi's parents are especially struggling to stay afloat even without them."

The doctor nodded. "Very well, I'll get the paper work in order and contact you when everything is done."

Hawks nodded, and the doctor went down the hall.

"That is very generous of you." Tokoyami whispered.

Hawks threw on a grin, "It's the least I could do, really. Not everyone is saved after the villain is taken down, if you catch my drift."

"Saving their hearts after the villains are gone..." Tokoyami looked at the ground in thought, though there was something troubling by the way his feathers drooped. "That's something Joker would do."

Hawks chuckled, "Probably. Hey, have you been feeling okay? You've been... *off* since you started working with me. I didn't do something to make you uncomfortable, did I?"

"What? No." Tokoyami blinked. "I admit I have been pondering many troubling things as of late."

"If you need to get something off your chest, I'm all ears!"

Tokoyami stared at Hawks strangely and shifted on his feet. "I just... You've flown through any number of storms, correct?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever... experienced red rain before?"

"Red rain?" Hawks raised a brow. "I've been through some freaky lightning storms, but nothing about red rain. Why?"

"It's... it's nothing." Tokoyami turned away. "Forget I said anything."

At that moment, his phone rang. He frowned at Tokoyami, but he answered with a forced grin, "Kagome-chan! What's up?"

Oh, did he mention that his assistant was one of the quirkless people Joker rescued? Hawks might not have been as vocal as Gang Orca, Ryukyu, or Nezu about their various programs, but they were all still sorely lacking in a specific area: Quirkless people.

They deserved protections against discrimination, to be able to live their lives despite their lack of a quirk. To not be treated as second hand citizens. An afterthought or statistic. If he could take the first

step in setting up laws to protect them, then he would. After all, who could say no to a few choice words from the number 2 hero?

Besides, quirk or no, Kagome was one of the most scarily efficient people he's ever seen. He was happy to have her on board.

"Sir, I got a call from the Nighteye Agency."

"First, we talked about this," Hawks said. "You don't need to keep calling me 'sir'. Second, what does Nighteye want?"

Tokoyami perked up.

"Well...."

"What's wrong?"

"Nighteye didn't give many details, but it sounded urgent. The only hint he would give me was something about his quirk, and... something about Joker. He said he wanted to invite you to his agency and asked if you could come as soon as possible."

Hawks sobered, "Call him back and tell him we'll be there tomorrow."

"Yes sir- er, Hawks."

Kagome hung up.

Tokoyami glanced between Hawks and his phone warily, "What's going on?"

"I don't know yet." Hawks shoved his phone back in his pocket and sighed, "But it looks like our hospital visit will be cut short. We'll find out more when we get to the Nighteye Agency."

Tokoyami nodded and remained silent from there on out.

Hawks carefully folded Yumi's drawing and tucked it away. He hoped she wouldn't be too upset with him for leaving so soon.

"I think father is sick."

"*Eh? What do you mean?*" Fuyumi asked.

"*Yes! Hey, maybe we could get him admitted and-*"

"*Natsuo, hush!*" Fuyumi chastised, "*Go on, Shoto.*"

"Well," Shoto looked around the empty hallway nestled within Endeavor's agency. "We trained today, and it wasn't... it wasn't like the training we did when I was little. He was calm as he instructed me to copy what he could do so we could grasp the limits on my fire side. And then he talked about how we could practice with my fire and ice together to do something new."

"*Okay?*" Fuyumi whispered, "*I thought it was bad idea to do a work study at our father's agency but I wasn't expecting this.*"

"*Yeah, little bro! What the heck were you thinking? There are loads of other hero agencies that have fire quirks!! Why go with that bastard?*"

"I know, but he's the best option to hone my fire side. Besides... there's more."

"*He didn't hurt you, did he!?*" Natsuo snapped.

"No. Actually," Shoto grabbed his right shoulder with his free hand, "He's been... *smiling*, or trying to. At first I thought he was constipated or in pain, honestly. Before we trained he cracked a joke with one of his sidekicks, who looked confused at first. Then after we went to his office, I was expecting to be told how our training session was a complete failure."

"*What did he do?*" Fuyumi asked softly.

“He...” Shoto’s throat tightened, so he cleared it before answering, a strange knot of emotions tangled in his chest. He didn’t know what to make of them. “He patted my shoulder and told me how proud he was of me.”

“Yep, sounds like he needs to be admitted to psyche ward, stat. All of these are clearly signs of a mental break.”

“Natsuo, knock it off!”

“What? Do you honestly think he’s had a change of heart? I don’t!”

“Well, he’s been acting differently for a long time now. He’s not... he’s not the same person anymore.” Fuyumi sighed, *“He told me he was proud of me too, for what we did with that petition for Joker.”*

“Wait, really? Why hasn’t he told me he’s proud of me!?”

“Would you have accepted it?”

“No, but-”

“It’s because you won’t give him the time of day. He gave us space after the Yaoyorozu trial because you kept throwing glares at him. Maybe we should give him a chance.”

The siblings didn’t speak for several moments.

“I’ll see how the rest of this week goes.” Shoto said, frowning, “I’m still on the fence, he needs to prove he’s genuine first.”

“Shoto...” Fuyumi said.

“I’ll be watching in case he goes back to old habits. Don’t wait up for me if I have to say ‘I told you so!’”

Natsuo hung up first.

Fuyumi sighed, “*Chin up, okay Shoto? Call me if you need anything?*”

“Of course, Fuyumi. Talk to you later?”

“*Yeah, later.*”

Shoto hung up. He looked at his phone when another text came from his father, asking if he’s ‘ready to go on patrol with his old man’.

Shoto groaned.

“I’m still having nightmares about it, man!” Kaminari cried, “Why are the teachers being so... sooo...”

“Evasive? Mysterious? Secretive!?” Ashido wagged her fingers at Kaminari, “What are they hiding!?”

“Maybe they have good reasons to keep their traps shut.” Bakugo snapped. “And you should too!”

Ashido and Kaminari whipped around to him, and others in the common area pretended not to eavesdrop. They were terrible at it.

“What do you mean?” Kaminari frowned, “You’d think this would be a pretty big deal! I haven’t seen a single article on it either! *Nobody* is talking about it!”

“Especially since it’s somehow related to Joker!?” Ashido threw her hands up, “I mean, come on! They can’t just leave us on *that* !”

Bakugo looked at his clenched hands, scowling, “I saw it before.”

“Huh?” Kaminari asked.

“That red sky over U.A. I’ve seen it a few times, just for a second or two, and had some weird dreams about it since. I thought I was just

seeing things.” Bakugo glanced around the room, “Nobody else saw it before the picnic?”

“N-no, dude.”

Ashido shook her head.

Great, now the extras were looking at him in concern.

“Why only me?” He muttered to himself.

“Joker...”

They looked up to Deku, who had just walked in.

“Oh, you’re back!” Kaminari grinned, “How did it go? Kirishima and the others got in with their agencies!”

“Apparently Hawks and Endeavor approved Tokoyami and Todoroki’s paperwork early, so they’re already with those agencies!” Ashido draped her arms over the back of the couch, “What about you, Midoriya?”

“Ah, yeah! I’m starting tomorrow!”

“Nice!” Kaminari’s grin faltered, “But why do you look so spooked, dude? Did something happen?”

Deku flinched, his eyes darting around. “No?”

Bakugo narrowed his eyes as Deku inched towards the elevator.

“I-I’m going to hit the hay. Good night!”

“Midoriya!” Ashido yelled, “It’s not even 5 pm yet! What about your dinner!?”

“Aaaaand, he’s gone.” Kaminari said with a shrug, “I wonder what’s gotten into him?”

Bakugo stood and stomped towards the elevator.

"You too, Bakugo?" Ashido asked.

"I just need some time alone. Piss off."

"Somebody's cranky." Kaminari stage whispered to Ashido.

Bakugo ignored them as the elevator doors closed. When he got off, he stomped towards his room and locked his door. Bakugo stared at the Seth statue sitting proudly on his headboard, frozen on Seth's billowing wings and mouth open to a silent roar. He snorted as he went to his bed and fell face first onto it.

His only thoughts were how the bastards got the wrong number of horns on Seth's head.

Ren paced back and forth around the attic, the others watching him in concern.

"Are you sure you want to contact him?" Manami asked.

"Yeah." Ren stopped and raised a brow at her, "He posted a new blog with a picture of a bird. He knew our code word for the heroes, so I doubt it's a coincidence."

"I wonder if something happened." Atsuhiro said, "Maybe he has some information to share?"

"It can't hurt checking in with him," Morgana said as his tail swished back and forth, "It's been a while."

"Okay." Manami handed Ren a burner, "I added additional protections just in case."

Ren nodded, and called the only number set in the burner phone. It only rang once before somebody picked up.

"Hello?"

Ren smirked, "Greetings, T-san."

"Kid!?" There were loud crashing noises in the background, the sound of things falling and Taneo muttering a string of colorful curses.

"Are you okay?"

"Am I okay!?" Taneo huffed as another tower of something crashed onto the floor. *"You know, when someone you care about disappears without a trace and suddenly calls you and one jammed toe into a table sends a bunch of paperwork onto the floor-I'm just peachy."*

"Sorry, I should've contacted you sooner."

"Ah, don't be. I literally asked you to call me in a round about way, I just didn't expect you to get in touch so soon." Taneo sighed as if all his strength left him, *"You had me worried sick, and I'm not the only one. You had no idea how many people really felt relief when you posted that picture on Spotlight."*

"I know." Ren sat down in the middle of the attic. Morgana pranced over to him to listen in, so Ren pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker so everyone could hear. *"Anyway, why did you want to get into contact with me?"*

"Oh, right..." Taneo seemed to brace himself, *"Look, I'm not one to mince words, so I'll get straight to the point. Something freaky happened at U.A."*

Ren's heartbeat picked up as the others leaned in.

"Something that they don't want many people to know about, but Nezu thought it would be important to you personally." Taneo let those words hang in the air for a moment, before his voice turned grave, *"Would you happen to be familiar with red rain?"*

Ren flinched. Morgana shivered as a similar icy cold fear stabbed into Ren's chest. Atsuhiro mouthed 'red rain?' to Shuichi, who shrugged. Tobita exchanged glances with Manami.

Kaito remained silent, but he crossed his arms with a deepened frown.

"Kid?"

"When did it happen?" Ren asked, unable to keep his voice steady.

"Last Saturday. There's something else. Nezu also said that along with the red rain, there was a strange voice or something that echoed through the grounds. Something enormous. The cameras around the school malfunctioned when it happened, so he doesn't have any recordings of the event, but it's clear that whatever it was had him pretty spooked."

Ren and Morgana stared at each other, mutual dread filtering through their eyes.

"What happened after? Did Shadows attack the students?"

"Huh? Shadows? I don't think anything attacked the students. The red rain only lasted a minute or so, and the storm ended shortly after that voice faded away. Nezu thinks it'll happen again, though he doesn't know when. You... you know what's going on, don't you?"

"Yeah. I do." The phone creaked under Ren's tightened grip. "Listen, it could be dangerous."

"Huh?"

"Stay away from the school if you can."

"Wait-"

Ren hung up and jumped to his feet, leaving the burner on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Morgana asked when Ren went to his bags, his hackles still raised.

“You heard him, Morgana.” Ren rifled through his bag and grabbed his phone from home. He had kept it off since he shared his real name with the others, so he turned it on. “I’m checking to see if the Metaverse app is on my phone. If the Metaverse is appearing at U.A., then we *have* to be there.”

“W-wait a second!” Morgana shouted.

“Merp!” Stubbs announced.

Shuichi frantically waved his arms, “What!? You can’t just-”

“I feel like you’re skipping a few steps.” Atsuhiro went to Ren’s side, “What is this ‘Metaverse’? What has the two of you spooked so badly?”

“We should talk about this before you make such a bold decision.” Tobita said calmly. “Please.”

Ren froze as his phone lit up. And began to vibrate. Ren stared in shock as his phone screen glitched and a high pitched whine screeched from the speakers. A familiar eye shaped icon appeared in the center of the screen, wavering with the warped prismatic colors. Ren hissed and dropped the phone as it burned his palm, the others jumped away as it sparked and exploded.

The screen went black, and small trails of smoke leaked from it.

“No way...” Ren whispered in the dreaded silence. He fell to his knees and stared at it, “It can’t be...”

“Th-that was...” Morgana’s eyes went wide, and he shivered. “I saw it before the screen went dark, i-it really is-”

“Morgana, we can’t waste any time.” Ren snatched his bag and warily picked up his phone. It was still hot, but he tossed it in his bag.

He slipped on his shoes and a warm hoodie, and made for the stairs, "Are you coming or not?"

"Wait!" Morgana and the others were on his heel, "Please, take a minute and think about this, Ren! Ren!!"

They made it to the bottom of the stairs and Kaito rounded on Ren, blocking his way to the storage room.

"Kaito, move." Ren growled. "I *have* to go."

"You're being rash." Kaito held up his hands, his voice steady, "I don't fully understand what happened at U.A., but you have to calm down and think about the consequences. You're not the only one affected here."

"Yeah, you're our leader! We're a *team* !" Shuichi cried. "We'll support you no matter what, but you gotta talk to us, man!"

Manami tugged on his sleeve, "Let's go back upstairs and take a breather, okay?"

Ren scoffed, "Morgana, tell them we *have* to go."

"I..."

Ren frowned as he looked over his shoulder at Morgana, who stared at him strangely. "... Morgana?"

"They're right."

"What?"

"I get it, I'm scared too." Morgana sat on the bottom stair and curled his tail around his legs. "But we can't just jump into this like we have before! Especially since you... since you're..."

Ren scowled. "Since I'm *what* ?"

Morgana's ears drooped, "Since you still don't have your powers. It's too dangerous. I-I can't fight all the Shadows by myself, I-let alone be able to do *anything* if Yaldabaoth really shows up! If I fail, a-and there's no way to save the others, then who will protect *you*?"

"So I'm useless, is that it?"

"What!?" Morgana jumped on all fours, "I never said that!"

"But I might as well be!" Ren snapped. "I can't summon my costume or my Personas. I'm tired of just sitting here doing nothing! And now we lost our *one* tie to our home! If I can help U.A., if I can reunite us with the others, then I will! This is *our chance*, Morgana!"

"We're not saying we won't help with whatever is going on," Tobita stepped next to Ren, his eyes full of warmth that made Ren's chest hurt. "We're just asking you to calm down so we can all come up with a plan together."

Ren's heart pounded and his skin prickled. He felt too hot. The walls closed in and it was suddenly hard to breathe. They were all looking at him as if he were an injured animal ready to lash out.

"Ren." Ren looked into Kaito's eyes, so full with knowledge and understanding that it instantly reminded Ren of Kohryu. Kaito gently put both hands on Ren's shoulders, gripping firmly, "It's okay. *Everything* will be okay. You're like family to me and I don't want to lose you. We'll figure something out, but you need to work with us, okay?"

Ren swallowed. The fight slowly drained out of him, and he let his bag drop to the floor with a dull *thud*. For some reason, his eyes burned. His heart pounded against his ribcage, a stab of *hurt* and *pain* accompanied each frantic beat.

"That's it." Kaito smiled softly, "Now, let's-"

“No.” Ren shrugged of Kaito, “I just... “ His face fell in his hands as he tried and failed to make the frustrated tears go away, “I need some air. I need to think... away from this bar. I’ve been cooped up here too long.”

“But-” Manami started.

“I won’t go far.” Ren’s hands fell to his sides, “Unless I can’t even do *that*, either. I’ve only been out of this place *once* .”

Kaito opened and closed his mouth. He looked at the others, and with a sigh, he stepped out of Ren’s way. Morgana made to follow, but Ren stopped him with a sharp glare.

“*Alone* .”

Morgana froze as the back door closed silently, but it might as well have been as loud as a bomb going off.

Manami sniffled, “I-I’ve never seen him so upset with us before...”

“I-I...” They looked at Morgana, who trembled. He choked down a sob as tears dripped onto the floor, “I-I miss them too, Ren!” He yowled at the door, “I-I’ve been burying my feelings because I was so worried about *you* ! Why can’t you see that I’m hurting, too!? I just don’t want to lose you again, you *jerk* !”

“Morgana...” Kaito said softly.

Morgana shuddered with another sob, and Manami wrapped the feline in her arms.

Atsuhiro pinched the bridge of his nose, “It seems we haven’t been taking in their feelings as much as we should have.” He lowered his hand and looked in between their group, “We’ll give Ren the space he wants, but we should go after him if he doesn’t return within 20 minutes.”

“He has the penchant to get into trouble on his own.” Tobita said.

“But what choice did we have?” Shuichi threw his hands up, “He was so upset, and forcing him to stay here would’ve made it way worse!”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs huffed.

Kaito picked up Ren’s bag from the floor, then looked at Atsuhiko, “Who should go?”

Atsuhiko blinked, “You’re asking *me* ?”

Kaito shrugged, “You might be the newest member, but you’ve grown really close to Ren and the rest of us. You have the power to make sure he comes back okay.”

“Well, I suppose...” Atsuhiko frowned, “Spinner, Morgana, and I should go. Manami, see if you can do anything to repair that phone.”

Manami pulled away from Morgana and nodded.

“What should I do?” Tobita asked.

“Stay here, maybe prepare some tea and food for when we get back. I think Ren will need it.”

Tobita frowned, his other hand tapping the cuff around his wrist, “Oh. Alright.”

“Merp?”

Atsuhiko snorted at Stubbs’ soul devouring stare, “You and Kaito stay down here in case he returns without us. Does that sound like a plan, everyone?”

After a round of agreements, they split into their respective duties.

Morgana did his best to calm down and wipe away his tears with his tiny paws, then jumped onto Atsuhiko’s shoulder.

After 20 minutes and no sign of Ren, they delved deep into the labyrinth sprawling from the back of the bar.

Eri dashed through the darkness.

She slipped in a puddle and fell on her face, but the stinging on her hands and knees was nothing compared to the terror washing through her whole body.

“Eri...”

She looked behind her. Overhaul was in the shadows somewhere, stalking her like prey. His voice echoed around the stone cold walls, his presence everywhere and nowhere all at once. Her heart skipped and her veins flooded with another layer of ice.

She pulled herself onto shaking legs, and *ran* .

“I’m a bit nervous.” Midoriya said to Mirio.

Civilians pointed and smiled at them as they walked down the busy sidewalk. The morning was bright and sunny, and yet Midoriya’s stomach held nothing but a tangled ball of nerves.

Mirio beamed, “You must’ve gone on patrol at your last internship, right?”

“Well... not really. My internship was a bit unorthodox.”

“I see.” Mirio nodded, “Stick with me and I’ll show you the ropes! There’s nothing to be worried about as long as you’re with Lemillion!”

“Lemillion?” Midoriya’s eyes widened as he stared at the blazing gold 1000000 on Mirio’s chest, “Oh, that’s your hero name?”

“Yep!” Mirio posed his with hands on his hips, a couple girls behind them blushed, “It’s because I want to save a million people! I never

got your hero name, though.”

“It’s Deku.”

“*Deku* ?” Mirio looked at him as if he sprouted another head, “Are you sure you’re okay with something like that?”

Midoriya nodded, “It’s not as bad as it sounds! It used to be an insult, but a close friend of mine said it reminded them of that saying ‘You can do it!’.”

“That’s a good friend.” Mirio said, smiling. “I’m glad you could turn it into something positive!”

“Yeah, I don’t know what I would do without them. Oh, speaking of, I heard that Hawks will be at the Nighteye Agency sometime today?”

“Right! Bubble Girl did say something like that before we left! Why?”

“One of my classmates is interning with Hawks! It’ll be exciting working with him and one of the top heroes in Japan!”

“That’s the spirit, Deku!”

Midoriya didn’t noticed a tiny mouth of an alley until something small bowled into his legs. He staggered and Mirio steadied him with a hand on the shoulder.

“Woah! Are you okay?”

“Um...”

Midoriya stared at a tiny girl looking up at him from the ground. Long white hair flowed down her back, and her gleaming ruby eyes were wide in fear. She wore a tattered, dirty dress, and her arms and legs were wrapped in filthy bandages. His eye caught the tiny horn poking out the top of her forehead.

He knelt down with a warm smile, "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. Are you lost?"

Mirio exchanged a worried look with him when she didn't answer.

Midoriya didn't see her freeze when he lifted a hand and gently set it on her head. "Don't be scared! Everything is okay now that we're here to help you! What's your name?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears, and Midoriya heart leapt to his throat when she suddenly tackled him in a hug. Her tiny hands gripped the back of his hero costume as if it was the last thing on this earth.

"Eri." She whispered, her voice as soft as a puff of cotton dancing on a breeze.

Midoriya wrapped his arms around her, his heart twisting as he felt skin and bone under her dress, "Well, Eri, why don't we get you looked at and then we can figure out where your parents are?"

"Eri, you're really making trouble for these young heroes?" A steely voice came from the dark alley.

The girl gasped and clung tighter to him. Midoriya squinted to see the figure stalking towards them, close enough for the shadows to recede. Mirio tensed, and he grabbed Midoriya's hood and pulled it over the top of his head.

Midoriya blinked in confusion until the man stopped a few paces away.

He was tall and slender, with shaggy auburn hair. Midoriya barely registered the rest of his clothes, too enamoured with the strange, beak-like mask over his mouth and nose. And his eyes . They were small and a gilded golden color, but they were cold. Calculating. *Emotionless*. They roamed over Midoriya as if he were a disgusting thing found at the bottom of a shoe.

“Thank you for finding my daughter.” The man droned, “She has a bad habit of wandering where she’s not supposed to.”

“H-he’s not my daddy.” Eri’s voice broke and she was on the verge of tears.

Midoriya tightened his grip on her, “Sir, she’s dirty and injured. I think we should go to the hospital and get her looked at properly.”

The man tilted his head, his eyes sharpening, “She’s clumsy and falls down all the time. She’ll feel better once she’s back *home* . Now Eri, stop throwing a tantrum and come along.”

“But-” Midoriya clamped his mouth shut when Mirio grasped his shoulder, his grip like iron.

“Oh, I know you!” Mirio said as he threw on a sunny grin, “You’re Overhaul, leader of the Shie Hassaikai, aren’t you?”

Overhaul narrowed his eyes at Mirio. “So you know me. What did you say your hero names were?”

“Oh, we’re nobody special!” Mirio chuckled as he rubbed the back of his head with his free hand, “We’re barely considered sidekicks!”

“I see.” Overhaul’s eyes flicked to Eri, and she flinched as if she had been stabbed, “Eri, let’s go. Unless you want to cause more *trouble* for these young heroes.”

He pulled at his glove.

Eri silently gasped, and she thrashed in Midoriya’s arms. She slipped from his grasp and ran to Overhaul’s side, her head ducked.

“Oh? Finally done throwing a tantrum?” The man patted her head, and her tiny hands curled into shaking fists. “Good girl. Now come along, you missed a lot while you were away from home.”

They walked back into the shadows. Midoriya shot to his feet and was about to run after them, but Mirio yanked him back.

“Lemillion, we can’t just-!”

“You didn’t feel it, did you.” Mirio’s sunny grin disappeared into a twisted grimace as the pair disappeared into the shadows, “That man had murderous intent written all over him. If we didn’t return his daughter, then he would have tried to kill us.”

“So that make it right to throw her away!?” He yelled. Mirio gave him a pained glance, and Midoriya’s throat tightened, “She was just a little girl. How can we turn away from someone who needed help?”

“Deku...” Mirio sighed as he let go of Midoriya’s arm, “I know how you feel, but as we are now we wouldn’t be of any help. The Shie Hassaikai are a small group, but they have really powerful quirks. Their leader has the worst one of all.”

“So...?”

“So,” Mirio smiled, although it was weaker than before, “We might not be able to help her now, but one of Sir’s specialties is dealing with people like that. We’ll make a report when we get back, and once we have enough information to save that girl, we will. I promise, we won’t abandon her next time.”

“But...”

Midoriya looked down at his hands, a recent memory taunting him.

“Would you still reach your hand to him even when he broke the law?” That girl, who he knew now as a disguised Toga Himiko, leered at him, “Aren’t heroes supposed to bring criminals to ‘justice’?”

“I would save him, no matter what.”

He would save Akira, *no matter what* . That's what he said. He stated it like a promise forged in steel. But why should that only apply to Akira? He knew it wasn't realistic to be able to save *everyone*, but she was right in front of him, in *his arms* ! Why couldn't he reach his hand out to a scared little girl at the end of her wits?

"Hey, Deku, snap out of it!"

Midoriya winced as Mirio snapped his fingers in front of his face. "Sorry."

"It's alright. That situation was... stressful." Mirio patted his shoulder, "Why don't we return to the agency?"

"Yeah, sure."

Midoriya glanced back into the shadowy alleyway, dread tugging at his heart, before following Mirio. He felt strange as they stepped back into the sunlight. His footsteps slowed as something buzzed under his skin. One For All fluttered along with another feeling in his chest, a familiar sensation he hadn't felt since before the Summer Camp. A rock sank into his stomach, these feelings intensifying as they walked down the street, getting further and further away from that alleyway.

An unknowable energy rippled through the world.

Midoriya suddenly felt dizzy as he was struck by the weird sensation, his steps slowing to a stop. The energy of One For All tangled with the growing pressure in his chest. He took a shaky breath and clutched at his heart as it continued to grow, thrashing against his ribcage like a wild animal trying to escape its cage.

Mirio looked over his shoulder, "Deku? Are you okay?"

"I..." Midoriya pulled his hood down. A sudden breeze picked up and flowed through his hair, "I don't feel right all of a sudden."

Mirio stepped closer, "Do you feel sick?"

"I don't know. I-"

"Ah, we have found you at last!"

Midoriya frantically looked around at the sudden voice in his head.

"What's wrong?" Mirio asked.

"Did you hear that voice? It sounded like a girl, n-not Eri's, but someone different."

Mirio frowned, "I didn't hear anything?"

A flash of sparkling blue came into the corner of his eye. Midoriya bolted after it, but Mirio stopped him before he could lose himself in another alleyway.

"*Deku*," Mirio kept his voice low as he clutched Midoriya's shoulder, "You're really starting to worry me. Let's get back to the agency so you can take a break. You must be exhausted by such an exciting patrol!"

Midoriya tried to pull away, but Mirio's grip tightened. "N-no, that's not-"

People screamed as the earth ruptured under their feet, cars screeched to a stop as windows shattered when a blinding white light blotted out their vision and took over the sky.

Mirio tackled Midoriya and covered him until the rumbling stopped.

"Are you hurt?" Mirio asked.

"N-no!"

"Get to safety, I'll-"

“No, I’ll go with you!”

“But you said-”

“I’m alright!” Midoriya yelled, “Besides, we’re the closest heroes! That direction is where Overhaul and Eri went!”

Mirio’s stiffened, then nodded, “Okay. Let’s go!”

One For All crackled over Midoriya’s skin as he leapt for the rooftops, Mirio followed. Midoriya felt his breath hitch when he saw chunks of some buildings missing in the distance, all concentrated in a perfect circle a few blocks away. As they got closer, *something* flew through the air over the disaster.

A massive blood red serpent with a dark purple underbelly. It gracefully glided on several bat-like wings attached to its head and body, and it whipped towards them as they approached. Five eyes, the deepest amethyst color Midoriya had ever seen, pierced into them. It flared its wings and charged. As it got closer, Midoriya realized that the partially transparent body was wreathed in *blue flames*.

Midoriya... just froze.

The shadow of the serpent was upon him.

“Deku!”

Mirio burst out of the rooftop, delivering a walloping blow to the flying serpent’s jaw. The snake’s wings picked up a great gust as it veered away. It twisted and turned into the air to face them. Then, like Midoriya, it suddenly stopped.

It hovered above them with splayed wings, peering at Midoriya. It’s tongue flicked out and tasted the air, almost curiously.

“*Chariot...?*” It hissed before it faded away into cerulean ash.

“What... what *was that* ?” Mirio asked.

“Th-that was- I-it can’t be.” Midoriya muttered as he stared at the destruction.

Mirio walked to the edge of the broken building they stood on.

Thankfully, most of the damage had been contained underground. But some of the surrounding buildings, the sidewalk, *anything* in between had been eradicated. The open sides of buildings revealed their framework skeletons, and the sewers underneath the ground lay exposed, the cleanly cut pipes bursting with water.

The surrounding cement and walls were twisted into layers of sharp spikes, and...

A large pool of blood trickled over the edge of the hole, dripping steadily into the water below. The wind blew ash and the scent of copper over them.

Midoriya barely heard the approaching sirens over the ringing in his own ears.

Next updates: May 28th and June 11th

Awakening

Chapter 73: Awakening

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(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

FANART!

[aidan](#) on Twitter

[Aria](#) on Twitter

Ren kicked a dented can across the alleyway, head lowered and shoulders hunched. His lone steps crunched over the filthy ground as the sickly sweet scent of garbage filled his nose. He kicked the can again, the aluminum scraping across the concrete, the grating sound too loud in the cramped alley.

He understood the others' intentions on some level. They just wanted him to *be safe*, but nobody in these worlds would be safe if Yaldabaoth got his way. Did Morgana forget that? What happened at Kamino was terrible, but he was working through it, just like he worked through the aftermath of their plan in the interrogation room back home, all on his own. Sure, the Thieves were relieved he was 'okay'. Nobody but Futaba saw what really happened, and Ren didn't want to worry them.

Sojiro promised he wouldn't tell them what state Ren came back home in, delirious from the drugs and the beatings, so close to breaking like cracked porcelain.

Futaba hugged him a little harder that night. Morgana pieced things together after the nightmares started, and Ren made him promise not to tell the others, too.

Ren scowled and kicked the can with more force than necessary, the memories of his real teammates clogging his throat. The alleyway opened up a little, and Ren glanced between several branching pathways. He looked back, the thin alleyway silent. The rooftops didn't reveal any tailing shadows, either. At least they respected him enough to give him some real privacy.

With a scoff, he turned and walked in a random direction. This alleyway widened a little more, allowing some sunlight to brighten the stones closer to the rooftops while deeper shadowy pools swam on the ground. He didn't know how long he waded through the contrasting darkness of these alleys, twisting and turning in random directions as his mind stewed over Taneo's words.

He wasn't brought out of it until the hairs on the back of his neck raised. Ren stopped, listening. Then, he heard them. Footsteps. Two pairs, but the first was slow and predatory, almost leisurely in a way. The second, cowed and quiet, and too close together.

Ren pulled his hood tighter as two shadows emerged from an adjacent alleyway. The first was a man, tall and slender, with shaggy brown hair. He wore dark dress pants and a shirt, with a pale gray tie. A green bomber jacket with a purple furred collar was over them.

Ren grimaced at the strange beak-like mask the man had over his face, like a bird of prey colored with magenta and gold. The second tiny figure stopped behind him. Ren's heart froze at the little girl covered head to toe in bandages, her feet bare and scraped. The girl's hair was like flowing moonlight, matted and as dirty as the rest of her.

The man turned to Ren, and stopped. Ren bristled as golden eyes were upon him, brittle yet calculating, as cold and malicious as a

Shadow's. The girl made to follow the man, but froze, her crimson eyes peering into Ren's gray. Eyes so full of desperation and *pain* -

"Why are you looking at her like that?" The man's voice was as sharp as a scalpel despite the beak mask's hollowness, "Who do you think you are?"

Ren couldn't look away from the girl. Her expression morphed into terror when the man's hands twitched. Ren felt it, that change in the air, as cold as a winter wind sucking the life from dying embers.

"Didn't you hear me?" The man tilted his head, pulling his glove tight, "Do you intend to play *hero*, boy?"

Ren tore his eyes away from the girl, the shadow of his hood falling over his face as he looked at his shoes instead. What *could* he do? Shame curled in his chest and burned through his blood.

"I'm no hero." Ren said with a scoff. "I don't even have any powers to try."

The man blinked, "Are you quirkless?"

"You could say that."

The sharpness in the air dissipated. He studied Ren with an intensity that made his skin crawl, as if Ren himself was a shiny new toy ready for dissection. There was reverence behind the man's gaze that Ren couldn't make heads or tails of.

"You are luckier than most," The man said as the tension left his body, "Be thankful that you are one of the pure ones in a world of sickness. Come along now, Eri. We have important work to do."

The man walked past Ren, but the girl, Eri, didn't move. She was frozen to the spot. He dared to look her in the eye again. A foreign yet strangely familiar feeling trickled through Ren as their eyes met,

time slowed around them, each ebb and flow of their heartbeats rising and falling with the sun.

He shivered as his veins flooded with a torrent of ice and fire. By now, the man had stopped several paces away and looked over his shoulder.

“Eri.” He warned, but neither of the children heard him.

Pain flickered into Ren’s temple when a flood of memories hit him.

“Get in the car!”

“No! Please, somebody help me!”

The gavel hitting wood boomed in the silent courtroom, his fate was sealed with voices singing ‘guilty.’

“If you make trouble for me, that’s it. I’ll cast you out-”

“Oh, I’m in the way, aren’t I?” Shiho looked at him with no light in her eyes, a bruise darkening her face -

“Just go!” Ryuji yelled in the tiny cell crowded by Shadows, “Get out of here-”

“I am the Pillager of Twilight, Arsene!”

“You took everything from Shiho,” Ann stood with her Persona behind her, bathed in a wall of blue fire, “Now, I’ll take everything from you!”

“The children who adored you as ‘father’, the prospects of your pupils... How many did you trample upon? How many dreams did you exchange for riches? No more! No matter what it takes, I will bring you to justice!”

“I will go full-speed, nonstop! Right, Johanna!?”

"Please help me!" Futaba yelled as her monstrous Shadow of a mother screamed overhead, "That thing's gotta go!"

"Farewell, dear father. I'm no longer your subservient puppet!"

"I'll kill you... you're all going to die-"

"The sin of rebelling against a god is severe-"

"What if we were sent to a different world?"

The look of pure hatred in Silver Falcon's eyes was burned forever in his memory-

"Why did you help me?" Hitoshi asked, desperate and bewildered, "Nobody's ever helped before."

"Joker?" Stain peered at him, the stout wall between he and the heroic children, "You're the one that took down Silver Falcon."

"Trickster, quickly!" Kohryu whispered, "Get up to the-"

"Are you insane, Iida!? Do you expect us to work alongside him!?"

"Can I ruffle your hair?"

"Heh, straight to business. That's what I always liked about you-"

"Joker, I might be similar to this person, but don't think for a second that I'm some replacement for them-"

All For One nodded cordially, "I would like to make a deal with you-"

The scent of smoke and ash peppered the ruined bones of a city, of Bakugo's terrified expression that made Joker break his chains once and for all-

Then... darkness and pain, up until Akechi smirked in amusement, "What's wrong? You looked liked you've seen a ghost-"

"This isn't a game."

"Then why are you treating it like one?"

" - ther they lived or died, to either be saved or continue their suffering, that is something you never should have messed with. "

But isn't this how it all started? Ren sealed his fate the moment he saw that woman struggling against Shido. He didn't stand around to watch, or turn away and pretend nothing happened.

"Get in the car!"

"Eri."

"No! Please, somebody-!"

Ren peered into the ruby red eyes of a child that screamed-

HELP ME!

Chisaki huffed.

Of course Eri would find another person to taint with her curse. But this stranger was *quirkless*, pure. Untouched from the illness that plagued the rest of society.

"Eri." He said, but it was as if she and the other boy were in a separate world.

He pulled at his glove; his final warning. She still didn't move. Chisaki growled low in his throat and stalked towards them.

~ A few minutes before...

“You said he headed this way, right?” Spinner asked as they crouched over a rooftop.

“Yeah, I’m positive!” Morgana flicked his tail over Mr. Compress’ shoulder. “He went in this direction.”

“He couldn’t have gotten too far, but there are many twists and turns in this city. It’s like a maze.” Mr. Compress’ frown was hidden by his blank white mask as he looked into the dark alley. His prized Arsene mask was left at the bar. “I hope we find him soon though. Being in costume, on a rooftop in broad daylight, is making me nervous.”

“Don’t worry about it so much.” Spinner said, his golden scarf glinting faintly in the sun, “Daylight heroes hardly bother looking up.”

“We shouldn’t have let him out.” Morgana interrupted with a glower, “What if something bad happened and he’s hurt!?”

“Come on, Morgana, lighten up!” Spinner cried, “We’d be crappy friends to keep him locked up against his will. Besides,” Spinner tapped on the sheathed scimitar at his hip, “If anybody does bother Ren, we’ll take care of them!”

Mr. Compress snorted, “I’m glad we came prepared, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Morgana sighed. He took a long breath and concentrated, pushing his winds through the maze, filling in all of the nooks and crannies. Finally, his wind brushed against moving bodies.

“Oh, I found him! But... wait... there are people with him?” Morgana’s fur bristled when Mercurius sprang to the front of his mind.

“You feel that?” Mercurius said, *“I sense malevolent intent!”*

“Morgana?” Mr. Compress stared at him, “What’s wrong?”

“We need to get to Ren!” Morgana leapt off Atsuhiro’s shoulder,
“*Now!*”

“H-hey!” Spinner sputtered as Morgana took off with a blast of wind,
“W-wait for us!!”

Mr. Compress cursed as they scrambled to catch up.

Ren saw the shadow approaching Eri, threatening to drag her away and drown her in unrestrained horrors.

Ren *moved* .

He snatched the girl’s wrist and pulled her behind him, her small gasp dripping with fear. The masked man’s eyes snapped to Ren.

“What are you doing?” He asked, deceptive calm undermining the threat in his voice, “Give her back, or even your Quirkless status won’t save you. Unless...” His golden eyes met Eri’s, and she curled into herself, “You want a new babysitter? Your other one proved his uselessness, but I’ll deal with him when we get back.”

“No.” Ren stated, “You’re not taking her anywhere.”

The man’s mask hid the curl to his lip, “You insolent little-”

A green tornado turned the alley into a whipping wind tunnel. Blue marbles rained down on the alley when the masked man was blown away. With a *snap*, large chunks of concrete and other detritus blocked off the path, cutting off the masked man from view.

Three familiar figures jumped down, their landing softened by another gust.

“Ren!” Morgana jumped on Ren’s shoulder and rubbed against his hair, “There you are!”

“What-” Ren stared between Mr. Compress and Spinner, “What are you guys doing here?”

“Saving you from a total creep!” Spinner grinned.

“Ren, my dear boy,” Mr. Compress tilted his head at the girl, “*Who* is that?”

Eri frantically tried to pull away from Ren, her eyes lighting up in liquid terror.

“Please, I-let me go!” She whispered, her voice cracking, “I-I don’t want to hurt you, I-I don’t want him to kill you! *Please* !”

Spinner raised a scaly brow, “What are you-”

“*Eri* .”

The concrete barrier exploded into sharp whistling shards. Ren covered Eri and Morgana in his arms, his back getting painfully peppered. Mr. Compress and Spinner weren’t so lucky. Horrible screams and a wet squelch pierced Ren’s ears. He whirled around, still holding Eri and Morgana as horror seized him. The barrier was nothing more than a melted amalgamation of concrete shaped into razor sharp spikes, like a demonic maw leading to hell.

Mr. Compress’ chest was under the mask’s man’s shoe, a sizable pool of crimson pooling around them. Mr. Compress’ right hand clamped down over the short stump that had been his left arm, blood rushing between his fingers.

Spinner had drawn the glittering scimitar, his clothes dripping with crimson from the impaling shards in his body. He had protected Ren and the others from the worst of it.

“How dare you!?” Spinner snarled.

“How dare / ?” The beaked man ground his heel in Mr. Compress’ sternum, “If anybody is to blame, it is Eri. You see what happens

when you run away? I should have killed those young heroes to show you the error of your ways. You get people hurt. *You* get people killed, Eri.”

Eri shuddered in Ren’s arms.

“D-don’t... listen to him.” Mr. Compress hissed through clenched teeth, “Spinner, get them to-”

The man stomped on Mr. Compress’ face with a visceral *crunch* . His blank mask splintered and fell away. Revulsion coursed through them when Mr. Compress went still, another crimson pool leaking from his head.

“Mr. Compress!!” Spinner screamed.

The masked man scanned the group. “Give Eri back, or I’ll end this man’s life. It’s a fair trade, isn’t it? One insignificant brat for the life of your cohort?”

Spinner snarled as he got into a battle stance, his weapon tinged with red reflecting from the ground.

“Please,” Tears streamed down Eri’s face as she clutched Ren’s shirt, “Please let me go! I d-don’t want your friend to get hurt anymore, please, this is all my fault!”

“No, it’s not!” Spinner spat as a feral grin split his face, his eyes glinting dangerously, “It’s this scumbag’s fault! I won’t ever forgive you for hurting Mr. Compress and threatening this little girl!”

The beaked man scoffed, “Fine. If you want to play hero-”

“What’s this about *heroes* !?” Spinner’s hands quivered as splotches of blood dripped at his feet, “We aren’t heroes! We’re the *Phantom Thieves*! We protect the innocent, steal from those who don’t deserve their wealth, and deal with heinous criminals like *you*! If we

can't save one little girl, then it would spit in the face of everything I believe in!!”

“Spinner...” Morgana whispered.

“So be it.” The man reached down to Mr. Compress’ face.

Spinner howled a battle cry as he threw a knife, the metal glinting as it impaled the man’s hand. He growled and yanked the knife out as Spinner charged, the metal clattering against the wall.

“We have to do something!” Morgana jumped in front of Ren and Eri, his hackles raised as a breeze swirled around him. “We’ll distract him, you get home and tell the others!”

Eri was frozen in Ren’s arms. Her tiny hands trembled as they bunched the fabric of his shirt, her eyes leaking crystalline tears. He gently patted her head with his free hand. His heart lurched as she flinched at the touch, looking at him with a mix of horror and awe.

Ren stared into those terrified ruby eyes, his soul bursting as the final straw *snapped* .

Satanael reached for the final star as it suddenly exploded into a white hot blaze. He curled his wings around himself as the fire consumed him, the darkness of the endless black sea shifting into something different, something *familiar*.

Satanael studied the expanse of the Trickster’s shattered soul in horror, his silent call rousing the others sleeping within his World Arcana. A stream of familiar voices flowed through Satanael’s mind as roaring blue stars appeared around him, bearing darkened forms within. Satanael extended his wings, their united power banishing the darkness. Flowing flames filled the cracks and mended the shattered bits back together, the chorus growing as one until the desolate soul overflowed in an unending blaze.

The World Arcana sang until the soul was full to nearly bursting.

Yet, it wasn't enough. The Trickster could not hear them!

But now, the power of a bond not yet forged plucked the Trickster's soul, small yet mighty. A tiny butterfly's wing beat that would eventually spawn a hurricane. A new power that never existed in their world.

It fanned the flames ever higher.

"No." Ren set Eri down, she collapsed under her wobbly legs.

"Wh-what?" Morgana looked at Ren as Spinner weaved around the man's swipes, "What are you- Hey!"

Ren stepped around Morgana and Mr. Compress as his soul immolated him from the inside. He picked up the bloody dagger from the ground, "Watch over Eri and Compress, Mona. That's an order."

Morgana spluttered, "B-but-"

Ren let the fire take over, bowling over as his eyes *burned*. His shoulder hit the wall as a violent wind swirled around him, all in the alleyway froze as he clutched his head in his free hand, the pain threatening to split open his skull.

"Trickster!" Satanael boomed with a cacophony of familiar voices, *"We have found you at last!"*

Tears laced Ren's eyes as the vast hollowness within filled with familiar presences, but there was still a brick wall between he and them. The sheer, dizzying relief nearly made him fall to his knees, only the pain wracking his body kept him aware and on his feet. His fingers clawed into his hair as he breathed through clenched teeth.

"It appears we must forge a new contract. You are not the same as you were before, and we too have changed since our parting."

Satanael chuckled warmly, *"Ah, but isn't this a familiar scenario, Ren? Your friends are struggling against a higher power that could easily slay them. Should you do nothing, you will all be slaughtered by this stranger, an innocent life will be lost, and Yaldabaoth will be one step closer to true victory. Will you save them in spite of the horrors you've experienced in this world, or leave everything to the merciless onslaught?"*

"Is that a trick question!?" Ren snarled through the agonizing pain, *"Come to me! Now!"*

Satanael boomed with laughter, *"Very well! "*

Ren's heart pounded as the agony intensified, cutting through his body like razor blades, twisting and coursing through every fiber of his being. Immolating flames blazed through his veins, soldering his soul back together with star fire. That wall between them was coming down with broken nails and bloody fingers tips.

"Vow to us." The voices whispered as one, a spellbinding ensemble of male and female voices, of deep growls and shrill songs, *"We art thou, thou art us. Thou who hast bore the pain of worlds, thou who hast suffered greatly for the sake of others, thou who hast been lost in the sea of stars at the will of a malevolent god- Renew thy resolve and make all fiends tremble under thy might!"*

"You are no longer a Fool floundering through your journey!" Satanael's voice brushed against Ren's mind, practically whispering in his ear, *"Graduate from that fledgling role and take your rightful place as The World!"*

Ren's resolve crystallized in a veil of blue ash. His nose and the skin around his eyes burned as something materialized over his face, cold and metallic, familiar yet foreign. He heard Morgana's sharp gasp, and felt the stabbing gaze of the beaked man, the air heavy with murderous intent and the coppery scent of blood.

Ren curled his fingers under the corner of the mask, and ripped it off. Vibrant maroon splattered the wall and dripped down his face. He didn't know what sort of wild expression he wore as blood dribbled down his chin and neck in thick rivulets, only that Spinner and the stranger froze, gawking at him.

Ren didn't register their fear. The pain wracking his whole being made him feel *alive*. The muted colors of the world bled into intense hues as the euphoria coursed through him, until crimson gave away to cerulean flames swallowing Ren's body.

Boisterous laughter bounced off the walls as Ren's normal clothes burned away into something new, the horde of flame coming to life and rising above him.

"No way..." Morgana whispered as blue light painted them.

A figure appeared over Joker, flames fading underneath six ebony black wings. Larger than Arsene, but smaller than he was at Kamino, Satanael's majesty was second to none. His maroon eyes simmered under his golden horned mask.

"I am the Harbinger of Freedom and the Slayer of False Gods, Satanael!" His wings flared in the cramped space, sending eddies of blue flame licking the walls of the alley. He smiled at Joker. "It is good to be reunited, Trickster. We have missed you greatly."

Satanael's words were accompanied by cascading voices, calls, roars, and chatters within Joker's mind.

Joker's eyes flooded with hot tears, "I missed you all too."

"There is another gift for you." Satanael pointed to the knife in Joker's hand. "Use it against the darkness of this world!"

The fire swallowed the dagger, melting and forging it into a weapon unlike any he's ever seen. A handle of twisting black horns formed in Joker's hand, with a long blade of serrated white that could cleave

angels in two. The flames curled around his hand and faded when the act was done, and just holding the new weapon sent a wave of goosebumps on his arms. It whispered its name in his mind.

Paradise Lost.

He swung Paradise lost in an arc in front of him, the blade singing with a deep harmonizing tune. Joker pointed it towards the masked man staring back in seething hatred, blue flames dancing within in the man's golden eyes. That's when Joker caught something else. A low glimmer of golden thread stitching his crimson gloves, and swirling golden trim lining his ebony black tailcoat.

"Absorb your new appearance later, Trickster." Satanael said as he looked forward, *"We have company, and not the sort you'd invite for tea."*

"Spinner, fall back." Joker's velvety voice left no room for debate, "Look after the others."

Spinner obeyed without a second thought, eyes as wide as dinner plates. Satanael allowed him to pass under his wings and became the barrier between Joker and their injured comrades.

"Joker . I heard you were still alive," The masked man put his uninjured hand over the wound Spinner left, his injured extremity melting and reforming in the blink of an eye, whole and bloodless, *"but I hoped you'd never show your face again."*

Joker smirked to cover the shock of such a quirk, "I'm not going to apologize for disappointing you."

"Disappointing? No, given the circumstance, perhaps we can work something out." The man studied Joker, his gaze cold as the last of the blue flames died out, "You left a big void when you killed All For One-" Joker stiffened as a piece of him withered and buried itself deep in the mindscape, "Villains of all walks of life are fighting to take the crown." The man looked to the dark halo of wings floating over

Satanael's head, "From where I stand, the title of a Demon Lord may be within your grasp. If only just."

"What's your point?" Joker asked.

"Why bother saving people when you could've used those powerful demons to rule over them?" The man held out his hand, "Join me. Let me use your demons' powers to the best of their abilities, let's take the underworld for ourselves."

"I don't even know who you are." Joker chuckled, "I'd usually ask for your name and demand you take me to dinner first."

"Overhaul, of the Shie Hassaikai." He spat as red blotches appeared on his neck, his eyes furious, "Don't make a fool of me, Joker. You won't live long enough to enjoy it."

"Please, no! *Run!* "

Joker looked back as Eri cried out. Spinner held her in his arms, but she thrashed against him. Mercurius had appeared behind Morgana, his wings curling protectively around everyone.

"*Eri*, be quiet. I'll deal with your disobedience later." Overhaul growled, "Now Joker, your answer."

"You clearly don't know me at all, do you? I'll pass." Joker stepped forward, brilliant colors splashing under his black and gold boots, "Anyone who hurts my comrades and a defenseless child will never be a friend of mine."

"Then you are a bigger fool than I believed. I'll kill you all and take her back by force."

"That's just it, Overhaul." Joker twirled *Paradise Lost*, a familiar smirk appearing on his face. "I'm no longer *The Fool* ."

Overhaul put his palm flush on the wall.

“No!!” Eri screamed as Joker jumped to meet him.

A *crack* came from Satanael’s gun and red spurted from Overhaul’s arm. Joker was upon him, Paradise Lost wailing as he sliced another angry red line on Overhaul’s other arm. The villain swiped, missing Joker by a hair’s breadth as the vigilante flipped away.

Satanael and Joker moved as one, a united swing of a blade or the crack of a gun to counter a lethal swipe of Overhaul’s power. They weaved to and fro in a deadly dance, a swipe, a singing blade, another deafening *boom* of a gun and a whizzing bullet. Joker pirouetted and sliced in a single acrobatic move, Overhaul snarling under speckled crimson dripping from another shallow wound, as easily erased as the others.

Overhaul brushed his fingers against the ground before Joker could charge again, a wave of concrete and brick spikes spreading like a ripple in still water. Satanael waved his hand in front of him, a black serpent’s jaws crunching the spikes into dust before they could reach him. Specks of concrete and dust showered him.

One thing became clear as Joker zigzagged through the massive spikes: What good could they do when Overhaul healed himself with a single touch? Any injury, gone withing moments. Satanael could not move in these cramped walls unless they wanted the others to be left open to attack. Joker could not keep up this deadly tango forever, his energy and thriving adrenaline wouldn’t last forever.

“Let me play with him, Big Brother!” Joker’s soul bubbled with a familiar laughter. *“I want to dance, too!”*

Joker’s grin widened.

His mind flashed momentarily to Kamino. He pulled Alice into reality alongside Satanael, another string to add to the orchestra of battle. Alice appeared at Joker’s side in a flourish of blazing blue, her long hair wriggling. Her cold giggles sent prickles across their skin, but it was music to Joker’s ears.

We are thou, thou art us.

There was a notable drain on his energy as he anchored two Personas in reality at once, but if they could finish this *quick enough*-

“Ready, Alice, Satanael?” Joker asked.

A throb of bloodlust and magic pulsed through them, and they attacked as one.

Satanael pointed between Joker and Overhaul, the ground bubbling with oozing black. Alice grinned as tiny bursts of Megidolaon eradicated the spikes, leaving a trail straight to the villain. Joker steeled himself and burst into a sprint alongside Satanael’s Black Viper.

Overhaul didn’t move as the inky serpent surged forward with a shrill hiss, he almost looked bored.

“Too bad.” Overhaul muttered, “I expected more from such a famed vigilante.”

The Black Viper was upon Overhaul, but a single touch ended it all. Joker skid to a stop as black sludge exploded across the alleyway, and at the same time the earth rumbled under their feet. Joker threw himself to the side when another round of deadly spikes sprouted over cracked concrete. Overhaul lunged for Joker as he dodged another spike aimed for his heart.

One touch.

Overhaul’s fingers lightly brushed Joker’s arm. Unimaginable pain writhed through Joker’s body, a thousand cuts slicing open his skin and rupturing his soul. Joker fell to his knees, crimson rivulets dripping from his clothes. Screams of rage drowned his mindscape.

Alice shuddered as the power of her Survival Trick thrummed through Joker.

“How ?” Overhaul stared in bewilderment as Joker bled before him, still whole and very much *not* reduced to a bloody stain. “How did you survive my quirk? What are you?”

Alice balanced perfectly on the tip of a nearby spike, her hair writhing like worms in the earth. The power of Death sapped the heat from the alley.

“How *dare* you.” Alice whispered sweetly, her voice carrying across dead stones, “We just got him back, and you think you can kill him? You’ll pay for that.”

‘I gave this man the benefit of the doubt and followed the Trickster’s sacred dogma. But now it is clear. I cannot allow this Symbol Of Evil to take another breath!’

‘No! Sraosha, that’s not what I-’

‘I must do what the remnants of seven souls failed to do! It is my sacred duty to strike down Evil.’

The same death magic, though curse instead of bless, coursed through the power building in Alice. Dark energy floated around her body as she grinned from ear to ear, her eyes glowing with murderous glee. Joker inhaled sharply as terror impaled him.

“Alice, NO !!” Joker called.

His sudden command snapped Alice out of it. She stuttered and gaped at him as Overhaul’s shadow fell over Joker.

“Trickster, look out!!”

Too many things happened at once. Multiple forms burst into reality in front of Joker, one bearing three legs and feathers, the other with

black and red coloring, holding a familiar musical instrument. Joker's energy reserves plummeted, and the corners of his vision darkened.

Yatagarasu screeched and clawed and beat his wings against Overhaul.

Orpheus Picaro plucked his strings, swirling flames burning with Yatagarasu's wind.

Overhaul snarled as he backed away, swiping his hands at Yatagarasu as he dove for Overhaul's mask.

One touch .

Yatagarasu's string was cut with a single caress of skin on feather. The bird's final screech howled in their ears as he was reduced to a stain the pavement. The fragile glass of their freshly united soul cracked. Overhaul's skin broke out in hives as some of the blood speckled his face.

Joker nearly collapsed as his vision went black momentarily before it threw him back into reality, his shaking arms holding him up as he stared at the splotch in horror.

"Yatagarasu...?" Joker whispered.

"Trickster, it is too dangerous! Alice has used her Survival Trick and my Enduring Soul is spent!" Orpheus Picaro stared at the bloody stain in sorrow, "This villain is too powerful in cramped quarters. We must flee!"

"But-!"

"I'm tired of this..." Overhaul's eyes were shrunken pinpricks of rage. "Give her *back*..."

The earth and surrounding buildings disintegrated when Overhaul slapped his palms on the ground. They stumbled as everything

around them became jagged spikes, with only one clear path between Overhaul and Satanael.

Satanael's howl of rage rumbled through their bones as he readied his gun.

"Enough!"

A flash of blue appeared in the wall beside Joker, the sound of thrashing chains echoing. The barred door solidified and burst open. Several figures jumped out. The first was a woman with a short bob of platinum hair, wearing a stewardess' outfit. Shock and joy radiated from Orpheus Picaro as the woman opened the hefty tome in her hands.

"Samael, cover us!" She commanded.

Overhaul jumped back as a giant winged serpent charged at him from a torrent of whipping blue flames, concentrated blasts of several Megido forcing him away.

"Come on, this way!" Another person in blue, a man this time, waved at them from the glowing door.

"Go with them," Satanael urged Joker, *"Hurry!"*

"What about the others!?" Joker cried.

"We'll grab them, do not worry." A third woman donned in velvet blue, with long silken hair and a beautiful, serene face, looked at Joker with a small smile.

"Who... are you?" Joker asked.

The woman's smile simply widened as another appeared behind her.

"My trickster!"

The small form bolted to him. He caught her long pale hair decorated with a blue butterfly headband, golden eyes, and a long blue dress. Joker's heart stuttered as her arms wrapped around his neck.

"...Lavenza?" Joker blinked several times, the chaos of the fight in the background fading away as he wrapped his arms around her. "Is this really you? Are you *really here*?"

The other woman bowed and walked away, Satanael allowed her to pass under him.

Lavenza pulled away and gently cupped her hands on his cheeks, smiling, "Yes, we have finally found you again. Your Second Awakening called to us!" Her smile faded, her golden eyes watering in sync with Joker's, "Let's escape. You all need healing, and then we can talk."

Joker nodded.

Lavenza grabbed his wrist. "The others will gather your friends. Come on!"

Joker looked at Mr. Compress, who was being gathered up in the man's arms, blood dripping from the grisly stump. The beautiful woman spoke with Morgana and Spinner. A strange sense of trust and familiarity emanated from Ishtar, Shiva, and more intensely from Orpheus Picaro, directed at the short haired woman's laughter and blood lust.

Joker caught Spinner's eye and, trusting his Personas, firmly nodded. He handed the little girl over to the beautiful woman.

"Let's go." Lavenza tugged on Joker's wrist.

Joker's remaining personas returned to his mindscape as they were all led inside the glowing blue door.

The stewardess entered last as her Persona continued its magical onslaught. She stopped in the door frame with a malicious grin.

“Megidolaon.” She whispered.

White light drowned the outside world as she stepped inside the Velvet Room, the door slamming shut before fading into oblivion.

“It was worse than last time?” Hawks frowned as Nighteye’s expression hardened. “What did you see?”

“It was...” Nighteye’s clasped his hands together, his knuckles losing their color, “I don’t understand it myself. So many different pathways, twists and turns all layered over one another. I witnessed events that were caused by different outcomes for things that already happened, things that don’t... shouldn’t exist. It was too much, everything all at once. It’s no wonder my quirk overloaded.”

“Bubble Girl told me about the seizure.” Hawks hid his worry behind a tense smile, “And you didn’t even go to the hospital?”

“No, it would have wasted time. Besides, I’m fine now.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Nighteye sighed as he steepled his fingers, “That’s beside the point.”

“Is it? Your sidekicks are worried sick about you, you know.” Hawks’ wings twitched, “Even now their bodies are radiating stress. Bubble Girl is trying to cheer herself up by talking with Tsukuyomi in the lounge. Centipeder can’t sit still and keeps walking past your door.”

Nighteye frowned. “I have it handled. Can we move on?”

Hawks shrugged, then leaned forward, his chair creaking, “So, what’s the plan now? Are you sure it was smart to send Lemillion and Deku on patrol alone?”

"I trust in Lemillion's capability should anything happen." Nighteye pushed up his glasses, his shoulders suddenly tense as an intensity came into his eyes, "Their patrol was something I would have planned in any case. It'll be a good example to compare with other events."

"What do you mean?"

Nighteye sighed again, a sudden tiredness painting his features, "Let's just say that I never saw any of Joker's achievements when I looked into a certain Pro Hero's future. The Kamino Disaster ended differently, and things like the Musutafu and Sapporo Lab Raids were never supposed to happen."

"Your quirk could've been wrong."

"No, you don't understand." Nighteye's stare pierced into Hawks, "In all my years, my quirk has never been wrong. Not once. No matter what actions I took to try and change things, the outcomes were always written in stone. Until Joker appeared. That's when things changed so drastically."

"What exactly are you getting at?" Hawks whispered, his own eyes widening.

"I don't think Joker should have ever been here. And I mean that literally. My original visions would have come true if Joker never interfered. History... would have been written entirely different."

Those words hung in the air. Hawks suppressed a shiver, but the quivering in his wings must've given it away as Nighteye gained an understanding gleam to his eye. Without Joker - his mouth went dry at the mere thought of a world without his kid - he would still be in Kunikazu's grasp. People like Yumi-chan, the quirkless, all the victims of those smuggling rings, might still be captives or worse. All For One may have lived. The public's trust in heroes, without Joker's support, would have plummeted to critical levels. It may have led to a massive spike in villain activity.

Not to mention every person he's healed.

Iida never would have walked again, and the rest of Stain's victims would have been crippled for life, too.

A world without Joker would be grim beyond measure.

"We should bring Nezu on board." Hawks said with certainty, "He's smarter than the both of us combined, so he'd probably come up with something. Plus he would have custody of Joker since his Vigilante Program is finally a reality. If there's any possibility that Joker is nearby, then he should know about this."

"Yes, that was my next move." Nighteye nodded, "I wanted to inform you first, since you witnessed how my quirk reacted previously when Joker was involved."

"Well, that and I am one of the fastest heroes in the skies." Hawks smirked, "If something does happen, like say, Lemillion and Deku somehow encountering Joker on patrol, then I can be there as quick as lightning."

He meant it as a joke. The universe looked upon him at that moment and decided to dump a truck load of karma and irony on him. The lights flickered violently as a thunderous BOOM reverberated through the walls, the building shook and dust trickled down from the ceiling.

Hawks and Nighteye were out of their seats. He took one look at Nighteye's expression before he was out the door, his surroundings blurring under the flap of fiery wings.

"Hawks!" Tokoyami called for him, but there was no time to stop.

Now, the streets below were a blur of motion as he sped through the air, pushing himself to his limit with another powerful wing beat. A scarlet smudge moved over the center of the destruction. Wind screamed in his ears as he descended sharply towards it. He was

less than a block away when he witnessed the winged serpent disappear into ash over Deku and Lemillion.

Blue ash...

He shook himself out of it as sirens screamed in the distance.

"Deku! Lemillion!" Hawks dropped onto the rooftop, "Are you alright?"

"Y-yes, sir!" Lemillion turned towards him, eyes wild and bright, "We're not injured!"

Hawks looked at Deku, who nodded with a shaky smile.

"What happened?" Hawks asked as he went to the edge of the rooftop to survey the damage, several of his feathers darting around to check for potential casualties.

Deku and Lemillion exchanged a glance.

"We don't know for certain," Lemillion said, "But there's a strong possibility that Overhaul, the leader of a local Yakuza group, was involved. We encountered him on our patrol, and this *is* in the general direction of where he headed off to."

"And the flying snake?" Hawks stared where the serpent had been not a minute ago, "It was covered in blue flames! If it means what I *think* it means..."

"I-I think so too." Deku clutched at his chest, his breathing heavy, "Its possible that Joker encountered Overhaul, a-and that they fought each other."

Hawks barely kept himself from scowling at the ominous blood stain near the gaping hole. "We have no time to spare," He donned his professionalism like a mask to keep his nerves at bay. "Lemillion, check around these buildings and evacuate the surrounding area. I've taken a few people away so far, but it never hurts to have an extra set of hands."

“Yes, sir!” Lemillion said, and then he disappeared into the ground with a flash of his cape.

“What should I do?” Deku asked, his eyes hardening.

“Help me secure the perimeter until reinforcements arrive. I’ll be guiding them to us with my feathers.” Hawks jumped and hovered over the giant hole, “I’ll send more feathers into the sewers. With any luck, we might find some clues as to where Joker or Overhaul went to.”

Deku nodded, and he was off in a crack of green lightning.

Joker, please be alright. Hawks thought as they got to work, trying *not* to imagine the kid’s bloody and broken corpse laying in sewage.

In the end, after hours of searching the surrounding city blocks and deep into the sewers, they came up empty.

“More ferocity, Uravity! Gunhead didn’t teach you those martial arts for nothing!” Ryukyu’s voice echoed across the training gym in her agency, “Froppy, you’re doing great, but find better ways to adapt your natural flexibility when you’re out of your element!”

“Roger, Ryukyu!”

“Got it, kero!”

Ryukyu smiled as she watched them dodge around Nejire. Her oldest intern giggled as she seamlessly floated around the gym, weaving around her kohai’s attacks as easy as breathing. Ryukyu sighed when her phone went off. She would normally ignore it, but it was the ringtone she set to the chatroom with Hawks and the others. And it *kept* going off.

She froze at the messages.

[Raptor]

EMERGENCY! EVERYONE GET TO NIGHTEYE'S AGENCY ASAP.

[Miruko]

HUH??? What the heck is going on??

[Ingenium Sr.]

Are you alright, Hawks?

[Jeanist]

I heard there was an explosion close by Nighteye's agency. Is that what you're talking about, Hawks?

[Raptor]

Yeah... We'll explain more once you get here but...

It might have something to do with our kid.

PLEASE be subtle and come here as quietly as you can, it's really important that you don't draw attention to yourselves. I've been seen in town and we don't need more attention than necessary with everyone else in our group.

[Miruko]

SAY NO MORE I'M ON MY WAY ADNJA!!!

[Gang Orca]

Understood. I am leaving my agency now!

Ryukyu shoved her phone in her belt pouch, “Everyone!”

Nejire and the younger students stopped, staring at her with wide eyes.

“What’s up, Ryukyu?” Nejire asked.

“Change of plans. We’re needed elsewhere. Pack your things, we’re leaving in twenty!”

“But what about training?” Uraraka said, “And I thought we were going on patrol tonight?”

Ryukyu nodded, “Yes, but our plans have changed due to an emergency. As heroes, you need to be able to adjust your schedule in a moment’s notice.”

Uraraka and Asui exchanged glances, but bolted to the locker rooms.

Nejire was rooted to the spot, “What’s wrong, Ryukyu? You don’t look well!”

Ryukyu steeled herself as she looked her intern in the eye. “It’s Joker. I don’t know the full situation yet, but he might be in trouble.”

Nejire’s face lit up with determination, and with a sharp nod, she joined the other girls in the locker room.

“Hang in there, kid.” Ryukyu growled. There would be hell to pay if *anything* happened to him. “We’re coming.”

Joker doesn’t remember falling asleep. Awareness returned to him in waves, he wanted to drift off again when a familiar tune sang across the unknown space, lulling him back to-

Wait, this song wasn't *just familiar*.

Joker's eyes flew open and he shot up with a start. The wooden cot he'd been laying on did no favors for his back, but the soft blue swathes of fabric draping the walls made him forget his exhaustion and how his joints creaked. He got to his feet and studied the tiny cell. The uncomfortable bed and the toilet(which was never used, no thanks) were in the same places they always were.

He looked down at his unchained hands with wide eyes. Joker still wore his costume. His... *new* costume. Everything was familiar, yet different, like a cross between his old Phantom Thief attire and the grandeur of Satanael's Heavenly General outfit. He ran his blood red glove, now woven with glittering golden thread, down his sleeve.

His tailcoat was as black as a starless night sky, a deeper shade than his previous tailcoat, dark enough where the light couldn't touch it. Decorative golden lines accented the end of his sleeves and ran up his arms and around his shoulders. His vest was the same silvery gray, though like Satanael, lined with golden buttons decorated with horned skulls. His pants were the same shade of black as his tailcoat, and his steel-toed boots were emblazoned with golden threading and studded with gilded buckles. He grabbed his right coattail to inspect it, the tapered fabric cut identical to Satanael's leathery wings.

Thankfully, Paradise Lost was still sheathed at his hip.

He dropped his coattail when he felt eyes on him.

"Ah, you're awake!" Lavenza stood next to the open door frame, eyes full of fondness and loving warmth, "How are you feeling?"

Joker resisted the overwhelming urge to hug her and never let go.

"Stiff, but alive." Joker smiled at Lavenza, before looking down at himself. "And a bit surprised at my new costume."

“Yes, your new attire comes as quite a shock. We were so worried about you after...” A flash of pain crossed Lavenza’s delicate expression, gone just as fast as it came. “In any case, I am glad you’re okay, Trickster.”

“As am I.” Another familiar voice said.

Joker looked to the center of the Velvet Room. With a start he recognized Igor, the *real* Igor, sitting at an elaborate wooden desk encircled with a deep velvet blue rug. The iconic ‘V’ symbol was stamped in the center, the outer rim trimmed in gold.

A circle of open cells surrounded them, the velvet song entwining with the groans of metal and clinking chains. The strangers dressed in blue attire stood in a line behind Igor, expressions impassive, yet they studied Joker with keen interest.

Joker’s chest surged with warmth as Igor’s unblinking eyes softened.

“It is good to finally see you again, Trickster.” Igor held his hand out towards Joker. “Welcome to the Velvet Room.”

Next update is June 11th

Hymn Of The Soul

Chapter 74: Hymn Of The Soul

“It wasn’t important information at the time.” The beautiful woman stepped forward and politely bowed. “But where are my manners? I am Margaret, the Velvet Room Attendant before Lavenza.”

“I am Theodore.” The man put a hand on his chest and copied Margaret, “Also another Velvet Room Attendant of a previous Wild Card.”

The last woman simply smirked, “I’m Elizabeth. Theo’s better half.”

Theodore frowned, “Hey...”

ALSO NOTE there is a Trigger Warning in the final scene for some blood and gore because a certain somebody doesn't take loss very well

Wow, first off this story is very close to surpassing a significant milestone!! Almost 500k hits??? What???? How? I never thought for a second that it would ever be possible. Thank you guys! <3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

FANART!

[MissNoir17](#) on Twitter!

The Velvet Room's music soothed Joker as Igor and the others stared at him. but his trepidation must've been obvious to Lavenza. Justine and Caroline were always perceptive, with Lavenza even more so.

"Please don't be wary, Trickster." Lavenza said with a small, comforting smile, "You must have questions. We will do the best we can to answer them."

"Where are my teammates? Are they alright?"

"Yes, they are resting deeper within the Velvet Room." Lavenza ran a delicate finger down the spine of the Compendium, her brow raised, "Though something has peaked our interest with them."

"Ah, how curious to have Arcanas in another world, new bonds from which you draw immense strength. And not only those from your original deck, but new ones as well." Igor said, his gentle voice as cool as running water. "The Magician has tended to the Faith, Apostle, and the budding Aeon."

Faith and Apostle? The *Aeon* ?

"You'll be reunited with them soon, Trickster." Lavenza smiled at him, "In the meantime, what other questions did you have?"

Joker took a breath, "How did you find me? Why did it take you so long to get here?"

He tried to keep the betrayal and hurt out of his voice. Judging by Lavenza's pained wince, he didn't do a good enough job.

Lavenza curtsied. "Our sincerest apologies, Trickster. We tried to reach you sooner, but..."

"The Velvet Room is a place between dream and reality, mind and matter," Igor waved his hand around the Velvet Room, "However, it was deeply twisted by Yaldabaoth's machinations. Lavenza and

myself were greatly weakened by his actions as well, thus we could not traverse into the realm between worlds to reach you.”

“But your Second Awakening changed that.” Lavenza said, her expression lighting like the first rays of morning sunlight, “It blazed a pathway through the darkness, and with the aid of my siblings, we were able to break through and reunite with you. Although, the trip seems to have been one way.”

“*Siblings* ?” Joker’s eyes snapped between Lavenza and the other strangers standing behind Igor. “You never told me you had siblings.”

“It wasn’t important information at the time.” The beautiful woman stepped forward and politely bowed. “But where are my manners? I am Margaret, the Velvet Room Attendant before Lavenza.”

“I am Theodore.” The man put a hand on his chest and copied Margaret, “Also another Velvet Room Attendant of a previous Wild Card.”

The last woman simply smirked, “I’m Elizabeth. Theo’s better half.”

Theodore frowned, “Hey...”

“There, there, Theo.” Margaret chuckled, her laugh as velvety as the room around them, “Yes, Lavenza did summon us in her time of need. With our strengths combined and the calling of your Second Awakening, we were able to break away from Yaldabaoth’s control and come here.”

“Thank you.” Joker bowed his head. “If you didn’t come when you did...”

He would have failed as a leader. Again. Gotten his friends injured or worse. *Again* . But now Eri, Mona, and the others were safe, and that’s all that mattered right now. He tried to rationalize it that way, but a heavy weight in his chest made it a hard pill to swallow.

“The boy has manners.” Elizabeth purred, “I like him already.”

Lavenza cleared her throat. For some reason, her face reddened as she gave Elizabeth a stern look. “Trickster, why don’t you step out of your cell? The Velvet Room has changed due to your Second Awakening and our arrival here, and I sense your Personas would like a moment with you.”

Joker blinked, his heart pounding, and stepped out of his cell.

His eyes were drawn upwards as soft light bathed the Velvet Room in a shower of silver. The first floor of the Velvet Room was still molded after a stone-cold prison, but the walls were less solid the more his eyes traveled upwards, until they vanished into the great expanse replacing what had been a dark and ominous ceiling. Millions of stars twinkled in vast colorful pools intermingling at the center of a galaxy.

Reds, greens, purples, brilliant stripes of silver from clusters of twinkling diamonds. The sight reminded him of when he snuck out to the mountains to get a view of the stars back home. He felt small as he stared at the brightest stars, a familiar arrangement of seven.

A leathery brush of wings and a spark of blue flames appeared in the corner of his eye, drawing him away from the breath-taking sight. Satanael hovered in front of Joker, sending a wave of warmth to his other self. A gentle smile crossed Satanael’s lips as other flames appeared before Joker could even open his mouth.

“Master!!”

Joker was tackled by the several-ton body of Cerberus.

“Cerberus... buddy,” Joker laughed as the Persona nuzzled his face, snow white fur sticking out from between Joker’s fingers, “I missed you too, but could you let me breathe?”

Cerberus whined, his eyes going large and dark like a guilty puppy, but he got up. Joker smiled when he got to his feet, patting Cerberus' mane and scratching his favorite spot behind his ears. Others crowded around him.

Alice tackled him and wouldn't let go, her arms locked around his waist.

Titania ruffled his hair while Pixie buzzed around their heads, cackling.

Vasuki and Kohryu, the latter pressing himself against the half-solid wall of the Velvet Room, comforted him with the tips of their tails.

Shiva, Black Frost, Cu Chulainn, and Byakko kept their distance, but they reveled in the Trickster's presence and the others' joy... save for a sudden and terrifying swathe of rage.

"Amamiya Ren !"

The other Personas flinched at Ishtar's wrath. They backed away as she floated to him, her usual serene calm etched with undying fury.

Joker blinked. "Uh... me?"

"Yes, *you* ." She opened her eyes, the heat of her aquamarine glare could sear muscle off of bone. Joker opened his mouth, but her hand was quicker. He backpedaled as his cheek stung, putting a hand to the reddening spot.

He blinked rapidly, stupefied. "What was *that* for?"

Ishtar lunged forward. Joker's breath hitched when she wrapped her arms around him and tucked his head into the crook of her neck. Her embrace was as strong as steel, but her warmth and her soft scent brought him back to that starry night on the cliff during the Summer Camp. His heart thundered as she tightened her grasp, her rage dissipating with a wash of overwhelming affection.

“How dare you.” She whispered, her voice trembling. “How *dare* you value your life so little, that you thought dying was a suitable plan to escape that hospital.”

The air in the Velvet Room changed on her words, and unknowingly Elizabeth stared at Joker with eyes of liquid gold shielding many emotions. Theodore did much the same, but he chose to stare at the ground with a troubled expression instead.

Joker’s throat tightened as tears gathered in his eyes. “I-”

“I’m not finished.” Joker shut his mouth as Ishtar’s fingers ran through his hair. “It doesn’t matter if you thought there wasn’t any other way. Putting such responsibility onto the Magician was cruel beyond words.” She pulled back and locked her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes peered deeply into his. “Promise us you will *never* resort to such idiotically desperate measures again.”

“But I-”

“No.” She hissed, and the other Personas all stared at him in equal expectation. “Promise. Us. *Now* .”

Joker paled, “I... I promise I’ll never do that again.”

Ishtar stared at him for several tense moments, her gaze searching for any lies. Finally, her expression softened and she lightly sighed.

“Good.” She kissed him on the forehead. “If you even think about doing it ever again, then I swear I’ll ground you for the rest of eternity.”

“I second that.” Satanael said, unabashed.

“O-okay. I get it...” Joker said as he felt his face heat up. “I’m sorry.”

Exasperated sighs circled the Velvet Room, but Joker noticed that some Personas were still missing.

“Where’s Orpheus and Sraosha?” The Personas stiffened at Joker’s jolt of panic, “Yatagarasu!?”

“Sraosha is... unwell.” Titania frowned and looked at one of the open cells. The Isolation Cell, specifically.

Joker sensed Sraosha within, but he refused to come out even though the door was open. A heavy sense of dread and guilt filtered through him.

“He doesn’t want to talk to us yet.” Alice pouted as she tugged at Joker’s sleeve.

“As for Orpheus...” Elizabeth tilted her head, her expression pinched in a strange way, “Or shall we call him Orpheus *Picaro*, now?”

Orpheus Picaro appeared in front of her. Elizabeth looked him up and down, the harshness of her face softening as she put a hand to the Persona’s cheek.

“I wondered where you ran off to,” She said, “You found another Wild Card in need. I don’t blame you, but give a lady a little warning next time, alright? I was so worried about you.”

Joker furrowed his brows as Orpheus Picaro nodded, and gracefully floated away to join the other Personas. Elizabeth’s conflicted expression smoothed out as Lavenza walked up to Joker.

Lavenza opened the Compendium, “Yatagarasu is right here. I will... forgo the usual payment method just this once.”

The Compendium glowed softly, and Yatagarasu burst from its pages with a howl of wind. Yatagarasu’s bond, a glowing string, reattached itself to that starlit web in Joker’s soul that connected them all to one another. Yatagarasu circled the Velvet Room and landed on Joker’s shoulder.

“You’re okay!” Joker ran his hands down Yatagarasu’s feathers.

“My deepest apologies for worrying you,” Yatagarasu shuffled his wings as he leaned in to Joker’s touch, “It was painful being separated from you again, but I found myself somewhere dark and peaceful. I slept until I was summoned once more.”

“The Compendium saved him.” Lavenza said, “But it too has changed.”

“It changed?” Joker’s eyes widened, “Wait, is Seth there!?”

That hope shining in their hearts withered away when Lavenza frowned deeply, regret glimmering in her eyes.

“... No, he is not.” She flipped through other pages, “When we initially lost you, some of the pages turned an insidious black. We didn’t know what to make of it at first.”

“The black pages were the Personas sent away with you to another world,” Igor said, “Now, it is other pages which are missing. All others, aside from the ones gathered here, have vanished.”

“Can I see it?” Joker asked.

“Of course,” Lavenza’s smile turned sad when she handed it over. “These are *your* Personas.”

Most of his Personas returned to his mindscape to give him room. Joker took the heavy book in his hands, though they watched on curiously from his mind. Yatagarasu and Ishtar stayed, scanning through the pages with him. Satanael floated at Joker’s side in all of his majesty. Kohryu pressed himself against the upper walls, a layer of gold swimming in silver and velvet.

Joker opened the book to the first page, where Satanael replaced Arsene. He flipped through Titania’s and Cerberus’ pages, before stopping, his mouth dropping open. The next few after that were pages of pure darkness. He turned the next few pages rapidly until

they turned blank. Out of the 192 or so Personas he had back home, only 15 were filled, counting the ominous black pages.

“The black pages-” Ishtar started.

“Yes, I see the pattern as well.” Yatagarasu nodded sagely, “The pages in which the Trickster mastered our bonds are all clear as day, while the black pages are ones he has not yet mastered.”

Joker double checked. It was true. He cast out within his mindscape and touched each and every bond. Confusion swirled when Sraosha yanked his bond away in fear. Joker frowned when Sraosha buried himself away. Instead, he focused on another.

“There is one way to test it.” Joker said. “Pixie.”

Pixie giggled as she appeared from a blue spark, “Yes, Trickster?”

He closed the Compendium and tucked it under his arm, then held out his other hand. Pixie landed on his palm, her tiny form almost weightless. They stared into one another’s eyes as he focused on her bond.

Pixie’s bond was a warm summer’s wind on his face, speckled with the fresh scent of a forest brimming with life. Joker closed his eyes and took in everything, the very essence of Pixie herself, what made her different from the other Shadows lost in the Sea. He fully accepted her, and she him. His longest companion other than Arsene, one who stuck through with him from the start.

He opened his eyes when the bond clicked in place, his soul humming pleasantly as Pixie’s power thrummed through them.

The Compendium’s pages shimmered. Pixie fluttered above Joker when he flipped it open, one black page burning away with a trail of blue flame, it reminded Joker of how an old film would burn on a projector. Pixie’s page swirled with fine golden ink, which listed her strengths and weaknesses, and of the spells she could cast.

Igor hummed, and the other Velvet Room siblings exchanged glances.

Lavenza gasped, "Oh my, how intriguing! I wonder why your powers are so different here."

"From the beginning, my Personas sensed that this world was... different." Joker stated, "A different energy from the Sea Of Souls back home. Could that have something to do with it?"

"Perhaps. A bigger part may be consequences from Yaldabaoth's tampering." Igor said with a nod.

"What do you mean?" Joker asked.

"If we were to put it succinctly," Margaret said, "Think of each of these worlds as a different tapestry, which are carefully woven with strings of all colors and given all forms of life, rules, magic, and the like."

"Then some moronic god comes along and tears a giant hole in them, draining the life and individuality from them just because he can." Elizabeth's eyes narrowed dangerously, "He plucks away each string from these other tapestries, one by one."

"He replaces the strings with his own." Theodore frowned, "And he will not stop until-"

"Until each tapestry is nothing but *red* ." Lavenza finished, her expression falling. "It is likely that some 'information' melded between worlds due to these foreign threads, thereby changing the rules of these realities."

"But Yaldabaoth really screwed up, didn't he?" Elizabeth chuckled, hard and cold, "He cheated the game, so there was nothing to stop our dear Lavenza from doing a bit of cheating, too. He can't stop my other siblings and I from aiding another Wild Card on our own terms."

“You said that before.” Joker glanced in between them, “About other Wild Cards?”

“Did you think you were the first Wild Card?” Elizabeth asked with a tilt to her head.

“I thought about the possibility of other Persona users, but I didn’t know if there were others like *me* until... Akechi. I didn’t like thinking about it after what happened in Shido’s Palace.”

Elizabeth stared at him, her eyes simmering, “Orpheus didn’t tell you about his Wild Card?”

“He gave us hints,” Satanael said with a light shrug. “And the other Personas have faint memories of other Wild Cards, but the full story of your specific Wild Card eludes us still.”

“The other Wild Cards went through similar adventures.” Igor nodded, “They rose to the call when the world needed their power. They fought their battles and won. Time passes and new Wild Cards arise to the call when needed.”

“But we are not here to talk about past Wild Cards.” Elizabeth said sourly.

The other Attendants gave her worried glances. Joker wondered if something had happened to Elizabeth’s Wild Card. Given how the siblings’ mood dampened, and by the sharp pang of sorrow from Orpheus Picaro, he could only guess. He wasn’t about to pry. If Joker and his team barely scraped by Justine and Caroline’s battle, then he didn’t want to get on Elizabeth’s bad side.

“For the topic at hand.” Igor interrupted the stilted silence, his unwavering gaze landing on the Compendium. “The changes you’ve experienced with your powers, particularly with your Personas.”

Joker looked at the Compendium with dawning horror, “I never mastered Seth’s bond.”

“His page is not in there anymore.” Lavenza said. “It’s possible that... that he may be gone for good.”

“What ?”

Lavenza gently took the Compendium from Joker, “You never mastered his bond, correct?”

“... Yeah.” Joker whispered in the too quiet Velvet Room. Even the mournful song dimmed at his words, “He was killed like Yatagarasu, but Yatagarasu came back!”

“You mastered my bond ages ago, Trickster. The first, in fact.” Yatagarasu warbled. “We never worked on Seth’s.”

“I see.” Lavenza hugged the Compendium to her chest, “If the Persona itself was erased and there’s no mastered bond to forge its new page... then it seems impossible to get Seth back. I am sorry, Trickster.”

Joker felt dizzy.

Ishtar put a stabilizing hand on his shoulder.

“But that begs another question.” Margaret drew his attention, her eyes warm and kind, “What other changes have you experienced during your time in this new world? The changes to your Compendium cannot be the only thing.”

“Cognition...” Joker steadied himself with a deep breath, Ishtar’s tightened grip kept him focused, “My Personas not only grew in power the more the people of this world knew about them, but they slowly gained their individuality. Arcanas appeared after a good couple of months. There are some bad things too.”

“The Hierophant of this world, a pro hero by the name of Eraserhead...” Kohryu’s voice rolled through the Velvet Room like

distant thunder, “He could erase us from reality and send us back to the Trickster’s mindscape.”

Lavenza and the other Velvet Attendant’s eyes went wide.

“*What ?*” Elizabeth spat the word in vitriol, her posture going rigid, “How?”

“In this world, humans have powers called Quirks.” Joker explained, “But there are other quirks and technology that can erase powers. It works on my Personas, too.”

“But that makes no sense,” Theodore clutched his chin, eyes narrowing in thought, “You should not be completely bound by the laws of this world. Personas are not these... ‘quirks.’”

“Igor,” Elizabeth turned to the long nosed man, “We implied that new rules were made due to Yaldabaoth’s tampering. Could the rules overlap one another? Could they... *combine*, in a sense?”

“Possibly.” Igor tapped his chin, eyes unblinking, “In fact, it must be so.”

“What are you talking about?” Joker asked.

Theodore frowned, “Wait, Elizabeth, are you implying-”

Elizabeth walked towards Joker, and Theodore cut himself off with a sigh.

“Did you have lasting symptoms of this ‘erasure’?” Elizabeth stopped in front of Joker, her citrine eyes as hard as steel.

“Unimaginable pain for the Personas in reality.” Kohryu flicked his whiskers, “And we are... not ourselves for a short time after. I grew insane and nearly devastated the Trickster’s mindscape when it happened to me. I injured Arsene in my madness before he snapped me out of it, and I was weakened greatly afterwards.”

“Yes,” Satanael’s wings rattled together in anger, “When Eraserhead suppressed our power in that alley months ago, we were nearly consumed with rage when he returned us. I wanted nothing more than to end Eraserhead’s existence at great cost to the Trickster himself.”

Joker frowned as he put a hand over his heart, “It felt like I was being torn apart from the inside. I suffered severe backlash, and was unconscious for a few days when Kohryu was erased.”

“I see.” Elizabeth’s expression soured as if she had bit a particularly nasty lemon, “If anybody does that to you again, I’ll kill them myself.”

It was a quiet declaration, but one laced with such a powerful resolve that it made the hairs on the back of Joker’s neck stand on end.

“Elizabeth!” Margaret called.

“I understand your feelings, sister,” Theodore’s gloved hands balled into fists, “But that’s taking it too far. What happened to our Wild Cards’ friend is no excuse for such behavior.”

Our Wild Card’s ? Joker thought with a frown. Did these two share a Wild Card like Justine and Caroline shared *him* ? He buried that question when Elizabeth crossed her arms and scowled, her eyes glinting with a promise of murder.

“You act like you’ve experienced this before.” Joker glanced between Elizabeth and Theodore. “There’s no way there’s something that can suppress Personas like that back home, right?” Igor and the Velvet Room Attendants stared at him. Dread clawed up his spine. “... Right?”

“No.” Elizabeth huffed, “There is a medicine that humans can take to keep their Personas locked away.”

Joker’s eyes went wide.

“But doing so greatly hurts both the user and the Persona.” Theodore looked to the ground, unknown memories replaying within his eyes, “One of our Wild Cards’ most trusted friends did that to himself... and he experienced some of same symptoms you described when your Personas were ‘erased.’”

Elizabeth shook her head, “So thanks to Yaldabaoth’s bullshit, instead of a ‘quirk’ getting erased, it acts like a Persona Suppressor. How barbaric.”

“That’s not all.” Joker said gravely as the sentiment settled on him, “It’s not only my Personas that are changing, but my body, too.” Joker frowned as hazy memories surfaced, of that mad doctor and of the files he burned, “My physiology is changing. A brain scan revealed that my body is trying to compensate for a quirk that’s not there.”

“Fascinating,” Igor held up both hands, fingers splayed, “One, a world of Distortions, Shadows, and Persona users, and the other of heroes and super powers. Yaldabaoth rips the veils between worlds, and when the ‘tapestries’ combine unnaturally, inhabitants from both of them...” Igor clasped his fingers together, his grin widening, “eventually become something *in between* . These new Arcanas, your Personas gathering strength and individuality through Cognition, your changing physiology, and Personas being affected by these quirks, may be proof of this. The longer you are here, Trickster, the more changes we may see. These changes will continue until Yaldabaoth secures his true victory.”

Joker grimaced. The possibility of the Metaverse leaking into U.A. was bad enough, but the last thing they needed was for this world to be overcome with Distortions and Shadows.

“Master,” Lavenza faced Igor, “If the Trickster were to defeat Yaldabaoth and restore balance, would everything return to normal for all worlds?”

“I believe so.” Igor said, “Should Yaldabaoth’s tampering cease, it may allow the worlds to heal and go back to their original state. But it must be done before he succeeds at merging these worlds fully with the Metaverse.”

Joker sighed. “We almost defeated Yaldabaoth the first time before he threw us into other worlds. What’s to stop him from doing it again?”

“Well, you didn’t have our support last time, and your Second Awakening seems stronger than your first.” Elizabeth smirked, “This pansy god won’t know what hit him the second time around. He should’ve just accepted his fate the first time.”

“Agreed.” Lavenza smiled at Joker, “If we are to continue our battle through this world, then you need all of the strength you can muster. Now that the Velvet Room is restored to you, feel free to use our services as normal.”

Ice filled Joker’s veins. Concern trickled from his other selves as his heart pounded in his ears.

“It may be wise to do fusions now and-”

“No !”

The Velvet Room rung with his voice. The Attendants gaped at him, and Igor’s expression didn’t change much, but he stared with such sadness that Joker had to look away.

Joker cleared his throat and gathered the fractures remains of his composure, “I’m not ready for any fusions just yet.”

Yatagarasu nuzzled Joker’s hair with his beak, while Pixie fondly patted his cheek. Ishtar gave his hand a soft squeeze.

“I... I see.” Lavenza bowed deeply, her long hair flowing with the movement, “I apologize for bringing it up. I didn’t mean to cause you

any distress.”

Joker shook his head, “It’s fine. I didn’t mean to yell like that.”

“Your Second Awakening took much from you, and we have discussed many heavy topics.” Igor said softly, “Why don’t we stop here? Besides, your other teammates have been waiting patiently. Lavenza?”

Lavenza bowed to them before she ran off down the hall leading to an outer ring of cells. Despite the mournful song throughout the Velvet Room, it was so quiet. *Too* quiet. Elizabeth silently returned to her spot next to her other siblings. Margaret and Theodore studied Joker with a blend of intricate, yet carefully concealed, emotions.

Igor didn’t seem to mind awkwardness at all, humming along with the song.

“Joker!!”

Ishtar, Yatagarasu, and Pixie vanished as another body crashed into him. The green scales and vibrant pink hair tickling his face told him that it was Spinner.

“My guy!” Spinner let go, took Joker by the shoulders, and shook him wildly, “You’re okay!! What the heck is going on!?”

“What he means is-” Mr. Compress pulled Spinner away with a hand on his shoulder, “We heard everything you talked about with these fine people, but we are just a tad confused. Particularly the bit where you spoke of *multiple worlds* ?”

“Atsuhiro...” Joker looked the man up and down. Mr. Compress had his bloody coat draped over one arm, the rest of his shirt splotched with red, but his coat absorbed most of it. The other arm was intact, *whole* . He had lost his hat and mask, and his hair was messed up in an oddly similar way to Joker’s. “Are you okay?”

“We are fine, my boy. Mercurius and Mona healed us up quite nicely, though something strange has happened to Mona too...” Mr. Compress smirked and gently prodded Joker in the chest, “But I swear I am billing you for my dry cleaning! This is the *second* coat that’s been ruined by blood! Let’s not make it a habit and do it a third time, yes?”

“Y-yes.” Joker rubbed the back of his neck, grinning sheepishly. “Speaking of, where is Mona?”

“Right here!”

Mona walked in, holding hands with Eri. He wasn’t in his normal cat form, but his chibi-like, bipedal Metaverse form, complete with his yellow bandanna and the belt around his waist.

Joker gasped, “Mona, your form!”

“I know!! Aren’t I awesome!?” Mona grinned from ear to ear, his sapphire eyes twinkling. “It feels so good to have this form back! Oh, I can’t wait to finally shoot my slingshot again!”

“So... this *is* normal for Mona?” Mr. Compress asked, slack jawed.

“Yep! I couldn’t access this form for some reason, until now.” Mona looked down at himself, then his large eyes scanned the Velvet Room, “I wonder if it has something to do with being here again? I was born here, after all.”

Mr. Compress and Spinner gaped at each other. Mr. Compress shrugged with an exaggerated sigh.

“But I’m not the only that changed.” Mona narrowed his eyes as he looked Joker up and down, “What’s with your new costume!?”

Joker looked at his black and gold attire. Speaking of, he hasn’t seen his new mask yet. He reached up and took it off. Satanael’s pride warmed Joker’s soul as he stared at a likeness to Satanael’s own

mask, though deep black with gold rimming the sharp, wing-like edges. It was only a little larger than his other domino mask.

“Not a bad upgrade,” Mr. Compress chuckled as he walked a slow circle around Joker, “Gold trimming is always in style. It’s far fancier than your previous attire! Quite fitting for a Phantom Thief.”

“Phantom thief?” Spinner cackled, “I say he looks more like a Phantom *Prince* now! Look at all that gold!”

“But *why* did your costume change?” Mona asked, “I knew our Personas could grow stronger and evolve, but I never thought your Metaverse costume could do that too!”

Their mutual thought of Akechi’s attire went unsaid, as he was a... unique example.

“He no longer has the role of the Fool.” Lavenza stood at the back of the group, “The Trickster went through many trials and tribulations in this other world, enough to where his power has evolved from the Fool to The World. Satanael himself now bears the World Arcana as well.”

Igor chuckled, his toothy grin growing larger, “Something I doubt even Yaldabaoth could have predicted.”

“Er, you lost me again.” Spinner stated.

“I’ll explain later.” Joker rubbed his eyes and replaced his new mask. It fit perfectly, “Right now, we have more important things to worry about.”

Eri grasped Mona’s paw with white knuckles as they stared at her. Her breathing picked up as she scanned the whole of the Velvet Room, her crimson eyes drowning in fear. Joker approached slowly, and her eyes fell to the puddles of color under his feet.

He crouched down in front of her, smiling. "I'm sorry if we scared you, but you're safe now. We won't let that man harm you anymore."

Eri opened her mouth, but couldn't seem to form any words. She trembled like a leaf in the wind, making herself as small as possible.

Mona's expression softened.

"This child doesn't trust us yet," Ishtar whispered, "her Arcana is not fully formed."

"She has been through much pain and suffering." Shiva said, "It may take time."

Joker held out his hand to her, "How about we go home so you can meet our other friends? They're really nice, I promise."

Eri stared at his gloved hand, her lips wobbling. Slowly, she reached out. Her hand was so tiny compared to his.

Her touch electrified him. She must have felt something too, as her trepidation melted away with awe. A small light came into her eyes as she stared at Joker. Just then, he could sense his bond with her.

The Aeon .

Not yet solidified, but gracing the edge of his soul with its whisper soft touch.

"So... how *do* we get back?" Spinner whispered, breaking Joker and Eri out of their trance.

Joker looked over his shoulder to Mr. Compress, the Faith, and Spinner, the Apostle, respectively.

"There is an entrance nearby." Lavenza faced the long hallway leading to the outer cells, "This way."

Joker stood, hand in hand with Eri, her other hand latched onto Mona, and they followed. Spinner and Mr. Compress trailed behind them at a more sedate pace, their eyes wandering over the Velvet Room and its inhabitants before they turned their backs on it.

"Don't worry, Trickster." Satanael whispered, *"We will be with you as you exit. Always."*

"Yeah! We won't leave Master's side ever again!" Cerberus declared with a howl.

"I can't wait to play with Big Brother again! Although... I've always wanted a little sister, too!"

"Alice, darling, don't get any ideas." Titania said, *"We shouldn't scare the Aeon."*

"We can at least play games with her, right!?" Pixie said, giggling.

"I suppose, but harm one hair on her head and I'll eat you whole." Byakko warned.

"I just want to give the sweetheart a proper bath," Ishtar said with sorrow, *"And to see what lies under all of those dirty bandages."*

Hearing their voices again filled Joker with a soft, buzzing warmth. It eradicated his previous hopelessness and lifted his spirits. His heart was so full... he finally felt *complete* .

"Mister..." Eri tugged on his hand. Mona's ears twitched to listen, "Why are you crying? Are you sad?"

"What?" Joker wiped away the tears with his other hand. He didn't even notice. "No, I'm not sad. I'm... happy."

Eri blinked, her blank expression unchanging, "People can cry when they're happy?"

Joker nodded. "Crying isn't only for when you're sad."

“Oh.”

Joker and Mona exchanged subtle glances at Eri’s closed off expression, though maybe she was still in shock. Her whole world just turned upside down in a matter of hours. Joker didn’t know how long she was trapped with Overhaul, he dearly hoped it wasn’t her whole short life.

“Here we are.” Lavenza stopped in front of a set of stairs leading up into a doorway of bright white light. “Some time has passed since we took you into the Velvet Room, but the new location should be safe.”

“Are you coming with, Lady Lavenza?” Mona asked.

“Yes. I’ll escort you to your safe house, but I’ll give the Trickster something before we depart.” Lavenza opened the back cover of the Compendium. A small key was pressed in a hidden pocket. “Here is your Velvet Key, Trickster. It... should have been yours from the start of your journey.”

Joker held the tiny silver key in his palm. It was an intricate little thing, the iconic Velvet Room symbol was carved into the handle. He carefully placed it in his hidden breast pocket as Lavenza went up the stairs first.

There were dozens of steep steps. Mona wouldn’t have any trouble in his Metaverse form, but Eri was barely on her feet as is. He knelt down next to Eri, smiling.

“I can give you a piggy back ride, if you want. That way you won’t have to walk and we can get home faster. Is that okay with you?”

“It’s not gonna hurt, is it?” She asked. Then she winced and hunched her shoulders, her hands covering her face as if she expected a punch.

“No, it doesn’t.” Joker said softly as he settled his other hand on her hair. She looked up to him again, her eyes like liquid jewels,

“Actually, it’s pretty fun. I think you would like it.”

Eri blinked several times. “... Okay.”

Joker frowned when he situated Eri on his back. She was so light, barely a feather, compared to him. Her little arms wrapped around his neck and her chin rested on his shoulder, her eyes wide as she ogled her surroundings at this new height.

“How much do you want to bet that the others will kill us when we get back? Kaito specifically.” Spinner whispered to Mr. Compress as the others went on ahead.

“Perhaps they won’t go as hard this time.” Mr. Compress sighed as he stared at the tiny girl on Joker’s back, “Considering we’re bringing home not one, but *two*, traumatized children. And maybe... a *third* traumatized child? That butterfly girl is the real mystery, here.”

“Don’t forget two traumatized adults!” Spinner stared pointedly at Mr. Compress’ bloody coat, then up and around the cold stone walls resonating with haunting music. “What the heck are we supposed to make of all this?”

Mr. Compress folded the coat so the bloody splotches were hidden. He rolled his healed shoulder and wrist, flexed his bare fingers. He looked over his shoulder to find Igor’s unblinking gaze fixed on them. The man’s eerie smile widened.

“Joker said he would explain, and I’ll trust his word on... whatever this is. Giving him our trust and support is the least we can do after everything he’s done for us.” Mr. Compress turned away, staring at the light spilling on the stairs, “Otherworldly origins or no, *both* my arms appreciate being attached to my body.”

Mr. Compress followed Joker and the others. Spinner took a moment, gawking at the Velvet Room, before he followed. They all reached the top and stepped through the white light together.

Kirishima paced around the waiting room.

The adrenaline from his late night patrol with Fat Gum and Suneater still coursed through his veins. Soon enough footage of his fight was posted online, and he only saw it because the small TV in the waiting room had played it on the local news. It was so strange seeing himself from another point of view. Standing in that dark alley, using himself as an unbreakable wall between an insane blade villain and terrified civilians, *refusing* to back down until he knew the people were safe. He looked so manly!

He even got his first dedicated fans!

But... Suneater...

He perked up when he heard approaching footsteps, turning to see a familiar face. Fat Gum's bright yellow hero costume would stand out anywhere, it made him iconic in this town. He was such a softie too, both in personality and his quirk! Kirishima found it weird that their quirks were nearly the exact opposite, but they worked so well together.

"Suneater got his quirk back." Fat Gum's smile widened, "Thankfully, that drug doesn't appear to be permanent. Oh, and that bullet you saved was full of the same drug that hit Suneater, so they're running tests on it."

Kirishima breathed a sigh of relief. "So he's okay?"

"Yep! He'll be let out soon." Fat Gum's expression softened, "Are you up for some grub after he gets discharged?"

Kirishima beamed, "Sure, I'm starving!"

Fat Gum chuckled and ruffled Kirishima's hair, "That's the spirit! My favorite takoyaki restaurant is close by. The owner and I are close friends, so I get a discount. Eat as much as you like. My treat for doin' such a great job tonight!"

“Thank you, sir!”

Fat Gum snickered, “No need to call me sir, Kirishima.”

A doctor emerged from the hall, “Fat Gum, we just need to finalize some paperwork before we discharge Suneater. If you would...?”

“Ah, right!” Fat Gum ruffled Kirishima’s hair once more, “Wait here, okay sport? Suneater and I will come get ya once we’re done!”

“Okay!”

Kirishima plopped down on one of the chairs as Fat Gum was led away by the doctor. Curious, he got out his phone to check in with everyone. He had hundreds of messages from the class chatroom.

[Red Riot]

Hey guys! Did I miss something in class today?

[Pinkie]

OMG KIRI!!

WE SAW YOU ON THE NEWS YOU WERE AWESOME!!

[Red Riot]

Oh, thanks!!

But uh... why was everyone freaking out earlier?

My phone can't load that many messages!

[Invisibility]

You haven't seen the news yet???

[Red Riot]

Not really, had a really busy night!

[Charge Bolt]

MANNN I'm so jealous!

Both Deku and Red Riot got to be on the news!!

[Pinkie]

Deku was spotted working with Hawks!!

[Red Riot]

WAIT WHAT

I thought Tokoyami was working with Hawks? What's Midoriya doing with him?

[Pinkie]

That's what I wanna know!! We haven't heard from Tokoyami, or even Tsu-chan and Ochako! This radio silence is KILLING me!!

[Ingenium 2.0]

We do not have the full picture yet.

Do not spread any unnecessary rumors until we hear from either Tokoyami or Midoriya! DO NOT pester them with texts either! They

may be busy with their agencies!

But to answer your question, Kirishima, there was an explosion near Nighteye's agency earlier today, and there are certain rumors going around the internet.

[Red Riot]

Okay

And????

[Charge Bolt]

If you won't tell him Class Rep, I will!!

[Ingenium 2.0]

Fine. There are rumors that one of Joker's mythological companions was spotted in the area, but we have nothing concrete.

Please don't go spreading this around! The last thing we need is to be the cause of unscrupulous rumors!!

[Cellophane]

We get it! We heard you the first 50 times after Aizawa's lecture on 'secrecy' or whatever after the red rain!

[Tsukuyomi]

Apologies for the extended silence. I don't know how much we are allowed to say, but know that we are fine and have been busy

working with our respective agencies. I'm sure Midoriya and the others will update you as soon as they can.

It has been a mad banquet indeed.

[Invisibility]

That's it??

[Pinkie]

UGH MORE MYSTERIES!?

I'm at my wits end here!

[KingExplosionMurder]

WOULD YOU ALL SHUT UP

I'M TRYING TO SLEEP

Kirishima exited the conversation there, his previous energy soured with concern. Whatever happened, wherever his Aniki is right now, Kirishima hoped that he and the rest of Kirishima's classmates were okay.

"No hostiles." Lavenza craned her neck around the alley as Joker and his teammates exited the Velvet Room. "How curious. This world really harbors different energy from back home. Different.... threads, you could say."

Joker suppressed a shiver. It was as if they passed through a wall of icy water when stepping through the barred door, the strange magic of the Velvet Room shifting around them as they trekked into reality. His other teammates shared similar reactions. Weird. It was never that way back home.

“We can talk about it once we get back.” Joker said. “Eri, how are you doing?....Eri?”

Mr. Compress smiled, “It seems the little princess has fallen asleep already. Spinner, that means no shouting.”

“Aye aye.” Spinner said sarcastically, then he stiffened. “Wait, do you hear that? It’s coming from above.”

They looked up to the sliver of black sky between the buildings. A humming noise droned overhead, and a helicopter's blinking lights appeared far in the distance.

“That explosion must’ve drawn the humans’ attention.” Lavenza said.

Joker blinked. “What explosion?”

Lavenza turned to him, her brow heavy, “I must apologize for Elizabeth’s behaviour. Megidolaon is one of her favorite spells, and she cast it before the door to the Velvet Room closed. I presume it was to cover our tracks.”

Joker paled, “That spell is seriously powerful here!” He bit his lip when Eri shifted in her sleep, but thankfully didn’t wake.

Mr. Compress scanned the alley, “We should go while we have the chance. I recognize these alleys. It’s quite a walk from here to the bar, but we should be fine as long as we don’t venture on the rooftops.”

“I’ll keep an eye on our surroundings.” Mona jumped and waved his little arms around. Now his footsteps splashed with intense colors, too. “I can’t explain why, but my wind feels... *sharper* in this form. Stronger. Mercurius and I can probably extend my range and power in this form... I think.”

“Fantastic.” Mr. Compress walked past them, “We should call La Brava, too. Several hours have passed and they must be worried

sick. It would help to have additional ears on the heroes' movements."

"Go ahead," Joker said softly, "Mona and Spinner will keep watch."

Spinner did the two finger salute as Mr. Compress dug through his tattered coat pockets.

Joker turned towards the Velvet Room door as it vanished, the wash of ice cold magic fading along with it. "Is it supposed to do that?"

Lavenza hummed, "I suppose it's a new safety measure. Now that the Velvet Room is... *visible* to normal humans, thanks to the new rules, we do not want interlopers finding it."

Joker snorted. "Would any intruders even survive long enough to get a good look inside?"

"No... I suppose not." Lavenza chuckled, sending chills down Joker's spine, "Then perhaps it's not a safety measure for the Velvet Room itself, but for the inhabitants of this world. However, with your Velvet Key, it would not be a burden for you to summon it whenever you wish. You need not venture all the way out here for it."

Joker nodded, and they fell to silence.

He passed the minutes studying his new attire that was like a second skin to him, something that felt like *safety*. Although his guns were left back at the bar (a mistake he's never making again), Paradise Lost was at his hip like a faithful companion. His soul whispered with familiar chatter and the solid camaraderie of his other selves, and in the darkness of these alleyways, it almost felt like home.

Joker smiled when Satanael's wings brushed against his mind, but that fell once a sense of deep-seated uneasiness emanated from Kohryu. Sraosha burrowed himself away from the others, too. Even Orpheus Picaro no longer hesitated at the edge of the mindscape, he finally joined the others in full.

So what was wrong with Sraosha?

"Focus on regrouping with your comrades first." Kohryu whispered, *"But then you and I will have a talk."*

The dragon's voice faded on that ominous note. Mona saw Joker's expression fall and sent his partner a look, but Joker shook his head.

Lavenza hugged the Compendium to her chest as she watched the exchange.

If Joker could not bare to do fusions, then she feared it would only harm him in the long run.

"Anything?" Kaito asked as he finished another uneasy lap around the attic.

"I'm sure they're alright." Tobita said, though it sounded as if he were trying to convince himself. Lady Stubbs was flopped over by his lap, staring unblinkingly at the window, "It's not the first time Ren's pulled a stunt like this and returned home, safe and sound. Besides, the others are probably with him."

Kaito scoffed, "Define 'safe and sound.' I don't think that's in Ren's dictionary."

"Like the other hundred times you've asked, Kaito," Manami sighed as she looked up from her screen, "No, there hasn't been anything-"

A blessed ping echoed through the attic. A moment later her phone rang. The others crowded around her as she answered it.

"Hello?"

"La Brava!" Mr. Compress greeted happily, *"I'm glad you picked up on the first ring-"*

"Is everyone okay!?" She blurted, "Is Ren..."

"Oh. Everyone's... fine. For the most part."

"Why doesn't he sound certain?" Tobita asked.

"What happened?" Manami patted Tobita's arm, "The news channels are all going haywire! First that explosion, then Hawks was spotted investigating the disaster site, and *then* there are rumors going around that one of Joker's summons was spotted in town!"

"Er... Technically that one wasn't Ren's... I think?" Mr. Compress cleared his throat, *"But Ren got his powers back and may have angered a Yakuza group in the process?... By accident?"*

Kaito and Tobita stiffened. Lady Stubbs tilted her head at an unnatural angle as Manami's heart pounded.

"H-he... *what ?*" Manami stuttered.

"But there have been some... other unexpected developments. I wanted to call and warn you ahead of time that we have some additional guests, and to prepare yourselves for certain changes. You'll see for yourself once we get home, but I wanted to make sure we don't encounter any surprises. Villain or otherwise."

Manami breathed deeply through her nose. She tucked her phone into the crook of her neck and started typing.

"Okay, I'll send you a safe route back to the bar. But when you get here we better get an explanation! Got it, mister?"

"Y-yes, ma'am. Ciao!"

He hung up, and Manami let her phone tumble into her lap. She ran her hands down her face as a headache knocked in her skull.

"This impending conversation sounds like it will need tea." Tobita said gravely as he stood. *"A lot of tea."*

“Agreed.” Kaito crossed his arms and sagged against the wall, “This is going to be a long night, isn't it?”

“Merp...”

At that, everyone in the attic agreed.

~*~*~*TW Scene~

Chisaki stormed back into his stronghold. His subordinates took one look at his murderous expression and opened the gate for him, and bolted to the other side of the complex. Fear spread like a plague as the rats scattered and whispers broke out about his return.

Chisaki threw open the front door and stepped into sterile white walls and cold, hard floors. The sharp scent of cleaning supplies and the metallic groans of medical equipment nearby centered him, but this rage consumed his whole body with the heat of a volcano.

“Chisaki?” A familiar voice called to him, sharp footsteps coming closer. “Chisaki!”

He whirled around to the voice, breathing hard. His eyes focused on the *black and gold* mask approaching him, of that vigilante's smirking face and mocking words. Chisaki moved. The man froze like a deer in the headlights when Chisaki grabbed his throat and slammed him against the wall, his other hand unmaking the black and gold bird-like mask from existence.

“Chisaki, calm down!”

Kurono's white hood fell around his shoulders, his shocked expression visible. Pale, shoulder length hair pointed like clock hands, not messy black. Dark gray eyes, not blazing gold tinged with cerulean. Chisaki sensed people watching from the doors and around the corners, but he didn't care.

“What *happened* ?” Kurono asked softly as Chisaki let him go, “The search parties came up empty and it’s already past dark. I was worried... why do you smell like a sewer?”

“Where is he?” Chisaki’s voice was low and full of gravel, his skin itched and blemished with hives. His eyes burned with the fury of a thousand stars. “*Where* ?”

“Boss!”

Another sorry dreg of human existence rushed towards them, unremarkable in every way in Chisaki’s eyes.

“I-I’m sorry! I-I only looked away for *one second* and she was gone-”

Chisaki became a blur. One moment the man was there, whole and intact, the next Chisaki was standing over a veritable sea of blood. The floor, the walls, a few specs dribbled down from the ceiling.

“... Kai?” Kurono whispered.

Chisaki didn’t hear him over his own laboured breathing. He swiped his fingers through the crimson pool, his skin bubbling with hives. The man was remade in a blink of an eye, gasping.

He saw Chisaki’s shadow standing over him, hand reaching for his face.

“B-Boss! I-I said I-I’m *sorry!*”

It didn’t matter. Kurono remained deathly still as Chisaki made and remade the man over and over and over . They were used to Chisaki throwing people away on a whim, but this...

Chisaki was deaf to the man’s desperate pleas, growing more frantic than an animal trapped in a cage. The crimson pool contained no organs or even bones, everything about his person being reduced to sickening crimson that steadily grew in size, painting Chisaki with a red wave.

Finally, after an eternity of repeated horror and death, Chisaki stopped, breathing hard. Silence, the type of terrifying disquiet where you held your breath or else you might be the monster's next victim.

"Eri is gone." Chisaki's voice felt as loud as an explosive, the shadows hiding around the corners flinching, "Stolen, by *Joker* ."

"*What ?*" It took everything in Kurono to not stare at the stain that had once been a person, "How? I didn't- The explosion and rumors of a flying red serpent have been on the news. Your involvement wasn't mentioned of course, so I didn't think-"

"I was going to *end him*, but somehow he resisted my quirk." Chisaki reached into his coat pocket for pieces of a broken mask and a crumpled, bloody top hat, "Then other people appeared out of thin air and they all escaped."

"*What ?* How is that possible?"

"I don't understand it yet." Chisaki looked at Kurono, his eyes mad and feral, "But we're getting Eri back, and I *will* eradicate Joker's sickness from this world. I know just the pawns to use to do so."

Chisaki turned away and walked through the bloody pool. He was halfway down the hall, followed by grisly footsteps, before he turned back to his right hand man.

"Oh, and Kurono?"

"Y-yes?"

Chisaki looked at the gore in disgust. "Get this mess cleaned up."

Chisaki walked away, uncaring of the frantic screams forged in his subordinates' minds.

Well, some long standing questions finally got answered, huh?

There is one last important note for the update schedule. In other words, please be patient with me if I have to delay any updates by a week or so, the summer months, and September specifically, are extremely hard on both my physical and mental health. I've been really struggling with my health lately as is. I would like to upkeep the quality of this story without rushing through it, and I can't exactly do that when I can't even think straight most days anymore.

Anywho, plans are finally in place to get this story moving again... and I honestly can't wait. I may or may not be expecting for next chapter's title alone to cause some form of chaos ;))

Next scheduled chapter is June 25th unless otherwise specified.

Edit: Chapter 8 of the Thieves Den will be updated with the new Arcanas!

Price(Another Version)

Chapter 75: Price(Another Version)

“You-” Manami’s eyes twitched, “Is that what you were doing the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“Yes?”

“I really shouldn’t be surprised at this point.” Manami deadpanned, “I really shouldn’t.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“What the hell *happened* ?”

Kaito asked a legitimate question, Joker thought. For what else could he say when Joker and the others crept through the attic window like a group of teenagers sneaking in after a night of debauchery?

Between Joker’s upgraded costume and the sleeping girl on his back, Mona’s Metaverse form, how Shuichi and Atsuhiro’s clothes were tattered and bloodstained, and the other child sized not-human thriving with unknown power, they didn’t know where to start.

Manami, Stubbs, and Tobita openly gaped as Joker’s face turned red. He shifted his weight between his feet, careful not to wake Eri.

“Can we talk after I tuck Eri in?” Joker asked, “She’s exhausted.”

Tobita helped Joker set out an extra futon, a million questions dancing in his barely concealed shock.

“This attic is... quaint.” Lavenza looked around, “Not unlike the attic back home, Trickster.”

“We were in an internet cafe before this.” Mona said.

Lavenza blinked and tilted her head, as innocent as a doe, “What is an ‘internet cafe?’”

Kaito and Manami gawked at Joker in desperation.

Joker pulled the comforter up to Eri’s chin, and then rested his hand on her head. Even in her sleep, she leaned into the soft, caring contact. Joker smiled sadly and pulled away.

Stubbs rounded on Mona, her fur puffed out, “Merp!”

“What do you mean ‘who are you!?’ It’s me, Morgana!”

“Maybe it’s better if you change back.” Joker said as he turned to the rest of the team, frowning. “You *can* change back, right?”

“Let me try.” Mona posed with his little arms waving through the air, whisper-shouting. “Morgana, transfoooorm!”

A spurt of flame engulfed Mona’s body and faded just as quickly, revealing his normal cat form.

Morgana stretched and wove his tail back and forth, cackling with a bright grin, “I can change back into a car *and* my Metaverse form? Oh, this will be handy!”

Kaito’s eye twitched, “Please, just tell us what’s going on before we collectively lose our minds.”

“You actually have minds to lose?” Joker asked with a smirk, “I thought we’d lost them ages ago. Shouldn’t you be used to this by now?”

Kaito and Manami locked him with unimpressed glares.

“Okay, okay.” Joker put his hands up in surrender, “Everyone, get comfortable. This isn’t going to be an easy pill to swallow.”

Tobita passed around cups of tea. Shuichi and Atsuhiro took turns changing clothes in the bathroom before everyone gathered in the attic.

"I believe I should introduce myself," Lavenza said as she tucked the Compendium under one arm and performed a perfect curtsy, "I am Lavenza, a Ruler of Power and Velvet Room Attendant to the Trickster."

Manami blinked at her, "Nice to meet you?"

"Do you need to go back to the Velvet Room, Lavenza?" Joker asked.

"No, not yet." Lavenza sat primly next to him, close enough to almost touch, "I can provide extra context and support, if necessary."

"We'll need every detail," Atsuhiro downed his tea and Tobita poured him another cup, now wearing a spare coat over unspoiled clothes, "Depending on what you share, I might need something a little stronger than tea."

"You're not the only one." Kaito muttered. His bright blue eyes flicked in between Lavenza, Joker, and Morgana, his finger tapping on the silvery wrist band, "Don't hold anything back."

"Okay." Joker swallowed, "I wandered around for a while after I left the bar. Eventually I encountered Overhaul, a member of the Shie Hassaikai, in one of the alleyways."

"The 8 Precepts of Death." Manami's eyes went wide.

"You've heard of them?" Joker asked.

"They were a smaller Yakuza group until recently. I heard they were a main distributor for Trigger."

"Trigger? What's that?" Morgana asked.

“It’s a horrible drug.” Tobita said, frowning as he elegantly swirled his tea, “It makes someone’s quirk immeasurably more powerful for a limited time, but the side effects are rather disastrous.”

“Including, but not limited to,” Atsuhiro lifted a finger, “Losing control of your quirk, degraded mental capability, and a black tongue.”

“But what does the Yakuza have to do with that little girl?” Kaito said as he looked over at Eri, “Who is she?”

“She was with Overhaul. Her name is Eri, but that’s about all we have.” Joker glanced at Eri too, his heart twisting, “Overhaul said that quirks were an illness, and that he and Eri were going to ‘work together’ to do something about it. As far as I could tell, she wasn’t with him voluntarily.”

The sentiment settled sourly on the group.

Joker glanced at Shuichi and Atsuhiro, “It was around that time when you showed up.”

“I’m glad we interrupted when we did.” Atsuhiro stared into Joker’s eyes, shoulders tense, “I don’t want to imagine what Overhaul would have done to you had we not intervened.”

“What are you talking about?” Kaito asked with narrowed eyes.

“Given Eri’s situation, I wouldn’t put kidnapping Ren past him.” Atsuhiro said, “I cut Overhaul’s line of sight with some spare debris stored in my marbles, but...”

“He broke through!” Shuichi stated, “His quirk can take *anything* apart with a single touch! And Compress-”

Atsuhiro slapped a hand on Shuichi’s mouth, “I am fine now, obviously. Mona’s magic is a step above every other healing quirk in existence.”

Shuichi and Joker gave him a horrified look. Morgana shuddered.

“Well, Overhaul injured Atsuhiro, so Shuichi took over to protect us, but then...” Joker looked down at his gloves. He glanced in between Lavenza, Morgana, and Eri, “That’s when I heard my personas again for the first time since Kamino, and I reawakened to my powers.”

“Yeah!” Shuichi playfully batted Atsuhiro’s hand away, “He ripped this mask off and FWOOSH!” He threw his arms up in the air, “Satanael was there, and there was so much blood and fire everywhere! OH, and his new costume a-and then all of those people in blue-”

“*Shuichi* .” Kaito chastised when they heard Eri stir.

Thankfully, the girl rolled over and fell back into a deep slumber.

“Sorry.” Shuichi whispered.

Lavenza bore a tiny smile, “We came to the Trickster when his Second Awakening broke through the barriers between worlds, and we were able to rescue all of you.”

“And *that’s* the part I want to hear,” Atsuhiro smirked, practically vibrating with excitement, “Adventures across time and space? It must be an *interesting* story.”

“Oh, right.” Manami gripped the hem of her shirt, her eyes falling to the floor, “You two didn’t know.”

Joker’s sigh drew everyone’s attention. He and Morgana shared a long look, a silent conversation flowing in between them. Morgana firmly nodded.

For the second time, they shared their experiences back home. This time, Lavenza corroborated with them, explaining some of the deeper intricacies of the Velvet Room, as well as sharing what Yaldabaoth did to her and Igor. Atsuhiro and Shuichi’s expressions darkened considerably when Joker got to the interrogation room and the following events with Yaldabaoth and the Qliphoth World.

A terrible silence settled in the attic when they were done.

Tobita made another batch of tea and opened a large pack of jam-filled shortbread cookies before they continued. Joker took a handful of the cookies, suddenly realizing how hungry he was.

He passed one to Lavenza, who stared at it as if it were a strange trinket. Her eyes lit up when she took a delicate bite, crumbs falling into her lap.

“I thought you looked familiar,” Kaito said as Lavenza finished her cookie and blinked at him, “I saw you, and Justine and Caroline before you, when I relived Ren’s memories.”

“Wait, *that’s* your quirk?” Atsuhiro gaped at Kaito, “Reliving people’s memories?”

“Not just memories, I relive their whole lives as if I’ve lived them myself.” Kaito blinked slowly as Atsuhiro paled, “For other people, only seconds pass, but for me it could be several years.”

“So that time we played chess and you *happened to know* someone who played it before?”

“Yeah, she was a chess prodigy.”

“That’s cheating!”

“She was only seven years old at the time, if that makes it any better.”

“No, that makes it *worse!* ”

Morgana groaned, “Can we get back on track?”

Kaito crossed his arms and looked at Joker and Morgana. “When Ren entered the Raven’s Nest for the very first time and my quirk activated... everything was hazy, except for bits and pieces of the Metaverse and those ‘Palaces’. Some portions had these weird

psychedelic patterns around the edge of my vision. I saw Justine and Caroline through your eyes, Ren, among... other things in the Velvet Room. My quirk makes me relive everything with *crystal clarity*, so when Ren and Morgana first told us the truth, I believed them right away.”

“... What do you mean ‘believed them right away?’” Shuichi blinked rapidly, “I know the truth is a little out there, but I believe in my buddy after what we just went through!”

Atsuhiro nodded. “I knew there was something about Joker and Mona’s powers that were different to any quirk I’ve seen. What we witnessed in the Velvet Room and hearing their explanations... it just makes sense to me, as strange as it is.”

Joker felt an intense rush of warmth and appreciation for Atsuhiro and Shuichi. He didn’t know how he would cope if it turned out like the *first* time they tried to explain their past. It must’ve shown on his face, as Manami and Tobita withered under Joker’s bright expression.

Atsuhiro quirked a brow at them, “Did you two *not* believe him?”

“That... would be correct.” Tobita’s expression crumpled with sadness and regret, “We thought a villain tampered with their memories. We tried to convince them that they must’ve been confused or lost. It caused a great rift between us for a while.”

“But we believe you now!” Manami said with a start, her eyes watering.

“I know you do.” Joker gave her a soft smile, “Hitoshi said he did too.”

Joker wondered what Hitoshi was doing now, and how he was faring at U.A.

“U.A. and the Metaverse...”

Morgana's tail swept back and forth, "Joker?"

"That's why I got so angry and frustrated about going to U.A. I was scared that Yaldabaoth would invade the school and hurt the students." Joker's hands balled into fists before he stared at Morgana, "Morgana, I'm sorry."

Morgana blinked rapidly, "Huh?"

"For rushing through things, for not thinking clearly. For upsetting you so badly, not just today, but after Kamino too."

"Hey, i-it's not your fault." Morgana hopped on Joker's lap and bumped his head against Joker's chin, "I reacted badly too! I was so scared of losing you again that I wasn't thinking clearly either. You're my partner, and I would do anything to make sure you were okay!"

Joker hugged Morgana close, and Morgana's purr gently rumbled through the attic.

"Having such a sudden shock like that did a number on you both." Tobita said softly, "It's understandable, but let us know if we can do anything to help. You both carry incredible weight on your shoulders, and it pains us to see you be crushed under them."

"About that..." Joker slackened his grip on Morgana as the not-cat curled on his lap, "You guys have to understand something. Once Morgana and I go to U.A., that's it."

"What are you getting at?" Atsuhiro asked, frowning.

Morgana's ears drooped. "That school might be our last stop. Who knows what we'll encounter when we get there. Now that Joker has his powers back, with Lady Lavenza and the others, a-and my Metaverse form too... it could be dangerous for the rest of you."

"It's not just that." Joker said as he ran a hand down Morgana's back, "Nezu has that program, but what'll happen once Morgana and

I go home? How will they treat you? Especially you, Atsuhiro, since you were with the League for a while. I don't... I wouldn't want you to suffer or be trapped there because of us."

"My dear boy," Atsuhiro chuckled as he locked a hand on Joker's shoulder, "Do you really have so little faith in us? My background with U.A. is rocky at best, but I can weather whatever they dish out as long as I can help you get home. Besides, I have a few juicy bargaining chips to ensure my own safety. I can handle it."

Joker felt his eyes burn, and he blinked rapidly. "You really mean that?"

"Of course I do." Atsuhiro put his other hand over his heart, "As a descendant of Arsene Lupin, I'd never leave a fellow Phantom Thief high and dry! And... I'd *never* force my family to fend for themselves to cover my own skin."

"Me too!" Shuichi beamed as bright as the sun, "Me and Lady Stubbs will be with you until the end!"

"Merp!"

"You can't dissuade us that easily, Ren." Manami bore a soft smile, "We're in this together!"

Tobita raised his teacup at Joker.

"Wherever you go, I'll follow until I know you get home safe." Kaito's expression softened, "But what about Eri? We can't leave her like this."

"We'll take her with us." Joker said, "I don't feel comfortable dropping her off at a random police station, or leaving her with just any hero while Overhaul is on the prowl. She would be safest there."

"Agreed, but before we do *anything*," Atsuhiro playfully glared at Joker, "We'll *all* come up with a plan of action together. We'll

scrounge up what gear we can, make *proper* preparations as a team, and come up with counter measures should something go wrong, which with this group is a *guarantee* . I won't hear any nonsense of you and Morgana gallivanting off to U.A. all on your own. Got it?"

"Yeah, I get it." Joker rubbed the back of his neck, his face heating up once more. "... Thank you."

"You're welcome." Atsuhiro said with no small amount of amusement, the others smiling or releasing their own quiet laughter.

"I'm glad you have teammates like these to support you, Trickster." Lavenza turned to Joker, eyes sharp and bright, "But there is one other matter you need to discuss with your Personas. You know what I'm talking about."

Joker paled. "Right. *That* ."

Morgana hopped off as Joker stood up, Lavenza following suit as she swept cookie crumbs from her dress.

"Can you guys watch Eri?" Joker asked as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "There's something I need to do."

Kaito shot up and walked to Joker, careful of the teacups and cookies on the floor, "What is it? You *just* got back from another harrowing experience, and you want to go do something again so soon?"

"It's Kohryu." Joker frowned when the dragon came to the front of his mind. They shared the sudden urge to be free, "He wants to talk about something, but it needs to be private. It's something I have to work with my Personas on my own."

"Not in the Velvet Room?" Lavenza asked, eyes wide.

"No. He doesn't want to go there to do it."

“Then where?” Morgana asked.

“Kohryu is rather large.” Tobita clutched his chin in thought, “Wouldn’t he attract unwanted attention?”

Morgana winced, “Yeah, I-I don’t want a repeat of the Musutafu Raid.”

“Actually, I may have a solution.” Atsuhiro elegantly rose to his feet, grinning, “I’ve heard rumors that an abandoned harbor was purchased recently at the edge of town, practically for pennies. It’s right by the sea, enough room for Kohryu to go over the open water without being spotted.”

Manami raised a brow, “Where did you hear this?”

Atsuhiro’s playful smirk was all too familiar, “Myself. I bought it. Under an alias, of course. Completely untraceable to us!”

“You-” Manami’s eyes twitched, “Is *that* what you were doing the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“Yes?”

“I really shouldn’t be surprised at this point.” Manami deadpanned, “I really shouldn’t.”

“But why go through that trouble,” Shuichi said, “And not tell us right away?”

“Where did you even get the *funds* ?” Morgana asked skeptically.

“What kind of Legacy Gentleman Thief would I be if my family didn’t have some measure of wealth gathered over the centuries? This bar isn’t the only little nest egg I’ve collected, in fact I own a good number of locations all across the globe.” Atsuhiro shrugged, “I wanted it to be a surprise! The isolated location is useful for any number of things!”

“That’d be perfect.” Joker said, “The open air and the lack of interruptions is what I need.”

“The next question is how you’re going to get there without attracting attention.” Kaito said.

Atsuhiro waved his hand around, “My quirk plus a suitable disguise will work. It’s safer that way, if you don’t mind traveling in my pocket. Given what happened, the Yakuza will need time to recuperate, and the heroes are so focused looking for Joker that they’ll pass over another random face in the crowd.”

Joker looked around. The others obviously weren’t happy, but Kohryu was being strangely adamant. He stared back at Manami as she studied him intensely.

“Okay.” Manami sighed as she grabbed her laptop, “I don’t like this, not *one* bit. I hope you know that.”

“I know.” Joker chuckled dryly. “I have so much apology curry to make, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do.” She stated. “I’ll intercept any police and hero communications, and keep an eye out while you’re doing... whatever it is you’re going to do.”

“I’ll be with you.” Morgana said to Manami. “I want to test out my new limits, too!”

“Shuichi should stay here with me.” Kaito said as he crossed his arms, “In case Eri wakes up.”

“Not good with children, are we?” Atsuhiro teased.

Kaito rolled his eyes, “I’ve had - No, I’ve lived several lives where people had multiple children, but it’s better if she doesn’t wake up in a weird place with a complete stranger. She might get scared if Joker and Morgana are gone.”

“Oh, I get it!” Shuichi said. “Leave it to me!”

Joker turned to Lavenza, “What do you want to do?”

“I shall return to the Velvet Room for the time being. If you would, Trickster?”

Joker retrieved his Velvet Key and approached an empty space of wall. He touched the tiny key to the wall, and the Velvet Room door materialized around it, a soft blue glow painting the attic. The others’ muffled noises of surprise barely covered his own.

“That’s that.” Lavenza smiled softly at Joker, “I’ll be waiting.”

Joker nodded.

Lavenza hesitated. She stared longingly at the packages of shortbread cookies, before swiping them and disappearing into the Velvet Room, the cold iron bars closing behind her. It vanished the same way it did back in the alley.

“Did she just steal all of our cookies?” Atsuhiro asked with an amused expression.

Joker snorted, and then stared at the tiny key in his palm. Summoning the Velvet Room wherever he wanted was unimaginably useful... but also dangerous. He’d have to test whether it was just him who could open it, or if anyone else could summon it. A thought for later. He tucked the key carefully in his costume, then turned to face the others.

“Let’s go.”

With hesitant goodbyes, the team split up.

The aroma of salt and rusted iron flowed on the cold breeze. Long abandoned boats lined the forgotten pier and warehouses rising up

around them. Joker stood on the edge of the seawall as icy sprays of water hounded him, the wind ruffling his hair and winged coattails around his ankles. The sea stretched out beyond the horizon, the waning moon just bright enough to speckle the sea with silver.

“Please be careful.” Morgana whispered as he clung to Gentle’s shoulder.

“I will, promise.” Joker smirked, “Kohryu won’t let anything happen.”

“Says the one who attracts trouble on a daily basis.” La Brava deadpanned.

“Hey, I don’t find trouble! Trouble finds me!”

“Uh huh, sure.”

“I’m on La Brava’s side here,” Mr. Compress said, chuckling, “Even I have not been in as much trouble since encountering you.”

Joker sighed, turning towards the water when Kohryu materialized. Most of Kohryu’s glittering gold body appeared under the water, the orbs in his claws making the water dance with multicolored lights. Kohryu’s bulk caused the water to swell, the rusty old boats in the distance creaking like ghosts as they rocked back and forth.

Kohryu raised his head out of the water, his whiskers floating lazily as salty waterfalls fell from the dragon’s head, his ruby eyes blazing bright, “Shall we go, Trickster?”

Joker stepped onto the bridge of Kohryu’s nose and sat cross legged at the base of Kohryu’s horns. Joker waved at the others when Kohryu turned away, and soon they were out of sight.

A companionable silence floated between them as Kohryu swam, pushing against the rocky bottom before the sea opened up below. It wasn’t long before the strip of land turned into a smudge on the horizon and Kohryu lifted himself from the water. Water fell from

Kohryu's scales as they travelled skywards, the sparse moonlight sprouting faint rainbows of color.

Joker's stomach flipped as they rose higher and higher into the clouds, until the salty water dried from the dragon's scales and there was nothing but open water in all directions. The moon and a carpet of stars rose above like silent vigils. A cloud passed underneath them, Kohryu's immense shadow draping it in darkness before it passed.

Joker didn't want to have the conversation skirting his mind.

He wanted to be lost here in the middle of the ocean, just he and his Personas. After being separated for so long, he wanted to bask in their presence. No dire situations, no gods to fight or worlds to save. He wanted to be allowed to exist, as one and at peace with his other selves. If only for a moment.

Kohryu allowed it for a time as they floated aimlessly. Joker fell in tune to the bobbing movements and gentle *whooshes* of Kohryu's breathing, matching it with his own as he finally relaxed. It wasn't until the moon was over their heads, casting Kohryu's serpentine shadow down on the silvery waves, that the dragon broke the silence.

"Trickster, there is nothing to be afraid of. The nature of fusions and the Velvet Room itself is integral to your journey."

Joker's heart leapt to his throat. "But Seth-"

"What happened to Seth is unfortunate and we all miss him dearly." Kohryu's whiskers gently brushed Joker's shoulders, "But your fear is misplaced."

"Misplaced?" Joker shook his head, "We almost lost Yatagarasu too! How is it misplaced?"

“We art thou, thou art us.” Kohryu chuckled as a fountain of warmth flowed over the icy fear in Joker’s chest. “As long as you master our bonds and preserve us in the Compendium, then we will never be lost. This world has seen us, *all* of us, during the Kamino Crisis. This world knows what to expect should you stay stagnant, opening you to weakness. But if you were to forge new powers from the ashes of the old....”

“We’ll catch any enemies off guard, giving us the advantage.” Joker’s face fell into his hands, “We can’t afford to lose, especially if Yaldabaoth is planning to invade soon. That’s what you’re trying to tell me, right?”

“Exactly, Trickster. You *must* do fusions if we are to be victorious. Our first step is mastering bonds.” Kohryu hummed, the deep sound thrumming through Joker’s bones, “Now, focus on my bond. You have grown much since we last tried on that fateful morning, and I believe you have the strength to master it now as The World.”

Joker took a deep breath and closed his eyes, shutting away the moonlit sea. Kohryu’s sacred Shimenawa appeared within. The threads exuded holy power, of Kohryu’s heavenly brilliance and dominion over the earth and seasonal changes. If he listened closely, he could hear whale songs, see faint glimmers of a palace deep under the ocean. A wisp of Byakko’s bond entwined the Shimenawa in a breath of cold wind.

It nearly crushed him last time. He had felt tiny, *insignificant*, next to the veritable universe Kohryu kept within himself. Now, Joker took in small pieces, fully accepting everything that made Kohryu. It was like taking spoonfuls of the sea below, one at a time, to fill a different reservoir.

Kohryu felt the strain on the Trickster’s body, but he pushed onward. The moon, their sole witness, made her journey across the horizon. Then, something in their souls clicked. A *snap* as an icy cold rush flowed through their bodies, striking their inner most core.

Kohryu howled with joy over the open water, "Well done, Trickster!"

Joker opened his eyes and wiped the sweat from his brow. "That was the hardest one to master yet."

"Indeed. My Compendium page has been forged, but the night is not yet over, neither is this lesson."

Joker frowned, "You're not saying...?"

"Yes." Kohryu's happiness sharpened into a steely resolve. "I want you to fuse me in the Velvet Room with another Persona. Harness our power and gain new strengths, Trickster. If you yet have need of me, then summon me from the Compendium afterwards."

Panic stabbed through Joker's heart, twisting into a bitter sourness. The other Personas bubbled within his mind.

"Kohryu, isn't that cruel?" Satanael said.

"Maybe so," Kohryu's brow softened, "But it is the inevitable truth. The Trickster needs to face it head on if we are to survive what this world has in store, Metaverse or otherwise."

"As harsh as it is, I agree with Kohryu." Titania bunched her shimmering emerald dress in her hands, *"I also volunteer for a fusion. I will give everything that I am to make the Trickster stronger!"*

"Titania..." Ishtar whispered.

"Me-he too, ho!" Black Frost cackled, *"Master my bond next, Trickster! Let my next self be stronger than before!!"*

"Don't be sad, Master! Let us help you!"

"How rare for Cerberus and I to share the same opinion." Byakko languidly bobbed his tail back and forth, *"This is what we were made for, some of us quite literally."*

"C'mon, big brother! You can do it!"

Cu Chulainn raised his spear, *"Be not afraid, Trickster! I will go gladly in the face of those guillotines if it secured Yaldabaoth's demise!"*

Vasuki hissed in agreement, and the others sent their assent.

All except for one.

"Wait." Sraosha rose above the others in the mindscape, his wings glimmering like the moonstruck waves below, *"I wish to be used as fusion fodder, but I will not allow the Trickster to master my bond."*

"What!?" Ishtar yelled.

"Sraosha," Joker's eyes went wide, *"What are you saying?"*

"I'll go to my death willingly as punishment for what I did in Kamino."

Kohryu reared his head up, nostrils flaring.

Joker steadied himself as Kohryu thrashed like a ribbon snapping in the wind.

"What madness is this, Sraosha?" Kohryu growled, *"The Trickster relies on all of us! Your Compendium page must be forged!"*

"No, listen to me!" A wave of sadness turned into frustration as Sraosha sharply flapped his wings, *"It's my fault that the Trickster's resolve was broken! I fractured his soul so deeply that we could no longer reach him until his Second Awakening. I killed All For One against the Trickster's orders, as it is in my nature to eradicate all evil beings! I buried myself within the Trickster's soul for fear that I would do the same to Overhaul, thus repeating the cycle. If we see that monster again, I **will** kill him. Nothing will stop me next time."*

Joker's heart thundered in his ears, but Sraosha continued.

"I am too dangerous, Trickster. I fear I will do irreparable damage to your soul by going against your wishes again. Your hands should not be stained red simply because I must follow my creed."

"Valued friend," Yatagarasu flew up to Sraosha and landed on his shoulder, resting the tip of his beak on Sraosha's forehead, *"Please calm yourself. You are jumping to conclusions. You controlled yourself up until Kamino, why not do so again?"*

"You're asking me to go against what I am, indefinitely. I held back before simply because we were shadows of ourselves in the beginning, then my true calling slowly awakened through the Trickster's travels in this world. All For One's crimes against the Trickster... broke that final straw. I no longer have the strength..." Sraosha brushed Yatagarasu off of his shoulder and turned his back to the other Personas. *"This is my ultimatum, Trickster: Either fuse me without mastering my bond, or lock me away in the Isolation Cell in the Velvet Room."*

"You are set on this?" Satanael's heavy voice lay a blanket of dread on Joker's soul, *"There's no way to convince you?"*

"No. My decision is set in stone."

No matter how the others tried to convince him, no matter what Joker said, Sraosha would not budge. Joker reached out to Sraosha's bond; A long sacred scroll scrawled with a dead language, but it was brutally ripped from his grasp. The action caused a ripple through the mindscape, and a wave of dizziness slammed against Joker.

Kohryu blinked rapidly to stay afloat.

"Trickster, please." Sraosha's voice trembled, *"Let me atone. My next self **won't** disobey you."*

Joker's hands curled so tight his gloves creaked. His heart hammered in his chest. Sraosha was nothing but sincere in this.

Throwing him in the Isolation Cell would be cruel, but forcing Sraosha to remain as is was a punishment worse than death in the Persona's eyes. Only through sacrifice and redemption would he feel at peace.

"Okay." Joker leaned against Kohryu's horn with a weary sigh. "Let's go, then. We'll meet up with the others and get home, then... then we'll go into the Velvet Room."

Kohryu veered towards land.

Manami stayed back by the far wall, watching as Gentle and Mona(his 'chibi' form was so cute!! She wanted to squish his adorable face.) bounced around the warehouse. Mr. Compress sat up in the rafters, gently kicking his legs back and forth.

Mona laughed as the stretchy concrete vaulted him upwards, where he whipped out his golden slingshot and fired at a marble Mr. Compress threw. The empty can, appearing with a *snap* of Mr. Compress' fingers, was hit dead-on, clattering at the other end of the room.

"I still got it!" Mona cackled as he landed, bouncing in place.

"Well done!" Gentle was grinning, too. They had established his new range, a wide circle several meters all around him, and the both of them were having fun experimenting. "Now, if only I knew how to turn off my own quirk. I can feel it. It's so close..."

"Hey, we'll get there!" Mona said, beaming, "We'll just have to work with what we got and take it from here! What else can you do? You could form stretchy air barriers before, right?"

"Stretchy barriers, huh?" Mr. Compress tilted his head, "Let's try that next and see if there are any changes, too."

Manami smiled.

Mona and Mr. Compress could help Gentle better than she could. They continued experimenting for a while, a knot in her gut slowly growing as the hours went by. Then, a salty wind flowed through the warehouse. They looked up to the open skylight as Mercurius stuck his head in.

“The Trickster returns!”

Manami released a sigh of relief, the knot untangling.

Gentle wiped his brow, then he reached into his back pocket and clicked the suppressor cuff on his wrist. Mona turned back into his feline form with a whisper of blue flame, then climbed on Gentle's shoulder. Although heavy bags came under Gentle's eyes, he approached her with his usual smile, full of warmth and comfort.

“Let's not keep him waiting. Shall we, my dear?”

“Right!” She tucked her laptop away in her bag, then bounced over to them. “This area is pretty desolate, so I don't think anybody will find this.”

“We can hope. It'll wear off.... eventually.” Gentle's smile widened, despite his own hesitance, “But whether it is discovered or not, I don't see how we have much of a choice but to do this. I feel like I failed Ren by holding back my quirk. I *will* learn how to control it, no matter what it takes.”

“Gentle...”

He held out his hand. She grabbed it with a smile, and with practiced motions, they jumped up to the skylight. Morgana hopped down when their feet landed on the roof. Manami chuckled as she straightened her hair.

She missed doing that.

“Hey, don’t leave without me!” Mr. Compress jumped out the window next, wagging a finger at them, “How rude!”

Morgana snickered at him.

“There he is.” Mercurius pointed his staff towards the golden smudge on the horizon, rapidly getting closer. He bowed to Morgana and vanished.

The stars were fading and the waning moon had set. Greens and blues lightened the sky as the sun began to rise.

“Come on!” Morgana jumped from the roof with the natural grace of a feline.

The others climbed down the old fashioned way via a pile of rusty crates. Joker’s golden dragon had submerged it’s body beneath the water by the time they rushed to the edge of the harbor. Joker stood on the only half of Kohryu’s head sticking out of the water like a crocodile’s. The dragon raised it’s head from the sea when they were close enough, water soaking the concrete.

Manami’s breath caught.

Joker elegantly stepped down, his movements flowing like a choreographed dance as he landed on the concrete, sending ripples of color throughout it. He turned and faced Kohryu as the dragon’s throat rumbled with a sorrowful song.

At that moment, she realized how much Ren had grown. She remembers the terrified kid she first saw in the Raven’s Nest, to the valiant and powerful vigilante evening the odds against a world that wanted to smother him, and now, to the man he became after weathering so much suffering and pain.

Manami’s heart sank as the dragon nuzzled Joker, who in turn rested his forehead on the tip of Kohryu’s snout. They shared a moment together, bathing in the pale light of the sunrise.

Manami thought it looked like a scene from a fairy tale, a courageous king and his benevolent dragon bearing the weight of worlds on their shoulders. Kohryu vanished in a shower of blue ashes raining down over Joker, then he turned to them, smiling. It wasn't a happy smile.

"... Are you okay?" Morgana asked as he rubbed against Joker's legs, despite the seawater soaking his paws.

"Yeah, mostly." Joker said as Morgana climbed to his shoulder, "I'm going to do some fusions in the Velvet Room once we get back."

"Oh." Morgana's eyes widened. "Which ones are you going to fuse?"

"Sraosha and Kohryu, a couple others who volunteered, too." Joker pinched the bridge of his masked nose, "Sraosha doesn't want to be saved in the Compendium though, he wants to be sacrificed for good."

Manami paled. She exchanged a quick glance with Gentle.

"What does it mean for them not to be saved in the Compendium?" Mr. Compress asked.

"It's a permanent death for the Persona, in a sense. Like what happened with Seth." Joker grimaced, "Sraosha will be reborn into a new one, but it won't be the same."

Morgana's fur puffed. Joker staggered suddenly, but caught himself.

"Are you alright?" Gentle asked as he put a hand to Joker's shoulder, "You've been out all night. You're exhausted."

"I'll be okay until we get back." Joker shook his head.

"You haven't slept in almost two days *and* you haven't even dispelled your Metaverse costume once since your Second Awakening!" Morgana flicked his tail on the back of Joker's head, "You *will* sleep once you're done in the Velvet Room, okay?"

“I get it already. Fusions first, then I’ll pass out.” Joker smirked.
“Promise.”

Morgana squinted at him, “Fine. Let’s just get out of here before somebody sees us.”

“I’ll give Compress the safe route.” Manami said, “The heroes should be changing shifts right around now, so there are plenty of openings to slip through!”

Mr. Compress pulled on his gloves, “Leave everything to me.”

Joker nodded, “Let’s get this over with.”

He spent another hour meditating in the Velvet Room to master the remaining bonds- Black Frost’s ripple of beautiful, swirling frost on a window, Cu Chulainn’s ancient tapestry, and Vasuki’s caustic Sea of Milk. Their bonds were a breeze to master compared to Kohryu, and now Cu Chulainn and Black Frost stood alongside the others who wished to be fused.

The Velvet Room’s melody matched Joker’s dour mood as he stared at the glinting guillotine blades. He could practically feel their uncanny sharpness from across the room, phantom memories from previous fusions sprang to the forefront of his mind.

“Who will I tease now?” Ishtar hovered in front of Titania with her arms crossed.

“Oh please,” Titania smirked and waved her hand at Ishtar, “Tease my next self, if you must.”

Ishtar stared at Titania, frowning. Then, she wrapped her arms around Titania before vanishing into Joker’s mindscape.

Titania blinked a few times, but smiled softly.

“Are you ready, Trickster?” Lavenza asked Joker as he leaned against the door frame of his cell.

“Yeah.” Joker stared at the Compendium she held, he had already chosen the next Personas and which skills they would inherit, “Let’s do it before I change my mind.”

Lavenza bowed. Igor and the other Attendants watched from the sidelines as Sraosha and Cu Chulainn stepped towards the guillotines first. Joker watched Sraosha, and the last time he saw the Persona was with his head bowed deeply in gratitude. Lavenza threw the velvet blue shroud over them, and dragged them forward so their necks were positioned just right for the guillotine.

Joker’s held his breath before the blades fell, that moment felt like an eternity stretched within a single heartbeat. The blades came down with a violent *SLAM* . Ice water flowed over Joker’s soul when Cu Cuchulain and Sraosha vanished in tendrils of black and bright blue, converging together in front of the guillotines in a writhing ball of magic. A new Persona was born with a bright flash.

“Oh my,” Margaret whispered as she put a hand over her heart, “Our Wild Cards’ fusions were never so... violent.”

“Absolutely brutal. I love it.” Elizabeth smirked.

“Oh course you do.” Theodore said with a sigh.

“Shut it, you.”

Joker was too enamored by the being in front of him to pay attention to the other Attendants.

A graceful woman hovered on soft green wings, her skin the same color and her long black hair swept away from her face. Her golden eyes were as breathtaking as the golden breastplate and flowing silk robes she wore, and in her hands were a sword and a bouquet of white lilies.

“Ah, Trickster.” Her ethereal voice held motherly notes, of the comfort of a hug on a cool, rainy day, “I am Gabriel. As your mask, I now declare the birth of your newfound power.”

Her body converged into a black and gold mask, which flowed into Joker with a shower of bright blue flames. The act birthed a new connection within his mindscape. The other Personas welcomed Gabriel into the fold, as easily as if she were always there. Pieces of Sraosha’s guilt and Cu Chulainn’s blood-lust lay within her bond of heavenly light splashing on a sea of white lilies.

Joker blinked. Gabriel was no longer a *Temperance* Persona as she was back home. The *Faith* Arcana replaced it.

“Shall we go next, Shiva?” Titania asked as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Yes, lets.” Shiva nodded, his snakes flicking their tongues in excitement.

“Sure, hee ho!!” Black Frost raised his fists, “Saving the best for last, right Kohryu!?”

Kohryu flicked a whisker in acknowledgement, but said nothing as Titania and Shiva followed in Cu Cuchulain and Sraosha’s footsteps. The shrouds were donned, and the blades came down. At least Joker didn’t flinch this time, though his body shivered as if he were thrown in the Arctic sea.

A man with tawny skin appeared from the bright light, with pale hair sweeping down from his fantastically horned headdress. Joker thought it looked rather like a copper fish with massive fins fanning outwards, complete with a long body and a tail going down the Persona’s back. His clothes were ancient and exotic, full of bright mosaics and sweeping transparent fabric.

“I am Baal.” The Persona lifted a goblet encrusted with golden flowers, “I grant to thee, oh master of souls, this mask which brings

bountiful rain and fertility to the earth.”

Like Gabriel, Baal changed into a mask and flowed into Joker, forging another new branch in the connection they all shared. His bond felt like the first spring rain on a parched river bed. Joker took a breath as the rush of energy faded, then he looked between Kohryu and Black Frost.

“Last pair.” Joker forced a smile.

Black Frost skipped towards the guillotines, cackling.

Kohryu brushed one of his whiskers against Joker, “I shall see you soon, no?”

“Right...”

Kohryu crawled down next to Black Frost.

Joker would never know how the shrouds reduced a Persona the size of Kohryu into something so small. Then again, the beings wriggling in the suffocating veil *were* his other selves, and shrank down to a humanoid figure about his size...

He rubbed his neck as the guillotines came down for the third time-

The blades screeched to a stop halfway through, the noise like claws down a chalkboard. Lavenza stared at the still blades, then sighed.

“How troublesome.” She said.

Lavenza turned away and grabbed something leaning against the wall, the familiar, *horrible* roar of a chainsaw drowned out the Velvet Song. With a malicious smirk, Lavenza sprinted towards the guillotines and mercilessly swung her weapon.

Elizabeth beamed and clapped as the chainsaw severed the Personas’ heads.

Margaret looked away and covered Theodore's eyes.

Kohryu and Black Frost's bodies exploded into a mass of energy, larger than the others, and with a stream of glittering gold within the black and blue. An ear-splitting roar hounded the Velvet Room before the mass burst like rotting fruit hitting the ground. Another dragon, different from Kohryu and even Seth, emerged, still dripping with black.

A long sinuous body gleamed with plated scales that shifted in color, from steely gray, sterling silver, and pitch black at the darkest parts. Opalescent metal swooped around its shoulders and out its back in a fan of spines, looking not unlike hollowed out wings. It's metallic, mask-like face revealed fangs and deep, black holes where its eyes should be, and curved, pointed horns as sharp as razor blades. Its beating heart, visible from within a clear glass window lodged in its chest, pounded rapidly.

It crawled towards Joker on all fours, the scythe-like claws scratching the stone floor. Joker stared up at the towering dragon over three times his height, blinking rapidly.

"I am Fafnir." His voice was like stones grinding together, his breath a hiss of hot steam. "As long as you wield my mask, the gold and all the treasures of this world will be ours for the taking!"

Fafnir reared up on his hind legs and howled into the starry galaxy above. He morphed into a mask with a wicked flash of black and gold, and crashed into Joker at lightning speed. Joker shivered at this new bond, a tangled length of silvery metal with jagged barbs, it reminded him of barbed wire. It was so untamed compared to the rest.

"That..." Joker cleared his throat as Lavenza approached, thankfully leaving the chainsaw behind. "That's not a Persona I've ever had before?"

“Oho,” Igor chuckled, “I’ve not seen Fafnir in quite some time! He had quite a different form back then.”

“I like him!” Elizabeth said.

“*Enough*, Elizabeth.” Margaret chastised. “Be quiet, now.”

Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at Margaret, but she was promptly ignored.

Lavenza sighed, “It’s no surprise, Trickster. This is not our world, so new Personas may linger within the Sea of Human Souls. In any case, the guillotines need repairs, so fusions are currently unavailable. Is there anything else you need, Trickster?”

Joker shoved his hands in his pockets, the new bonds fluttering like freshly hatched birds, “Could I get Kohryu and a few others back?”

“Of course. You have three slots open in your stock.” She opened the Compendium, “Oh, but it appears you don’t have the necessary funds.”

“How much does Kohryu cost?”

“With all of the discounts, Kohryu would be 120,000 yen.”

“You can’t make him free like you did with Yatagarasu?”

“No... given the circumstances, Yatagarasu was an exception, not the rule. I am sorry, Trickster.”

Joker blinked. It was as if the weight of the universe pressed down on him all at once, laughing at his misfortunes.

“Alright.” He grumbled, “I’ll figure something out later.”

Lavenza looked sad at his sudden departure from the Velvet Room. The others were all sprawled out on their futons around the attic,

save for Kaito. The man's eyes latched onto him as the Velvet Room door vanished.

Kaito looked him up and down, eyes settling on his sour expression, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just peachy."

Kaito rolled his eyes, "You forget that I experienced Alice's fusion first hand, so I know what you went through."

Joker grimaced, "Yeah, but there's a new Persona I've never seen before. He's... different from anything I had back home. I'll explain later."

Joker *finally* let his costume disappear. His exhaustion doubled and it felt like a mountain pressed down on him. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

Kaito nudged him towards the futon next to Eri's. Morgana slept on his back, his paws in the air, between the two futons.

"Go to sleep, Ren." Kaito said as Ren collapsed face first into the pillows, "I'll wake everyone up if something happens, okay?"

Ren's groan was lost into the soft pillow smooshing his face. He was out like a light.

Kaito ruffled Ren's hair and draped the blanket over him. Kaito stared at Eri and Morgana, both sleeping soundly, then to the others snoring in their respective futons. Lady Stubbs was flopped over Shuichi's face like a furry mask. Manami and Tobita's fingers were intertwined between their futons. Atsuhiro's back was turned to him, he was probably the most elegant sleeper of the bunch.

Kaito got comfortable and prepared to watch over his sleeping family.

Tokoyami looked around the small waiting room nestled within the Nighteye Agency. Mostly consisting of a pair of couches, a few chairs, a table with untouched magazines, and a fake plant sitting in the corner, perhaps forever pondering the purpose of its existence as early morning light seeped in from the window.

The silence, even within his own mind, was becoming unbearable.

Midoriya's eyes never left the floor, his face pale and eyebrows tense. Asui and Uraraka shared a pair of headphones connected to Asui's phone, probably listening to music. Kirishima paced in circles.

They all looked to the door when a familiar face walked in.

"Todoroki!?" Kirishima gasped, "*You're* in on this too!?"

"Apparently." Todoroki blinked and looked around, "Endeavor got the call early this morning. I take it everyone is here for the same thing?"

"Probably!" Uraraka beamed as she looked at Asui, who rolled up the earbuds and put them away, "Isn't this exciting!? I can't believe we're all working together!"

"It is a bit unexpected, kero." Asui tilted her head, "I wonder what has the heroes so on edge? Ryukyu's whole demeanor changed with one text."

"Th-that's probably why they're holding a debriefing. I-it's not surprising, given what happened a-and the rumors going around." Midoriya clasped his hands together, his brow furrowing, "Endeavor and Fat Gum were the last on Nighteye's list."

"This is our first big venture as interns." Tokoyami folded his arms and eyed the rest of them with grave seriousness, "The public's fears about that explosion replays on every news station, and the rumor of Joker's *real* return has put them in a frenzy. We must make the most of this experience if we are to grow into proper heroes."

The mention of Joker set tension in everyone's shoulders.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Todoroki turned to Kirishima, "But why did they invite Fat Gum? From what I can tell, it's mostly the group of heroes that Joker worked with, plus my father and Nezu."

"Oh." Kirishima blinked, "I uh, I don't know, actually. Maybe it has something to do with what happened to us last night?"

"Your fight was on the news!" Uraraka smiled at him, "It was so cool!"

Kirishima blushed, "Thanks! But..." The excitement in Kirishima's eyes faded, "The villains shot Amajiki with something, and he couldn't use his quirk for a while. He got it back after a few hours, but it was pretty scary. They tried to shoot me, too. My quirk protected me though!"

"A bullet that can *erase* quirks?" Midoriya asked, eyes widening.

Kirishima nodded, "They took the bullets and rushed them into some lab for tests. The one that hit me was full of the stuff that made Amajiki unable to use his quirk. Maybe that's why Fat Gum was called here?"

"Okay, but... how does that tie in with Joker?" Tokoyami asked, "If Nezu is here, then it only solidifies my own suspicions." Tokoyami blinked when they all stared at him. His feathers puffed out in embarrassment, "Does no one else ponder the mystery of the Red Rain and its supposed connection to Joker? How the air within U.A. grows heavier each day, and why students outside of our class don't seem to notice? Why Nezu and the other teachers seem to be so frazzled as of late?"

"W-well, now that you say it..." Uraraka whispered.

"I try not to think about it." Kirishima put on a watery smile, "I mean, Aniki will come back to us, right? We'll find out more by then?"

“I’ve been trying to connect the dots myself, but I agree with Kirishima.” Todoroki said, his voice as smooth as ever, “We’re still missing a large piece of the puzzle. I don’t think we’ll get anywhere until Joker makes his next move, whatever that will be.”

Another bout of silence suffocated the waiting room.

“POWER!!” The door was thrown open and Lemillion burst in, his crimson cape flaring behind him.

“Lemillion!” Midoriya put a hand to his chest, “Er, a-a little warning next time?”

Lemillion put his hands on his hips and laughed, “No way! It’s good to get the nerves out! Loosen up! That said-” Lemillion scanned the young heroes in training, “We’re almost ready to start.”

Uraraka put a hand over her heart, “Oh, this is kinda scary!”

“It won’t be that bad!” Kirishima said, “... Right?”

“Imagine being in a meeting with *Endeavor* .” Todoroki deadpanned.

Kirishima blanched.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of!” Lemillion said, “Relax and take a breather if you have to. Don’t be scared to ask questions, and if you notice something that the pros haven’t, then speak up. You never know how much it could help the case! If you need a break, then you are free to leave the room. Everything is being recorded for later. Any other questions?”

When no questions were asked, Lemillion motioned them to follow.

Tokoyami hesitated as the others slowly filtered out of the room. He reached into his back pouch for a tarot card. He had taken to carrying a deck around with him at all times ever since the Room King Fiasco. He pulled a card out and stared at it with a frown. It was

of a woman bearing a sword and a set of scales, but it was upside down.

“Reverse Justice?” He muttered to himself. “What portents lurk on the horizon?”

“Fumi, you’re falling behind!!” Dark Shadow screamed for the first time that morning.

Tokoyami sighed. He shoved the card back in the deck and rushed out of the room, though the tarot stayed cemented in his mind.

Why is it so hard choosing Personas for this story? I love them all too much. Which ones do you think, aside from Kohryu, should rejoin the stock?

Chapter 8 of the Thieves Den has been updated with the new Persona builds.

Next chapter should be on July 9th unless otherwise specified.

Days Of Sisters

Chapter 76: Days Of Sisters

“Wait, they asked you what your daughter liked?” Kaito asked as a hint of a smirk appeared. “And you didn’t specify otherwise?”

SOFT SUGARY FLUFF?? IN MY DTESH!?

It's more likely than you think.

Also, I put up a video with the new Personas and their builds! Might do more videos or streams like this in the future, let me know your thoughts!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbSK9uZ2sKc>

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The table was laden with criminal files, pitchers of water and coffee, and surrounded with enough chairs to seat their entire class.

Nighteye was at the head of the table, tall and imposing, with the light of a projector behind him casting his face in deep shadow. To his immediate left sat Nezu, then next to him-

“Aizawa-sensei? You’re here too!?” Uraraka asked.

“Obviously.” Their teacher stared back, unimpressed, “You’re wasting time, Uravity. Get seated so we can begin.”

“Y-yes, sensei!” She said.

“Don’t call me sensei. Refer to me only as Eraserhead when we’re on the job. That goes for all of you, understand?”

“Yes, Eraserhead!” Kirishima said as he sat down between Fat Gum and Suneater.

Todoroki hardly looked at Endeavor, despite the other man attempting a curt smile that didn’t quite fit his face. Hawks nodded in greeting for Tokoyami. Hado grinned as Tsuyu and Uraraka sat beside her, Ryukyu looked up from her file to give them a reassuring smile, too.

Midoriya gulped when Lemillion sat to Nighteye’s right hand side, and rushed to take the seat next to Lemillion. Bubble Girl and Centipeder stood on either side of the projector screen with heavy folders in their arms.

Iida Tensei, who had a laptop and a swarm of papers all around him, was right beside him.

Gang Orca, Best Jeanist, and even *Miruko* were here too! So many powerful heroes! Midoriya wondered if he could get their autograph later.

“And... we’re recording.” Iida gave the thumbs up to Nighteye.

Nighteye rose from his chair, his shadow pooling onto the projector. “This meeting will be short, as there is a lot of work to do and not much time to do it. Lemillion, if you would start?”

“Yes, Sir!” Lemillion shot up as Nighteye sat down, “Yesterday, Deku and I were on a routine patrol when we encountered Overhaul and a little girl in an alley.”

The projector changed, showcasing the villain’s profile, alongside his quirk, approximate age, and other such information.

“He’s the leader of the Shie Hassaikai?” Miruko scoffed, “I thought the Yakuza were all dyin’ off.”

“They are not as brazen as other villains. Their type has quieted down since All Might’s reign as number 1, but that’s made them crafty and clever.” Endeavor said as he glared at Overhaul’s profile, “In some cases, that makes them even more dangerous.”

“I agree.” Ryukyu frowned, “I can’t believe he had a little girl with him.”

“Eri.” Midoriya didn’t realize he spoke out loud until over a dozen pairs of eyes landed on him, “T-that’s her name. She was dirty and covered in bandages, I-I could feel her bones underneath her dress, too.”

Gang Orca’s growl reverberated across the table.

“I hate to say it, but we couldn’t rescue her at that time.” Lemillion’s expression turned grim, “We didn’t have enough information and there were too many civilians he could’ve used as hostages.”

“Is his quirk that dangerous?” Best Jeanist asked.

“His quirk, aptly named Overhaul, can disassemble and reassemble anything he touches down to the molecular level.” Nighteye frowned, “That *includes* organic matter. So yes, it is incredibly dangerous.”

A sharp tang struck the room as the seasoned pros sobered.

Nighteye nodded for Lemillion to continue.

“It wasn’t long after Overhaul took Eri back and disappeared that the explosion hit.” Lemillion cleared his throat as the projector changed. Midoriya had ingrained every detail into his mind. Buildings decimated, the ground torn open and water pipes bursting. How ironic that the sprays of water made a rainbow over the destruction.

“Deku and I were the first on the scene. That’s when we encountered *this* .”

The projector changed to the drawing of a scarlet winged serpent. The underbelly, multiple eyes, and the under side of the wings were deep amethyst in color.

“There’s a note that says it may be one of Joker’s summons.” Endeavor looked down to the copy within the files, “How are you so sure?”

“Joker’s summons are usually accompanied by bright blue flames! As the report states, both Lemillion and Deku reported such flames around this serpent.” Nezu tilted his head, “But we have not seen this one before. I wonder who this is?”

“I don’t know, but something wasn’t right with it.” Midoriya said.

Nezu blinked at him, “Care to explain?”

“It was transparent.” Midoriya frowned, his eyes falling in thought, “The last time I remember one of Joker’s summons being transparent was at the USJ... where he first appeared.”

Nezu’s ears flicked, and he jotted something down in a notebook.

“I concur with Deku.” Tokoyami’s voice was surprisingly stable as he spoke to the pros, “Another classmate and I were the first to encounter him at the USJ. Joker used none other than Arsene himself to cover his escape from the Squal Zone, and I distinctly remember that he was transparent because I could see the door *through* Arsene.”

“Interesting.” Nezu said as he wrote another note.

“I only remember the blue flames when he summoned Cu Chulainn.” Best Jeanist glanced between Miruko, Iida Tensei, and the others who were with him that night. “He was not transparent.”

"I've watched and re-watched the Kamino footage countless times," Hawks said as his eyes sharpened, "All of Joker's summons were solid. So what does it mean if they're transparent? A change in power level or something?"

Nighteye waved it off, "What's important is what the serpent did when it encountered Deku and Lemillion."

"Well, it was hostile... at first." Lemillion said, "But it stopped when I fended off its first attack against Deku."

Midoriya nodded, "Maybe it knew who I was? I don't think it meant to cause any harm!" Midoriya stared directly into Tokoyami's eyes, "It called me the *Chariot*. I-It only said that single word before it vanished."

Tokoyami's feathers bristled.

"The Chariot?" Miruko muttered.

"Principal Nezu, if I may add something? We of Class 1-A may have pieced something together about Joker." Tokoyami rose from his chair when Nezu nodded, Lemillion sat down, "When we first moved into the dorms, several classmates remembered that Joker or his summons called them by certain Arcanas."

Hawks and Miruko exchanged a look, with Miruko shrugging.

Nezu's ears perked up as he twirled his pen in his paws, "Can you list examples?"

"Yes." Todoroki raised his hand, "Bakugo Katsuki and I encountered Seth during the Summer Camp, and he blatantly stated that Bakugo is the Tower and I'm the Hanged Man."

Endeavor stared at his son with slightly widened eyes.

"Joker called Yaoyorozu Momo the Empress!" Uraraka said, "Oh, and Shinsou Hitoshi is the Moon!"

Eraserhead stiffened at that.

“So Midoriya is the ‘Chariot’?” Gang Orca asked. “What does this even mean?”

Nezu hummed, “Perhaps Joker assigns Arcanas to the people with whom he’s forged a strong bond with. This serpent calling Deku the Chariot, alongside these other instances, could confirm that. How fascinating!”

“But we don’t know *why* he supposedly assigns Arcanas.” Ryukyu gained a concerned expression, “Could it tie to how Joker’s powers work, I wonder?”

“I can add something to this.” Eraserhead droned, the room went still as they waited for him to speak, “Whenever I had an encounter with Joker, good or bad, there was always a strange feeling in my chest. I really noticed it after one particular encounter, where I met with him on a rooftop to...” Eraserhead cleared his throat, his voice straining, “We both made a truce towards each other. That warm feeling was the strongest it had ever been after that night. Has anyone else experienced this?”

“Oho!” Nezu beamed, “I’ve had that feeling when I met with him in the Blue Lotus!”

“Me too.” Midoriya put a hand over his heart.

“Well, now that you mention it...” Hawks whispered.

“Huh, and here I thought it was just heartburn!” Miruko cried.

“Tsukuyomi, you seem to be the expert on this stuff.” Hawks said with a glint of pride. “Could you guess which Arcanas we are? Or if everyone in this room even has one?”

“W-well, that... may be difficult.” Tokoyami clasped his hands on the table, “There is one Arcana I can think of that would fit one person in

this room. This certain Arcana describes a person of authority and education, a teacher who is quite wise and... logical.”

Eraserhead sat straighter as his student looked him in the eye.

“Eraserhead, you would fit the Hierophant Arcana. As for the rest of you...” Tokoyami’s eyes swept through the room, “Aside from the examples we know already... I do not know you well enough to guess, and I don’t dare draw any conclusions without confirmation from Joker himself. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Tsukuyomi.” Nighteye held up a hand, “Besides, as interesting as this revelation is, we are getting off topic.” When everyone was seated, he continued, “The next point is the quirk erasing bullets Fat Gum and his interns encountered last night.”

“Thankfully the bullet was only temporary.” Fat Gum nudged his intern, “Suneater here got his quirk back after a couple of hours. Right, Suneater?”

“Y-yeah...” Suneater hunched his shoulders and sank down into his chair.

“Yes, well, the results came back.” Nighteye’s scowl sent shivers through the room, “And the drug is composed mostly of human DNA.”

“Word has it that the Shie Hassaikai are the only group who distribute these quirk canceling bullets.” Eraserhead said after he collected himself, “Given the girl’s bandages and how Overhaul was eager to get her back...”

“You don’t think-” Miruko started.

“That child with Overhaul...” Ryukyu’s lip curled.

“Who’s to say they aren’t working on a more... *permanent* version?” Nighteye steepled his fingers as everyone looked at him in horror,

“So far, the picture painted for us is this; Overhaul and the Shie Hassaikai are creating quirk erasing bullets containing human DNA, perhaps the girl’s DNA. Then, after Deku and Lemillion, Overhaul takes Eri and encounters Joker. It’s clear that they had an altercation, judging by the disfiguration of the buildings iconic to Overhaul’s quirk, and the fact that one of Joker’s summons could be clearly identified. The next question is what happened to Joker and Eri?”

“I arrived right after the serpent disappeared.” Hawks said as he glanced between Midoriya and Lemillion, “I immediately sent my feathers into the surrounding sewers and alleyways. No dice.”

“No sign of Joker or Eri?” Gang Orca growled.

“Nope. Nothing of Overhaul either.” Hawks said. “Though with Overhaul’s quirk it’d be easy to redo the underground networks to cover his tracks.”

“The nearby bloodstain was inconclusive as well.” Nighteye sighed. “We’re at square one.”

“My, my, we really do have a conundrum here!” Nezu hopped on the table with his signature grin.

“Er, Nezu.” Sweat beaded on Fat Gum’s forehead, “You’re awfully... chipper. Shouldn’t you be more concerned about this poor little girl and Joker? The boy would fall under your jurisdiction, right?”

“I agree.” Nighteye quirked a brow at Nezu, “The crime scene leads me to believe that Joker may be injured or worse, perhaps he and Eri were captured by Overhaul. Need I remind you that human experimentation is only *one* of the Shie Hassaikai’s crimes?”

“So we’re talking about another Sapporo Lab incident?” Ryukyu asked, the folders crinkling under her grip.

Miruko crackled her knuckles with a malicious scowl.

“People often forget that Joker is part of a larger team.” Nezu’s tail flicked. “There are multiple ways this encounter could have gone: First, Joker awakened some sort of new power to combat Overhaul, hence the flying serpent we have no knowledge of, he may have rescued Eri and escaped. Second, the same scenario, but Joker fails to save Eri and Overhaul takes her back. And the third, and probably the most likely, Joker’s teammates interrupted the encounter and a fight ensued. Now, scenarios vary greatly from here-”

“I hate to interrupt, Nezu.” Gang Orca’s chair groaned as he shifted his massive weight, his crimson eyes blazing, “We can sit here and debate about this all we want, but I’ve had enough of conjecture and talking in circles. What are we going to do to ensure Joker and Eri’s safety? If they escaped, chances are they are being hunted as we speak. If they have been captured, then who knows what tortures they are being put through! Time is of the essence in either case!”

“Calm yourself, Gang Orca.” Best Jeanist put a hand on his comrade’s arm, “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Gang Orca snorted sharply.

Nighteye rose from his chair, “My Agency is dedicated to taking down crime syndicates like these.”

“But, Nighteye...” Hawks grimaced. “Are you sure you want to keep pushing yourself after...?”

Nighteye sighed as he understood. “Yes, as you read in the reports, we cannot use my quirk without serious consequences to myself. However, you are all competent heroes, and having everyone gather information will expedite the process, with or without it.” Nighteye glanced at his sidekicks and they began handing out their loads, “I will assign tasks to each hero here. Mark my words, the Shie Hassaikai’s days are numbered.”

A powerful wave of resolve hit Midoriya, and as he met his classmates’ brightened eyes, he knew they felt the same.

Midoriya wouldn't let Eri or Akira slip through his fingers ever again.

Eri opened her eyes. She slowly took in the wooden ceiling glowing with golden sunlight. *Not* sterile white walls. She wiggled her fingers and toes. Her sore body was wrapped in softness instead of scratchy blankets.

It wasn't just a dream?

She rolled over and froze, a gasp locked in her throat. Joker-san slept in a pile of his own blankets next to her. His whole face was visible without the mask-that-isn't-scary. Joker-san was pretty. Not as pretty as a princess, but maybe a prince? He didn't have any scars, his fluffy black hair all tussled over his face. One of his hands lay on the wooden floor between them.

Eri's vision blurred, both hands going to the top of her head.

Deku-san... Joker-san...

Their touch was so soft. It left a weird, warm feeling in her chest. Not the cold heart-stopping pain from Overhaul's touch. Eri held her breath as she slowly reached over to touch Joker-san's hand.

Warm .

Was she bad for wanting more *warm* ? Would Overhaul break in during the night and steal Joker-san's warmth away to teach her a lesson? Her tears burned and her chest was stuffed full of needle pains. She didn't want to be the reason that Joker-san lost his warmth!

Joker-san's smile and a soft-sad song replayed in her mind.

"I'm sorry if we scared you, but you're safe now. We won't let that man harm you anymore."

Safe?

But Overhaul would *never* let her be safe!

Her thoughts were drawn away when Joker-san twitched in his sleep. She wiped her eyes as Joker-san shifted, almost curling into himself. Did Joker-san have bad dreams too?

She looked at her hand on his, her other hand going to her head.

Safe?

Warm.

Would Joker-san feel safe and warm if she...?

Eri held her breath as she pulled her hand away from his, and gently put it on the soft-fluff on Joker-san's head. Black curls spilled from between her small fingers as she copied what Deku-san and Joker-san had done to her, to make her feel *safe(?)* and *warm*. How was his hair so soft and fluffy? She wondered if this was what a rabbit felt like.

Joker-san's eyes opened.

They weren't the deep-sunlight that chased away shadows. They were silver, but a different silver from Overhaul's needles, silver as in the stars she once saw before the white walls trapped her. Specks of deep-sunlight splintered the pretty starlight.

"Eri?" Joker-san frowned at her. Did she do something wrong?

Her heart iced over and wrenched her hand away from his hair, squeezing her eyes shut as she expected to be punished for touching him. There was a shift of blankets, and a *safe(?)* - **warm** hand rested on her head.

But there was something else, stirring deep within her. It happened in that alley, and again in that strange place with the soft-sad song. It

flared at Joker-san's touch once more, chasing away the cold dread prickling in her chest. It was closer than the other times, she could almost touch it.

Eri opened her eyes as Joker-san ruffled her hair, a sad smile on his lips.

"Are you okay?" Joker-san asked.

"Y-yeah."

"Then why are you crying?"

Eri blinked. She touched her tear stained cheeks. "O-Oh..."

She had been so good at not crying, but her heart had been so full that she couldn't hold it all in. She blinked and scrubbed her eyes to make it stop. *It wasn't working* .

Why couldn't she stop?

Joker-san gave her another strange look when she tried holding back the sniffles. He looked sad again. She didn't like the sadness on Joker-san's face. He pulled his hand away and stood, the sunlight painting him like an angel in the clouds.

His footsteps were light as he walked over to a pile of bags in the corner. It was the same type of quiet walk she taught herself when Overhaul got angry at her for being too noisy once. He dug around in one of the bags and pulled out a black and red cloth, then came back and sat cross legged in front of her. He gently lifted her chin towards him and wiped away her tears with the cloth.

"Eri, I want you to promise me something." Joker-san said when she finally forced her tears to dry.

"What?" She said, her voice scratchy.

“Promise me you won’t be afraid to cry anymore. You remember what I said last night? Crying isn’t only when you’re happy or sad, sometimes we *need* to cry as a release.” He smiled when she didn’t understand. “You feel better after crying, right?”

“I guess...” She bit her lip as her hands balled on the front of her dirty dress, “I... won’t get in trouble for crying?”

Joker-san’s face went through many tiny changes, as fast as when she flipped through the pages of her picture books before they were taken away, her last punishment for running away.

“You won’t get in trouble. You can cry whenever you want around me or the others, and we won’t get mad. Or if you need something - *anything*, you let us know.” Joker-san held out his pinkie, “It’ll be a promise between all of us, alright?”

“O-okay.” Eri blinked at Joker-san’s pinky.

Eri relaxed her balled hands as Joker-san took them, entwining one of her pinkies in his.

“This is a pinky promise. We can’t break this promise, okay?”

“O-okay. I-I promise.”

Joker-san nodded and pulled his pinky away.

She thought she was done crying. But like a magic spell, the dam over her heart cracked with such force that it sent a shiver down her spine. That *warm-safe* feeling finally burst through like a blazing phoenix, and at that moment she felt connected to Joker-san in a way she never felt connected to anyone else before.

Joker-san froze, his eyes flooding with sunlight.

But she couldn’t see him when the tears came in an overwhelming flood, her whole body trembling. All of the pain, all of the *hurt* buried deep within her heart, broke free when her new connection with

Joker-san finally shattered the dam. Eri couldn't hold it back anymore.

She burst into unrestrained cries.

Joker-san held his arms open, and she crashed into him and buried her face in his chest. He held her long after her tears dried and she went silent, his calm heartbeat lulling her back to sleep.

Ren trailed down the stairs without a sound. He stopped at the landing, listening to the silence in the hallway.

"Damn it all." He muttered as his face fell in his hands.

"It's a lot worse than we thought." Satanael said. "Perhaps the Arcana fully forming allowed her to release some of her pain."

"Just what did that monster do to her?" Ishtar snarled, "If I ever see that man again-"

"Relinquish your anger, Ishtar." Baal's voice soothed them like gentle rainfall, "Anger by itself will not solve this."

"I am a goddess of love and war, and this child has been hurt so deeply that she passed out from crying!"

Fafnir cackled and snapped his metallic jaws, his tail cracking like a whip. Pixie and Yatagarasu nimbly dodged around the dragon as he almost struck them without hesitation.

"Enough." Gabriel's wings softly rustled, "Overhaul's retribution has to be put on hold, but you can count on my sword if that time comes."

"What do you wish to do, Trickster?" Satanael asked.

"We'll let Eri sleep for now." Ren said as he tried to stem the burning anger thundering in his chest. His shirt was still damp from Eri's

tears. *"Let's find the others."*

Byakko's ears twitched, *"Perhaps they are in the front of this establishment?"*

"Yes, we would like to see where you have lived since we parted." Satanael added.

Ren's hands fell to his side and he walked into the empty kitchen. Familiar voices echoed in from the other side of the door leading to the front. It was day time, so the bar would be closed. He steeled himself and went through it.

It opened up into a rustic style American bar, the walls lined with booths and a large number of antique photos and knickknacks. Small round tables were scattered between the booths and the full bar. Glass lights hung down from the ceiling by chains, lighting up each table in a low spotlight. He expected it to smell like alcohol or cigarettes, instead a nice, lemony scent graced his nose. Maybe somebody just finished cleaning?

"Ren!" Shuichi waved at him from the bar, the lighting made the wall of glass bottles behind him shine like jewels, "You're awake!"

"I was about to check up on you." Morgana said as he sat on the bar top. "Did you sleep well?"

Kaito, Manami, and Tobita were seated along the bar, too.

"Yeah, I suppose." He sat down on the stool next to Kaito. They were more comfortable than they looked, for being all leather and wood. "What time is it?"

"Just after eleven." Kaito said as he studied Ren, "We didn't want to disturb you or Eri, so we came down here."

"How is she?" Morgana asked, staring at the wet spot on Ren's shirt in concern.

“She’s...” Ren sighed and propped his elbow on the wooden bar, holding his chin in the palm of his hand. “I woke up right after her. She was never *allowed* to cry before, so when I reassured her she just... lost it. It might be the first time she cried in a long time. She fell back asleep right after.”

“That poor girl.” Tobita said as his eyes softened.

“She must’ve been so scared.” Manami whispered.

“I can’t even imagine what must be under those bandages.” Morgana shook his head. “... Or how she got them.”

“I’ll ask her if I can look at her injuries later.” Ren frowned, “She trusts me so far, but we can’t move too fast with her.”

“Smart.” Kaito said with a firm nod. “It’ll take some time for her to acclimate to the rest of us, not to mention she’ll need that rock when we take her to U.A. with us.”

“Right...” Ren looked around with an arched brow. “Where’s Atsuhiro and Lady Stubbs? Magne?”

“Atsuhiro is getting stuff for Eri!” Shuichi stated. “Lady Stubbs is watching the back door.”

“I gave him a list of what Eri needs for the foreseeable future. Clothes, drawing supplies, brushes, her own toiletries, stuff like that.” Kaito said with a huff, “He was more than happy to go shopping again.”

“As long as he doesn’t buy another suspicious piece of land.” Manami rolled her eyes, “Once was enough.”

“Magne comes in an hour or so before the bar opens.” Shuichi said.

Morgana cleared his throat and stared at Manami.

“Oh, right.” Manami retrieved something from her pocket, then leaned over the bar and handed a phone to Ren. “I’m sorry. I tried to fix it while you were sleeping, but...”

Ren’s mouth went dry as he took his phone. It seemed... heavier than before. He stared back at his reflection in the dark screen, the golden flecks in his eyes intensifying with a wave of emotions. Their one tie to home, to their *family*, was gone. He had memorized the Phantom Thief chatroom, but not being able to scroll back through it, to see his teammates’ final messages anymore...

He grit his teeth as a lump formed in his throat.

He shoved it in his pocket. It hung there, heavy as a boulder. The others’ worried glances prickled at his skin, and Satanael and the others sent waves of soothing comfort. It helped him keep calm.

“Thanks for trying.” He said, forcing his voice to stay even, “What’s the plan for today?”

“That’s what we were waiting on you for.” Morgana locked eyes with Ren, “You’re our Leader after all.”

Ren frowned, “What about Atsuhiro?”

“He’ll be back soon!” Manami said.

“I suggest we make lunch while we wait for him.” Tobita stood up and gestured towards the kitchen. “Besides, I’m sure everyone is famished. What do you think Eri would like?”

“Try something simple until we know what she likes.” Kaito nodded, “Maybe apple slices or toast.”

“Apples, huh?” Ren smiled softly, “I have an idea that could cheer her up.”

“I’ll never understand how you turned an apple into a swan.” Manami said as they headed down the hall.

“You can learn anything on the internet, it just takes a bit of practice and finesse.” Ren said as he held a plate of apples. The seeds were the eyes, and the wings were fanned out from carefully carved slices. Two small cups joined the apple swans, one with peanut butter and the other with caramel sauce, “It was a slow day at Leblanc once, and I was bored.”

Morgana chuckled from Ren’s shoulder, “You sliced two of your fingers the first time, remember? You tried to hide it from Boss, but he noticed and bandaged them for you.”

“*Morgana.*” Ren said, scandalized. “How could you share my secrets like that?”

“Apparently quite easily.” Morgana deadpanned.

“I wonder if I could cut apples into swans?” Kaito asked as he clutched his chin, “I wouldn’t be anywhere near a stove and- why are you all looking at me like that?”

“It’s best not to chance it.” Manami said.

Ren smirked, “With your luck, the apples would take revenge on you.”

“They’d probably come to life and start a fire themselves.” Morgana said, grinning.

Kaito crossed his arms and scowled, “Ha ha, very funny.”

“Shuichi and Tobita are still making the rest of our food...” They all stopped by the stairs, and Manami looked at Ren with uncertainty, “Should we wait down here or go with you?”

“Eri will have to get used to everyone.” Kaito said softly, “We don’t want her to regress by moving too fast, but at the same time we

shouldn't baby her too much."

Ren nodded, "She'll be fine as long as we don't make any sudden movements."

Ren went up first. He ducked under the beam and poked his head into the attic. Eri was awake, rubbing her puffy eyes as the blanket swam around her. The handkerchief he used earlier was on her pillows. She jumped when the stairs creaked, but relaxed when she saw Ren.

"We brought you something to eat." Ren said as he stepped fully into the attic, "And there are some people who would like to meet you. Are you up for it?"

She pursed her lips, and nodded.

Manami and Kaito followed Ren and they sat around on the futons. Ren put the plate of apple swans in front of Eri, who blinked down at them. Ren smiled as he grabbed the small slice at the tip of one of the wings, dipping it in the caramel sauce and popping it in his mouth. Eri watched his every move.

She took the tip of the other wing and dipped in the sauce, glancing between Ren and the bit of fruit, before copying him. Immediately, her eyes brightened in wonder.

"Have you ever had apples before, Eri?" Manami asked.

Eri shook her head as she reached for another slice and dipped it in peanut butter, much to the same result.

There was something Ren noticed when Kaito and Manami introduced themselves and the swans slowly disappeared off the plate: Eri's expressions. They were muted for a child her age. He wasn't surprised, given her circumstances, but she had not smiled. Not *once*. She had broken down in his arms after the Arcana formed. Aside from that, her emotions were concentrated within the

creases around her eyes and forehead as soft as a butterfly's kiss. The rest of her face was like a porcelain mask.

He didn't know what to make of it.

"You finished those fast!" Morgana chirped.

Eri gawked at Morgana, "Who are you?"

"*What?*" Morgana hopped down from Ren's shoulder and puffed his chest. "Oh, I suppose you don't know this form! Watch this, Eri-chan!" Morgana stood on his hind legs, nearly losing his balance, "Morganaaaaaa trasnfoooooorm!"

A lick of blue flame transformed the not-cat into his Metaverse form.

"Oh, I remember now." Eri said as she leaned forward and pet him.

"Ack! You're getting apple juice and caramel on-" Mona blinked when Eri froze, "Er... never mind! Isn't my fur so soft!?"

Eri nodded and continued to pet him. She even pinched his cheeks, and Ren was impressed when Mona didn't protest, though Mona gave him a subtle glare when he and the others chuckled.

"Are you still hungry, Eri?" Ren asked, "We can get you something else."

Eri pulled her sticky hands away from Mona's ears, "More apples?"

"You can eat more than apples." Manami said, smiling. "There are a whole bunch of tasty fruits you can try!"

"You might like oranges or pears." Kaito raised a brow at Ren, "Could you cut other fruits into different animals, Ren?"

"I could try making them into flowers?" Ren shrugged, "I'm sure we could come up with something."

“Ren?” Eri stared at him, “I thought your name was Joker-san.”

Ren chuckled. “You can call me Joker whenever I have my costume on, but my real name is Ren. Amamiya Ren.”

“Ren.” Eri said, testing the name, “*Ren* . I got it.”

A sudden *thump* and hastily muttered curses came from downstairs. Mysterious yowls and growling noises too.

“Lady Stubbs, it’s just *me!* You know, Mr. Compress! Sako Atsuhiro!! You saw me leave like this earlier! Down girl!!”

“Atsuhiro’s back.” Kaito stated dryly.

Mona snickered as he turned back into his normal cat form. Eri watched him in subtle amazement, then turned her eyes to the stairs as the disguised man in question came up, rubbing his head. Lady Stubbs clung to his jacket sleeve like a starving piranha, still yowling.

It didn’t *look* like Atsuhiro. He wore make-up to change the general shape of his face, a dark wig that looked natural, and contacts to change his eye color to a startling emerald green.

“How is it that *every* time that cursed beam-” Atsuhiro stopped when he saw them, his irritation melting with a grin as he waved a heavy bag towards them. He completely ignored the attack cat latched on his arm, “Oh, you’re up! Good. I got everything the princess needed. Clothes, shampoo, a bunch of drawing supplies -”

He put the bag on the ground with a solid *thunk* .

Kaito blinked at it, “How much did you get?”

“Er... I didn’t know how much she needed! So I may have gotten a little more than necessary.” Atsuhiro shrugged, Lady Stubbs’ growls kicked up in volume as he went to his bags and stored the wig away, “Some nice ladies figured out what I was trying to do, and asked what my daughter liked so they could point out some suggestions!

But I couldn't answer that and we spent half an hour talking about *unicorns* and *cats* -"

"Wait, they asked you what your *daughter* liked?" Kaito asked as a hint of a smirk appeared. "And you didn't specify otherwise?"

"What else was I supposed to say without drawing suspicion?" The make-up didn't hide the cherry redness sprouting on Atsuhiro's face, and he jabbed a finger at their growing smirks, "Hush, all of you! I got the princess what she needed, so I don't need lip from you."

Atsuhiro turned and dug out a contact case and supplies for removing make-up.

"Hey, we didn't say anything." Morgana said as humor glimmered in his eyes.

"... Princess?" Eri's eyes widened, through the rest of her face was set in stone, "You think I'm... a princess?"

"Of course!" Atsuhiro's expression softened as he looked at Eri, carefully gauging her bandages. He put a hand over his heart and did a showman's bow, "You are the princess, and we're your valiant knights! As your loyal knight, princess, I come bearing gifts! Why don't you look in that bag and choose something to wear? I'm afraid your current dress is too dirty for such a beautiful princess."

Eri's eyes turned to liquid jewels as she stared at Atsuhiro, her cheeks turning red.

"Why don't we get you cleaned up first?" Ren asked as he and Eri stood up, "You still have apple juice on you."

"Oh." Eri looked down at her sticky hands, "Okay."

Ren held out his hand. She stared at it for a moment before grabbing it, the smallness of her hand squeezed Ren's heart. Kaito went with them, lifting the heavy bag on his shoulder. Morgana and Manami's

teasing voices followed them down the stairs, and Ren bit back laughter at Atsuhiro's snarky tone. Lady Stubbs still didn't let go, either.

Eri studied her surroundings as they made it down the stairs and into the bathroom. With her permission, Ren set her on the counter and grabbed a washcloth for her to clean her face and hands.

He exchanged a knowing glance with Kaito as she finished.

"Eri." Ren's heart sank when she stiffened and looked at him strangely. Maybe his sudden shift in tone scared her. He put on a soft smile. "I'm going to ask you something, and you *can* say no if you're not comfortable."

"What?" She whispered, specks of fear shining in her eyes.

Ren looked at her bandages, "Could we have a look at what's underneath your bandages?"

"You'll need to take a bath, too." Kaito added, not unkindly, "It's important that you stay clean... especially if you're injured."

Eri blinked. She looked down at her arms, then robotically held them out towards Ren, her expression scarily blank. He worked as gently as he could, and told her which ones he would take off next. It wasn't long before the bandages fell in long streams to the floor, revealing her marred skin.

Ren wasn't the only one to feel waves of rage and nausea as they stared at the patchwork of scars on her arms and legs. These weren't normal scars. Not old scars from fighting or other ghastly injuries, at least. No, these were meticulous cuts. *Medical*, in a way.

"Short, thin scars, repeating in rows." Satanael murmured.

"Injuries made with a blade of some sort." Gabriel said as she stared at the weapon in her hand.

"A scalpel, then?" Ren asked.

"... Most likely." Yatagarasu murmured.

"Did that man do this to you?" Kaito asked, snapping Ren out of his staring.

Eri's gaze went to the floor as tears laced her eyes, but she nodded.

Ren had another question on his tongue, but Ishtar stopped him.

"Asking why may be too painful at the moment. Let's move her focus to the bath, shall we?" Ishtar chuckled at his hesitation, *"I can do it."*

"Eri, do you want to meet one of my other friends?" Ren asked.
"She's really nice, and she likes you a lot. You two might have something in common, too."

Eri blinked up at him.

Strange. Now that he was looking, her horn was bigger than last night. He pushed the thought aside as she nodded, ignoring Kaito's odd look. Ren stepped aside and allowed Ishtar to manifest.

Eri gasped as she stared at Ishtar's long, twisting horns.

"I am Ishtar." The Persona said with a serene smile, "It's nice to meet you, Eri."

"N-nice to meet you too." Eri twisted her fingers together, "You're... like me?"

Ishtar patted Eri's head, "I am."

Eri's expression held fear as her eyes went to the ground. "You're cursed too...?"

Shock rippled through Ren and Kaito.

“Cursed?” Ishtar kept calm, minutely tilting her head, her long hair spilling to one side, “What do you mean by that, my dear?”

Eri's mouth clamped shut. The curtains of her hair shielded her expression from Ren and Kaito, her hands gripping her scarred arms with white knuckles. Ren opened his mouth, but Ishtar looked at him and shook her head.

“My child, please look at me.” Ishtar gently grabbed Eri's hands. The girl's arms were marked with small red welts, Ishtar massaged them with her thumbs as Eri's eyes locked onto Ishtar's. “Whoever said you were cursed is dreadfully wrong. You are a beautiful girl, Eri, and its been a blessing for Ren and the others to have you.”

“... A blessing?” Eri stared at her scars, eyes watering, “But...”

Ishtar tilted the girls chin back up to her, then cupped Eri's cheek, “Your scars are proof that you survived great ordeals, but they also bring you pain. If you wish, I can use my powers to heal them.”

Eri's eyes flooded with unshed tears, “I-I.... I...”

“You don't need to decide right now.” Ishtar wrapped the girl in her arms, and Eri wrapped her little arms around Ishtar's neck. Ishtar turned to the stupefied men. “I'll handle this. I will bathe her once she's feeling better. Judging by the smell coming from the kitchen, your comrades have finished your meal. The both of you must eat.”

Ren shuffled on his feet, hesitant. He sighed when Ishtar sent a powerful surge of comfort and reassurance. Ren grabbed the bag and slid it further into the bathroom.

“We have some planning to do.” Ren said softly, “Let's go, Kaito.”

Ishtar waved them away with one arm and closed the bathroom door.

“That was...” Ren facepalmed, “I don't even have the words for it.”

“What little girl thinks they’re ‘cursed’?” Kaito scowled. They looked at the bathroom door when they heard running water, “Are you sure Ishtar’s the right one for this?”

“Tell him that if he questions me again I’ll have Pixie mix itching powder in his shampoo.” Ishtar said.

Pixie cackled and rubbed her hands together.

Ren nodded, “Trust me, she knows what she’s doing.”

A few minutes later, the rest of the team situated themselves upstairs with bowls of food being passed around. At least Lady Stubbs let Atsuhiro go now that he looked like himself, though she was still giving him the stink eye.

“We might as well talk about the elephant in the room.” Kaito stated.

Shuichi sputtered, nearly choking on his miso soup, “Already!? Can’t we eat first!?”

“No.” Ren didn’t touch his food yet, “It’s better for us to talk where Eri can’t hear.”

Atsuhiro blinked at Ren, “About that. I’ve learned some *interesting* things while I was in town.”

“Like what?” Morgana asked.

“We’re stuck between a rock and a hard place.” Atsuhiro said as he poured himself a cup of tea, “There’s been rumors of multiple heroes in town, not just Hawks. You could probably guess which ones.”

“Ryukyu, Gang Orca, Best Jeanist, and the former Ingenium?” Ren said.

“You got it to a T. I’ve seen Ingenium’s sidekicks roaming the town with local heroes. There’s a chance that Endeavor is here, as well.” Atsuhiro chuckled, but his smile faded into a deep frown, “With

rumors of your 'summon' being spotted in town, those heroes flocked here, probably to search for *you* .”

Ren flinched, but Atsuhiro continued.

“On the other side of the coin is the Shie Hassaikai. We messed with their leader and took something precious from them; The Princess. Rumors have been going around that there’s been a significant uptick in Yakuza activity, with several cited incidents between the heroes and Yakuza. The freshest conflict was half an hour ago.”

Ren scowled, “Eri let me look under her bandages. Her arms and legs are covered in scars, injuries most likely caused by a scalpel. If the Shie Hassaikai had her against her will, we can guess what for.”

“And she called herself cursed.” Kaito glared into his untouched teacup, “As if it wasn’t enough to physically torture her, they’ve convinced her that she’s nothing but a curse.”

Everyone blanched.

“So, if she’s some sort of important experiment...” Shuichi ground through clenched teeth. I was a wonder his bowl didn’t shatter in his grip.

“They’re searching high and low for her.” Atsuhiro said, “A group of powerful heroes possibly looking for *us*, while another power hungry group is looking for their lost princess. We have many targets on our backs.”

“I don’t think Hawks and the other heroes want to hurt us. Maybe what happened with Overhaul and Samael just scared them.” Ren said, “Given the circumstances... maybe we should make ourselves known to them, see if they can offer any help.”

“That *is* what we’re ultimately going for,” Tobita stared down into his bowl, brows tense, “But I find myself hesitant.”

“That’s why we’re coming up with a plan.” Morgana said.

“Even the best laid plans don’t survive contact with the enemy. I’m agreeing to go to U.A. to get you two home, but I still don’t trust heroes as fast as I can trap them in a marble and dump them in a sewer.” Atsuhiro sighed, “What are your thoughts, Ren?”

They all stared at him. He sat up straighter, face set with determination.

“First, we’ll gather as much information about the situation as we can. Manami, can you cover that front?”

“Yep!” She nodded happily, “Leave that to me!”

“Right.” Ren’s eyes went to the pile of bags in the corner, “Next, I want to get a final count on our remaining items and gear. After that-”

“If I may?” Tobita interrupted.

“What’s up?” Ren asked.

“It’s my quirk. I understand we’ll be on a tight schedule, but could I practice with it more at the warehouse, just enough to control it properly? I’d rather not show such a weakness around the heroes.”

“I mean, he has a point.” Morgana said.

“But with all the heroes and the Shie Hassaikai, it might be dangerous.” Manami said.

“Indeed.” Atsuhiro bore a thoughtful frown, “We could get out that first night because the incident *just* happened, but by now all sides have had time to plan their counter attacks. Even with my abilities, it may be too dangerous for us to go out so frequently with this many eyes searching for us.”

Morgana sighed, “It won’t hurt to give him more practice before we’re behind U.A.’s walls. The less information they have on you guys, the

better.”

Tobita turned towards Ren, his eyes simmering, “I won’t be the weak point on our team.”

“Tobita, you’re not a weak point.” Ren sighed as he scratched the back of his head, “But... I understand where you’re coming from. There’s ample space in the Velvet Room. I don’t think they’d mind.”

“Are... you sure?” Shuichi’s scales seemed to lose their brightness, “I won’t lie, Elizabeth absolutely terrifies me. The others are scary too!”

“The Velvet Room’s purpose is to help me on my journey,” Ren said, “It won’t be hard to convince them to help us get stronger before we go to U.A. It’d be a good time to update them with our plans, too.”

Atsuhiro glanced at Tobita, “I can help you like we did in the warehouse.”

The other man smiled, his eyes crinkling. “It would be appreciated.”

“Now that that’s sorted, there’s one other thing.” Ren stated.

“What is it?” Morgana asked as he studied his partner.

“It’s my Personas. I have 4 open slots but no way to fill them.” Ren said, “Then I fused... a *new* one, he wasn’t like anything we had back home, Morgana.”

“Who is it?” Morgana asked, his eyes wide.

“Fafnir.”

“A dragon from Norse mythology?” Kaito asked as his eyebrows shot up.

Fafnir purred at Kaito’s words. Ren held back a snort. Both Fafnir and Kaito bore the Hermit Arcana. It’s no wonder the metal dragon

liked him so much.

“That’s the one.” Ren said. “He’s a bit chaotic, but he has powerful resistances and spells. The other ones I fused are Baal and Gabriel.”

Shuichi whistled. “Those sound pretty powerful!”

“And why can’t you fill your remaining slots?” Atsuhiko asked.

“Back home, I’d pay money to get the Personas I saved in the Compendium.” Ren crossed his arms, “But the more powerful they are, the more expensive they’ll be.”

Atsuhiko beamed, “If that’s the case, I can pay for them!”

“Wha-” Morgana started.

“It could be a lot of money!” Shuichi yelled.

“Oh please.” Atsuhiko waved his hand. He stared at Ren with a frown, “We’re preparing to turn ourselves over to U.A. to get you and Morgana get back home. Our Leader *needs* to be at his full strength to combat whatever chaos lingers on the horizon, whether the threats come from another world or this one.”

“... Are you sure?” Ren’s eyes went wide, “Kohryu is 120,000 yen *by himself*, not to mention how expensive it will be to fill the other slots... or what it could cost for other fusions I do in the future.”

Atsuhiko was quiet for a moment. The others grew worried the longer Atsuhiko seemed to be lost in thought. With a long sigh, he studied everyone with an intensity that wasn’t there moments ago.

“Yes, I will help pay for them. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it as many times as it takes,” Atsuhiko said, his voice heavy, “I owe you my life, Ren. You are the first ones I’ve considered *real* family in a very long time, so let me repay you before it’s too late.”

Ren stared into Atsuhiro's eyes. There was a resoluteness set in his expression that wouldn't take no for an answer. Ren felt that in himself often enough.

"Alright, if that's what you want to do." Ren nodded, "I'll think about the other Personas and let you know the final price."

The mood suddenly plummeted after a moment of silence.

"I still can't believe we'll be saying goodbye." Tobita said, grimacing into his cold teacup. "It's... difficult to fathom, after everything we've been through together. Is it cruel to wish you'd stay?"

Shuichi's eyes watered and he wiped them harshly. Lady Stubbs flopped onto Shuichi's lap, torn ears going flat on her head.

Kaito sulked, but he glanced between Ren and Morgana with understanding.

"Guys," Ren's smile turned shaky, "We're still here, and we need to get to U.A. before we even get to that point, and *who knows* what else we'll have to do there. Let's not say goodbye until then, okay?"

Morgana puffed out his chest, "Yeah! You better appreciate us before its too late!"

Manami button mashed Morgana's head with tears in her eyes. Nobody stopped her as Morgana yowled.

"You're right." Atsuhiro brightened, "Lets make the most of it while we can. Besides, we still have the Princess to look after! Let's not make her sad, alright?"

"He has a point." Morgana said as he recovered, the fur on his head sticking up in places. Manami looked proud of herself. "But what will you guys do after? Are you sticking with U.A.?"

"Absolutely not." Atsuhiro glowered into his tea as if it personally insulted him, "I'll take my leave after we get you two home. Covertly,

of course.”

“Yeah...” Shuichi scratched the back of his head, “I-I’m honestly not too fond of heroes myself. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll still go and help you guys get home no matter what! Right, Stubbs!?”

“Merp!!”

Manami and Tobita exchanged long glances, Manami spoke first, “Well, I still have that virus I started ages ago. I could continue working on it, and then launch it when Ren and Morgana go home to make our escape?”

“Being in U.A. itself may help in that regard.” Tobita said with a small smile. “If we could study their security system so she can make her virus more effective...”

Atsuhiro smirked, “Oh, I do like that plan. A *final* parting gift!”

“Same!” Shuichi added. “But don’t you think they’ll search us when we get there?”

“Oh,” Manami frowned, “Maybe.”

“We could hide it in one of our costumes.” Ren said as he looked at Morgana, “Our equipped weapons and items disappear with our Metaverse gear. I’m sure it’ll be no different for a USB drive.”

“Oh! That’s smart!” Manami beamed, “I’ll work on it right away!”

“What about you, Kaito?” Morgana asked.

“I... don’t know. I’m not like you guys. I can’t run across rooftops at night, let alone be anything like a Phantom Thief.” Kaito drummed his fingers on his silvery band, “The Raven’s Nest would be too lonely without all of you. Right now, I’m more concerned about Eri. If we gain her trust and then abandon her so suddenly... it may do more damage in the long run. We’ll have to explain the truth to her eventually.”

“Are you going to stay with her at U.A.?” Ren asked.

“Maybe, I just want her to be safe.” Kaito crossed his arms, his suppressant peeking out from his sleeve. “I’ll... think about it.”

Ren looked over the rest of the team, “Once we’re ready, we should contact Taneo to let Nezu know. I wouldn’t want to startle them by showing up suddenly. But if something happens and worse comes to worst, we’ll contact the heroes directly.”

Manami nodded, “Taneo *did* post another blog with a bird picture. He seemed... a bit more desperate this time.”

“That’s probably my fault for scaring him.” Ren ran a hand down his face, “For now, he can wait while we prepare for our departure to U.A. Does everyone agree?”

“I believe we have all bases covered.” Atsuhiro nodded.

Manami stood up, eyes blazing, “I’ll get started right away!”

“My dear, you barely touched your food.” Tobita said, frowning. “It’s gone cold.”

“I’ll eat later!” She patted Tobita on the shoulder, “The sooner we get started the better!”

As she rushed to get her laptop, Shuichi gained a troubled expression, “Er, we should probably let Magne know about all this. I’d hate to disappear on her without telling her ahead of time.”

“Leave that to me.” Atsuhiro said with a tired sigh, “I’ll break it to her tonight. We knew this wasn’t a permanent living situation anyway.”

“Trickster, I’ve finished Eri’s bath and have dressed her. She looks quite adorable if I do say so myself.” Ishtar said, *“Is it alright to come up?”*

Ren looked towards the stairs, “Yes, *we just finished.*”

Ishtar floated up the stairs with an air of grace. Eri was secured on her hip, adorned in a long sleeved white and red dress similar to the color of the apples she ate earlier. Ishtar smiled as she set Eri down, the girl glancing at them before staring at the floor, her fingers fidgeting with her sleeves.

“You look very pretty in that dress.” Ren said.

“Thank you...” Eri whispered.

Ren put a hand to her damp hair, “Would you like your hair done?”

“My hair?”

“Yeah!” Ren faced her fully, grinning from ear to ear, “We could put it in a braid, or a bun. Or we could even-”

He was silenced by a loud growling noise. Eri put her hands on her stomach, her stoic face turning red.

“Or we could get her more food.” Kaito said. “A growing girl needs more than apple slices.”

“And the Princess looks a bit underweight.” Atsuhiro added.

“We’ll have to make something fresh.” Tobita glanced around the scattered dishes, “I don’t think she should have cold left overs.”

“I could go for seconds!” Shuichi said.

Ren snapped his fingers, “How about a fresh batch of curry? It’s been a while since I made any.”

Eri blinked at him, “What’s.... curry?”

Ren’s heart stopped.

“*Hoo boy...*” Satanael whispered sarcastically.

The others stared at Ren as he took a deep breath.

“It is *the* most delicious food you’ll ever taste.” Ren stated with a serious face. Eri copied him the best she could with her porcelain-like expressions, “There are so many different ways to make it, and we can even use apples! Would you like to help make it?”

Eri bit her lip. She stared between Ishtar and Ren, and nodded. Eri took his hand and they trailed downstairs together with Ishtar floating at their heels.

Atsuhiro chuckled, “If that girl isn’t hooked on curry by the end of the day, I’ll eat my hat.”

“Do you even *have* a hat to eat?” Morgana stated with a grin.

“How dare you. I have another spare... somewhere.” Atsuhiro playfully rolled his eyes, “Rubbing salt in the wound of my lost mask and hat! Have you no shame, Morgana?”

“Nope. Absolutely none.”

“You still have your Arsene mask!” Shuichi said as he waved a hand, “The other one was blank, wasn’t it?”

“You might have a point, but still!” Atsuhiro pouted. “Ren would understand the value of every mask, now wouldn’t he?”

“Boys...” Manami huffed affectionately.

It wasn’t much longer before the familiar aroma of curry wafted into the attic.

“I never thought such a little person could eat so much curry...” Morgana said as Ren tucked a dozing Eri in her futon.

“She practically put herself in a food coma.” Atsuhiro smiled softly, “Poor thing.”

Tobita piled the mountain of dishes together, "I doubt Overhaul and his cohorts fed her properly."

Ren frowned when he patted Eri's head, her horn poking out of the top of her forehead, "She won't have to worry about that anymore." He said as he stood up, "At least she had fun helping me make it."

Morgana squinted at Ren, "I'm sure she enjoyed you sneaking the apple pieces to her too."

"Even a little girl is a better cook than me." Kaito crossed his arms.

"Oh, don't be sour!" Atsuhiro teased, "Hey, maybe she could teach you to cook when she's old enough!"

"No way." Ren, Morgana, Tobita, and Manami stated in unison.

"Definitely too dangerous for Eri." Ren said with a nod.

"Poking more fun at my misfortunes, are we?" Kaito shook his head, though he couldn't hide the slight smile on his face.

Ren wanted to tease him some more, when a blue flash came into the attic. They all stared as the Velvet Room door manifested in the corner, and Lavenza walked out.

"Lavenza? Is something wrong?" Ren asked as he stopped in front of her.

"No, nothing is wrong, Trickster." She smiled at him, "Actually, there's a new function in the Velvet Room that my siblings and I set up. We wanted to show you as soon as it was finished."

"A new function?"

"Yes." Her smile widened, crinkling her eyes, "A training room, of sorts. I discussed what happened with everyone after you mastered Kohryu's bond, and we decided that it would be safer for you to have

a training room readily available... away from any possible dangers of this new world.”

“Oh, that’s perfect!” Atsuhiro shot to his feet, “We were actually discussing something like this earlier.”

“Can the others use it too?” Ren asked as the others looked at him with hopeful expressions, “It would really help all of us.”

“Of course.” She turned towards the open door, “If you would all follow me.”

She vanished into the Velvet Room.

Ren gave Kaito a look.

“I’ll take care of Eri,” Kaito stated as a smirk grew on his lips, “Don’t get your butts kicked too hard.”

“They won’t be *too* difficult on us, right?” Tobita asked.

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it.” Ren chuckled as he stepped into the Velvet Room, his teammates following.

Lavenza waited at the bottom of the stairs, and she led them into a new hallway set into the outer ring of cells leading to the new room. The hairs on the back of Ren’s neck stood on end when he and his teammates stepped through a translucent wall of velvety blue mist, finding themselves within a huge circular arena.

This place didn’t feel like the rest of the Velvet Room, and the Velvet Song didn’t follow them. Rather the calm tune echoed through the room, having to pass through the veil as if they were underwater. It was far more haunting than Ren liked.

Thick iron bars lined the walls of the arena, with the Velvet Room logo stamped into the middle of the floor. The air tasted of bloodlust that made Ren’s teeth itch. His Personas buzzed when they saw the other Attendants standing in front of a massive guillotine.

Lavenza nodded to Margaret, who stepped forward first.

“Welcome.” Margaret politely bowed, “As Lavenza explained, we created this room to test you in battle. With proper dedication and training, it should help you expand your powers.”

“Is that why this place feel different from the rest of the Velvet Room?” Ren asked with a raised brow.

“Yep.” Elizabeth’s smirk sent shivers down his teammates’ spines, “We messed with the new rules to create this new space. You better appreciate our hard work. I demand more of those cookies, Theodore ate the last of them.”

Theodore cleared his throat, “What Elizabeth *means* is that this room was created with how your powers work in this world. This space borders the edge of reality in a way the rest of the Velvet Room doesn’t.”

“So unlike the heart of the Velvet Room,” Lavenza said, “You and your Personas will be as limited as they are in the real world. You cannot summon them all at once in reality, correct?”

“No.” Ren frowned, “They were all able to come out in Kamino, but it was difficult to keep a few Personas out when we encountered Overhaul.”

“You had the power of the masses actively behind you in Kamino.” Morgana said as he stared at his partner with unease. “But you don’t have that anymore.”

“It’s any wonder that you can summon more than one at once.” Theodore said as his expression turned troubled, “The only ones able to do that before were-”

Elizabeth gently punched him on the shoulder, her eyes gleaming dangerously, “Come back here whenever you’re ready to train with us. Don’t expect us to go easy on you.”

“Elizabeth is correct.” Margaret said with a disarmingly soft smile, “The heat of an intense battle will temper your powers better than if we held back. You’d best be prepared to the best of your ability.”

“We take it you need time before the first battle, Trickster?” Lavenza asked.

Ren nodded, “We’ll come back soon, I promise.”

Lavenza curtsied, “Of course. We look forward to your return.”

Ren led the team out of the bone-chilling arena and back into the heart of the Velvet Room, the song fully gracing their ears once more. Ren nodded towards Igor once they reached the stairs, the man’s eerie smile widening in turn.

“Uh... we’re totally going to get our asses handed to us, aren’t we?” Shuichi asked when they trekked up the stairs.

“Absolutely.” Ren deadpanned as he stepped out of the Velvet Room.

“It’s too bad we can’t do curry when the bar is open.” Ren prepared some cast iron pans for frying, “Magne’s bar would explode in popularity.”

Tobita chuckled, “Perhaps you can make curry at U.A. I’m sure the faculty and students alike would love it. For now we’ll just have to serve Magne’s patrons plainer dishes.”

“I guess. The 1-A kids loved the curry and brownies from the Blue Lotus.” Ren’s smile fell, “I really miss them. I’d like to see Risumi and Ayumu one more time before... you know. Do you think they’ll come visit?”

“Of course they will.” Tobita said as he opened the fridge and dug out ingredients, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were first in line at U.A.’s

door. I doubt even Nezu could keep them away.”

“Yeah...” The creak of wood drew Ren’s gaze to Kaito, who had entered from the hall. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s Eri.” Kaito said with a frown, “She’s having trouble sleeping, and anything we try isn’t helping. Do you think you could do something?”

Ren glanced at Tobita, who chuckled softly, “Go ahead, I’ll get started here.”

Ren nodded, and grabbed a clean mug. He warmed up some milk and sweetened it with honey, and followed Kaito upstairs with the steaming mug in hand.

Shuichi was at the bar up front with Magne, so the only ones up here were Morgana, Manami, and Atsuhiko. Eri too, of course. Manami, despite her fiery expression, managed to type fast and silent as she compiled data and worked on her original virus for U.A. Morgana sat at the edge of Eri’s futon, chatting away at nothing and everything. Atsuhiko read in the corner, looking up when Ren came upstairs.

Eri’s eyes locked onto Ren, her hands clenched tight on the handkerchief.

“Kaito tells me you can’t sleep?” Ren asked as he sat crossed legged beside her futon.

Kaito sat down nearby.

Eri shook her head, her long hair swaying with the movement. “N-No.”

“Why not?”

“I-I’m scared of the shadows...” Her breathing came out strained as she stared at the dark window, “I-I’m scared th-that Overhaul w-will come and hurt you. I-I can’t-”

She shivered as Ren gently placed his hand on her head.

"It's okay, Eri." Ren said as they locked eyes, "I promised he wouldn't hurt you anymore. I intend to keep that promise no matter what."

Her eyes flooded with unshed tears, but she nodded.

Atsuhiro cleared his throat. Ren looked at him as Atsuhiro gestured to his book.

"How about I read you a bed time story?" Ren asked.

Eri blinked, "A story?"

Ren smiled as he handed her the warm mug. He nodded for her to take a sip as he retrieved the *perfect* book from his bag, and sat back down at her side. Eri stared at the black cover with gold writing. Every time Eri saw the book from then on, her first thought was of Ren's new mask and a promise made in a soft-sad song.

Morgana chuckled. Atsuhiro beamed with pride in the corner of Ren's eye.

"O-okay." Eri got comfortable and took another sip, "You'll read until I fall asleep?"

"Yep. The milk will help you sleep, too." Ren flipped to the first chapter and read aloud, "It was a strange ending to a voyage that commenced in a most auspicious manner. The transatlantic steamship *La Provence* was a swift and comfortable vessel..."

Eri, for such a young mind, was enraptured by the story until her eyes couldn't stay open anymore. She was fast asleep by the time he reached the second chapter of Arsene Lupin's adventures.

"I'll keep an eye on her through the night." Kaito whispered as Ren set the book aside and picked up the empty mug.

"Me too." Morgana curled up beside her. "I won't leave her side."

Ren nodded. With one last gentle head pat, he went downstairs to help Tobita. He promised he wouldn't ever let Eri get hurt again. Ren would extract that same promise from Nezu when it came to it.

Ren owed her that much.

"It's time." Kurogiri's voice echoed in the dreary house.

"*Finally* ." Shigaraki griped as he put on the final petrified hand onto his face, "They wasted enough of our time with their bullshit. We're going to show them who's really in charge."

Dabi snorted. Shigaraki bristled, but held his tongue.

Toga gripped the sheathed knives at her hip, Twice bouncing on his heels next to her.

Looking at their newest member gave Kurogiri a headache. It was the doctor's first High-End Nomu, aptly named Hood. Its purple-black skin bulged with heavily muscled limbs as it perched on the ground like a frog, its long neck jutting with thick bands of muscle fiber and vertebrae. Like its namesake, its face was shadowed by a ragged black hood.

But the eyes...

What was that saying? Stare into the void too long, and the void stares back?

Hood's eyes glowed, bright and golden, in the darkness. Much like his own. They were the same shape, even. Something deep within Kurogiri became unsettled as Hood stared back with a predatory gaze. Kurogiri felt a razor sharp grin underneath the darkness, and suppressed a shiver.

Why was he so unsettled?

Perhaps he was just tired. He had barely slept the past few days, between gathering subjects for the doctor, taking Shigaraki Tomura back and forth to Gigantomachia daily, among many other duties.

“Well?” Shigaraki snapped. “Are you going to take us to those losers or not?”

Kurogiri kept his mist from trembling, “At once, Shigaraki Tomura.”

He spread out his misty body and allowed them to walk through, though in Hood’s case, *crawled* through like a savage beast. Kurogiri gathered himself before he followed them to one of the Shie Hassaikai’s underground bunkers.

Kurogiri put his mounting exhaustion to the side. After all, his main directive was taking care of Shigaraki Tomura above all others.

Apparently I can write the darkest of angst with absolutely no trouble, but when it comes to writing fluff I have to stop every five minutes and roll around on the floor because my cold heart cannot handle the fuzzy warm feelings.

Joking aside, there will be a change in update schedule. My health basically tanked really hard between now and when the last chapter was updated, and that's been making it difficult to write. Next updates are as follows:

Disintegration - July 23rd

Broadcast Accident - August 13th

I do want to finish the Overhaul arc before the September break, but if it comes down to it and I'm still too sick to write then I'll hold off on finishing the Overhaul arc until after. I really do need a break to recharge and properly plan out the final leg of this story anyway. I'll know by August 13th whether or not we'll finish the Overhaul arc

before the break or not, if we do, great! It'll still leave off on a fantastic place to start after the break. If not, then it'll still leave off on a good note and we'll have more time to perfect the Overhaul finale and continue after as normal. It all depends on which direction my health will take. I'd rather write when I'm feeling good so that the chapter turns out for the better, rather than forcing myself when I'm sick and having the chapter be sub par and patchy at best.

Any who, this note is long enough. See you guys next time!

Disintegration

Chapter 77: Disintegration

“I’m a little tired, but I can handle it. Any more than three is where it starts to drain me.” Ren shook his head, “Besides, Eri’s having fun and this is good practice. Right, Eri?”

Eri turned to them, her moonlight hair dressed up in a crown of flowers. Eri firmly nodded and wrapped another tuft of Byakko’s fur in a flowery pink hair tie.

“You’re too trusting for your own good, my boy.” Mr. Compress stated dryly, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I just... I want to help him, too.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Baal!” Joker yelled.

Baal sipped from his goblet as two circular blades of shearing wind soared through the Challenge Room, the whistling tempest louder than the haunting remains of the Velvet Song leaking into their ears.

Lavenza lifted her bare hands and caught the windy saw blades with ease. She squeezed them and they exploded into smaller gusts swirling around her, completely harmless.

“Is that all you have?” Lavenza asked, as calm as a still pool.

“My turn!” Gabriel lifted her sword, summoning a half dozen others in a fan behind her.

“No, *ME!*” Fafnir flung himself forward, his shoulder knocking Gabriel to the side.

“Fafnir, wait for my signal!” Joker cried, but it was too late.

Lavenza twirled away as Fafnir’s claws impaled the stone floor.

“You *fool!*” Gabriel snarled as her fan of swords vanished. “We had it, you overgrown snake!”

“That’s too bad.” Lavenza stated with a bored sigh. Joker lost all color in his face as she slowly approached, eyes glinting. “Well, if its any consolation, you lasted a few seconds longer than last time.”

Joker held up his hands, “Lavenza, wait-”

The Challenge Room was consumed with white light and Joker woke up splayed out on the floor moments later. His Personas had vanished into his mindscape. His whole body was a patchwork of bruises covered in a sheen of sweat.

He stared up at Lavenza, “Ouch. No mercy, huh?”

She smiled as she held out her hand, which he took. “It seems you have no trouble keeping three of them out at once. We are making progress.”

Joker rolled his shoulders, “*Painful* progress. Fafnir is so hard to control.” They turned to Joker’s other teammates and the Attendants sitting along the wall, “How long was that one?”

Mr. Compress looked at the stop watch in his hand, “A whole minute and six seconds.”

“That’s *it?*” Joker groaned.

“Hey, you’re getting there!” Mona said with a grin, “But you’ve been at it for a while. Why don’t we switch it up so you can take a break?”

“Indeed.” Gentle Criminal stood and straightened his tailcoat, “I’m eager to get started on my quirk!”

Elizabeth snickered. She got to her feet and wiped crumbs off of her dress, “Try saying that *after* I’m through with you. You’ll wish you were dead instead.”

Gentle Criminal’s steps faltered, but he followed her to the center of the room.

“Oh, and Theodore.” Elizabeth smirked, “Be a dear and actually save some of the cookies for the rest of us.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t eat the whole package.” Margaret chuckled.

“Why must you always pick on me?” Theodore mumbled. “I didn’t even eat any today. It was Lavenza who ate them all last time.”

“You are our brother.” Lavenza said as she took a seat beside Joker, and they shared the open package of cookies, “It’s our job to tease you.”

Theodore released a long, tired sigh. Everyone sat back and watched when Mr. Compress started the timer.

Gentle Criminal’s first match against Elizabeth didn’t last 8 seconds.

Meanwhile...

“They’re late!” Mimic shouted.

Overhaul stared at the tiny black plush bouncing in rage on the arm of his chair. Short stubby legs, long thin arms, and a stitched white plague mask completed the tiny figure, he looked soft and harmless for those that didn’t know better.

“Calm down, Mimic.” Kurono said, standing at Overhaul’s left side. He had replaced his black and gold plague mask with one that matched his hair color, with sterling silver around the eyes, “Getting angry won’t solve anything.”

“They’re wasting our time.” Nemoto Shin, one of the Eight Bullets crowded behind Overhaul, said. Like all other Eight Bullets, he wore a black plague mask, but Nemoto chose to wear a black bowler hat and a long cape draping down his shoulders. He gripped a burlap sack in his hand, “But more importantly, *Overhaul’s* time. That disrespect can’t-”

Overhaul rapped his fingers on the chair. Silence permeated the room. They knew they were all expendable, to be killed within a moment’s notice at their master’s whim, but recent events had shortened Overhaul’s temper more than usual.

Finally, the flicker of purple and black fog appeared behind the opposite chair, and the League Of Villains walked through.

Toga Himiko.

Dabi.

Twice.

Shigaraki Tomura, whose red eyes glimmered from behind the petrified hand attached to his face.

Overhaul eyed the animalistic abomination that crawled out next. Perhaps a new Nomu. Combining two or more beings was unsavory in Overhaul’s books. Not to mention the *multiple quirks*. A symbol of society’s disease. What a disgrace and an *insult* to bring it before him. He resisted the sudden urge to end the Nomu’s pathetic existence.

Overhaul gestured to the chair across from him. A small table separated the chairs, and Shigaraki grumbled under his breath as he

sat down. The two leaders stared at one another, their subordinates' bodies lined with tension.

"Well?" Shigaraki growled as he maintained eye contact, "Are you going to say anything or are you just wasting our time?"

"Says the ones who were late!" Mimic called.

Shigaraki snarled, but Overhaul held up his hand.

"Mimic." Overhaul warned. The possessed plush crossed his arms and plopped down on the chair arm. Overhaul set his expression in boredom, "We both know why we're here."

"Yeah, to team up and take down that damn secret boss."

"No."

Shigaraki blinked, "No?"

Overhaul leaned forward, "This is what'll happen. You'll merge with the Shie Hassaikai and be put under our leadership. Only that way will we be able to take down that cursed vigilante in an efficient manner."

Shigaraki's hands twitched. "And *why* would we ever do that?"

"Do I really have to lay it out for you?" Overhaul sighed as he leaned back, "It's because you don't know how to lead."

"How *dare you*-"

"Look at you." Overhaul scanned the League's bare remnants, "You've had villains like Moonfish and Muscular, S class subordinates who were lost in a futile raid against children. An informant notified us that Mustard will soon be transferred into the care of heroes under a new program. You've struggled to stay alive since Joker killed All For One." Overhaul huffed as Shigaraki glared daggers at him, "We have proof of another of your many failures."

“And that is?” Shigaraki punctuated every word with a dry hiss.

Overhaul waved Nemoto forward. Nemoto opened the burlap sack and dumped its contents on the table. Pieces of a broken mask and a ruined top hat tumbled out, splattered with old blood.

The League members stiffened.

“We’ve heard through the grapevine that you tried to kill one of your own.” Overhaul tilted his head, “But clearly Mr. Compress is very much alive, and now he’s helping Joker.”

The tension skyrocketed. Shigaraki slowly swiveled his head to a dangerously pale Toga Himiko. Dabi and Twice made subtle movements to be between her and Shigaraki.

Overhaul sighed, dragging Shigaraki’s dark gaze back to him, “Not to mention one of Joker’s vital weaknesses has dangled in front of you for the better part of *two months*- ”

“Get to your point!” Shigaraki clawed at his neck, but a look from Kurogiri stilled them. “What about you? You must have some reason for wanting that damn vigilante brat yourself. I heard there was an explosion in your town and one of Joker’s monsters was seen. I doubt its a coincidence.”

Overhaul reached into his coat pocket for a small package, setting it on the table and flipping it open, “These are the permanent Quirk Erasing Bullets. There are very few of them as they are difficult to produce on a larger scale.”

Shigaraki glanced at them, “What do those have to do with Joker?”

Overhaul’s expression twisted with hatred, “Joker stole the asset I need to create these bullets. In doing so, he insulted me and all of the Shie Hassaikai. I have the perfect plan to eliminate him once and for all, while ensuring we recover our asset. Once you are under my leadership, we-”

“No.” Shigaraki stood, his shadow falling over the table.

The Eight Bullets crowded around Overhaul, and the Nomu abomination lunged to Shigaraki’s side, dark jaws snapping. The other League members tensed, but didn’t go to their leader’s side.

“It’s vital that we form a party if Joker recovered his strength. Neither of our groups are strong enough to face him alone, you *know* that.” Shigaraki’s voice was as stale as a layer of dust on old furniture, “But we will not be put under you like a bunch of spare NPC’s. My League of Villains will work alongside you under *my* orders, and that’s final.”

“Fine.” Overhaul’s eyebrow twitched. “I’m only allowing this because I agree we cannot take Joker down by ourselves.”

“Yeah! If this were any different, you’d all be blood stains on the wall!” Mimic shouted.

“You ugly little-” Shigaraki stated.

“Kurono, give them the burner.” Overhaul said as he forced his temper to cool.

Kurono threw Kurogiri an old cellphone, to which the misty man easily caught, “We’ll contact you when the time comes. Be on standby while you wait.”

Kurogiri’s smoky body curled in on itself, golden eyes narrowed.

Shigaraki scoffed, “Whatever. Kurogiri, we’re leaving.”

The League walked through Kurogiri’s portal. The Nomu paused before the dark threshold, swiveling its long neck to peer at Overhaul, who stared back with a lazily raised brow. The abomination cackled before it dove into the darkness.

“How insolent.” Nemoto sneered when the portal vanished.

“I’ll allow them to be independent, for the time being.” Overhaul tucked the Quirk Erasing Bullets in his pocket, “Kuroono, is the scout back yet?”

Kuroono nodded, “They should have returned by now to provide you with a full report.”

“Good,” Overhaul hummed, “With Kurogiri at our side, extracting Joker’s weakness will pose no problems.”

The Eight Bullets cleared the way as Overhaul stood up and stalked towards the exit.

Knives were in Toga’s hands as her instincts threw her backward, dodging Shigaraki’s lethal swipe by a hair’s breadth.

“Shigaraki Tomura!”

Kurogiri shouted as Toga backed into a wall, her knives swinging in silver arcs as Shigaraki reached for her. A swathe of blue flame bathed the room as Shigaraki’s shadow fell over her, splitting the pair.

“Don’t fight!!” Twice frantically waved his arms, “Oh! Go for the round house kick, Toga-chan!!”

“Enough!”

Kurogiri’s body exploded with misty tendrils, redirecting Shigaraki’s hands, her knives, and Dabi’s next burst of flame. The fire hit the floor, ribbons of smoke curling from a cluster of incinerated weeds growing through the cracks. Twice shrieked as he stamped it out.

“Kurogiri, what are you doing!?” Shigaraki snapped.

Kurogiri blinked, “What is it *you* are doing, Shigaraki Tomura?”

“She was supposed to kill Mr. Compress! She’ll pay for failing Sensei’s direct order!”

“She did not fail, Shigaraki Tomura.” Kurogiri sighed, “Toga Himiko performed admirably. I watched as she stabbed Mr. Compress and let him bleed out on the ground. However, Joker must have healed him when our attention was elsewhere. If it wasn’t for Joker’s trickery, Mr. Compress would have died within minutes. It was not her failure, but mine for not making sure the job was finished.”

Shigaraki’s gaze stabbed into Kurogiri, and he slowly extracted his hands from the void.

Dabi scowled at Shigaraki as he did the same, his hands smoking.

Toga, her eyes wide and heart pounding wildly, pulled her knives out of Kurogiri’s portal, but her white knuckled hands held onto them for dear life. Kurogiri, satisfied, pulled himself back.

Toga sprinted to her room.

She slammed the door shut and leaned against it, hearing Dabi and Shigaraki get into another shouting match. Toga slid down the door, her knives clattering on the floor as she covered her face in her hands. The shouting exploded in volume, and it wasn’t long before Dabi’s signature door slam rattled the abandoned house.

The next bout of silence was too loud.

Dark thoughts skittered through her mind. She remembered All For One’s aura of death drowning her as he ordered Mr. Compress’ fate. Either she followed his order to the letter, or she’d disappear.

She covered Mr. Compress in *pretty red* - No! Her nails clawed into her forehead. He didn’t deserve to be covered in red.

They got off on the wrong foot, but Mr. Compress grew to be their friend. *Her* friend. He told stories of his grand heists during nights

when nobody could sleep, helped her when her braids were too tangled once, his hands gentle as he brushed through that terrible knot. Mr. Compress could break the tension between Dabi and Shigaraki like none of them could, including Kurogiri.

That was the start. The first crack in her loyalty to Shigaraki and the League Of Villains.

Gang Orca held an expression she couldn't dissect, "Yes. Villains, especially younger ones, should have a chance at redemption should they want it. I don't expect every villain to go along with it, but for the ones that do-" He looked down at his clenched fist, "They should at least have a chance for a new lease on life."

She turned her back to hide the conflict in her expression. She... didn't have to be a villain anymore? She could have a chance at being normal again, to really be herself? To live how she always wanted without hurting people? But she couldn't walk away from the League. Not yet. Not while it was still too dangerous for her... or others.

The tiny cracks splintered into greater crevices after the Provisional Exam. She was left floundering, with no real direction as her whole inner thoughts became a dizzying whirlpool of confusion and the feeling of being *lost* .

A knock startled her from her thoughts.

"Toga-chan?" Twice's voice was muffled by the door.

Toga sniffled and wiped her face with a dirty sleeve. She opened the door to let him in. Toga made sure the door was shut before Twice could say anything.

"Are you okay!?" He gripped her shoulders when he saw her expression, "That was really scary! I totally wasn't terrified out of my wits!"

“I’m okay. I’m just.... so tired.” She muttered as she could feel herself crumble, “I don’t want to do this anymore, Twice.”

Twice stiffened, “What?”

“Shigaraki and the Shie Hassaikai want to hurt Joker and Mr. Compress. I... I can’t...”

She thought of Joker’s genuine smile as they danced under the moonlight, the first person to treat her with any sort of respect and kindness. Of Mr. Compress’ boundless compassion. If Shigaraki and Overhaul got their hands on them... they wouldn’t survive. If only Joker hadn’t stolen whatever ‘asset’ to make those precious Quirk Erasing Bullets-

Her eyes brightened. Joker would be more than a match for Overhaul and Shigaraki without the threat of his powers being taken away. If they could get on the inside and mess up Overhaul’s plans even more... It... it might just work, but she couldn’t do it alone.

“Twice.”

“Y-yes, Toga-chan?”

“I need your help.” She peered into the blank whiteness where his mask hid his eyes, “Can you keep a secret? Right now, you’re the only one in the League I care about... the only one I can trust.”

Twice stilled. At first, she thought he would run off and tell Shigaraki about her doubts. Instead, her breath stuttered as he wrapped her in a tight hug.

“Of course, Toga-chan!!” He said, “I-I feel the same way! No I don’t! Warm fuzzy feelings!? *Ick* !”

She hugged back, a small smile forming.

The flicker of Hope strengthened.

Byakko, with Ren leaning against his soft belly, was splayed out across the attic floor. Eri, Ishtar, and Pixie crowded around Byakko's head, decorating the tiger's snowy fur with flowers, pins, and brightly colored clips.

"I want a rematch!!" Fafnir howled, "I could take those Attendants on!"

"I agree-hee with Fafnir, ho!" Black Frost threw his fists into the air. "Let there be bloodshed, heeee hooo!"

"You didn't learn from your last horrible loss?" Shiva asked.

"Losses." Gabriel begrudgingly corrected. "Several losses."

"Ugh," Pixie muttered, "I might go crazy if we have to listen to Theodore apologize one more time before he wipes the floor with us!"

"At least Margaret is a floating goddess of beauty and wrath, and executes her attacks with grace." Ishtar hummed with a pleasant smile, "Something I respect."

Ren ignored them as he tightened the last screw and placed the cover on the mechanism for his grappling hook.

"I'm surprised the Trickster doesn't have nightmares of Elizabeth and Lavenza." Baal said as he swirled his goblet, "Those two are certainly feistier than their siblings."

"Feisty, yes." Satanael sighed, "But it's thanks to their intensive training that we got so far so quickly."

"Yes, yes, anchoring three Personas in reality without tiring is a great achievement." Fafnir snapped sarcastically, "But we're wasting time with all of this other crap! Why can't we continue fighting them to get

even stronger!? We could be so much more powerful, not to mention what Fusions the Trickster can do with me at his side!!"

"One thing at a time, Fafnir. All of this training would be moot without proper recuperation and self-reflection in between battles. Besides, the Trickster doesn't want to rob the Faith of his every penny."

Kohryu grumbled, *"Have you truly learned nothing?"*

"Shut it, old man!" Clouds of steam hissed from Fafnir's jaws, *"I want to fight at the Trickster's side again! Stop denying us our rightful triumph!!"*

Kohryu grumbled, *"It's like talking to a child."*

"Isn't Fafnir your child in a way, Kohryu?" Shiva asked with a humorous smile. *"He came from you."*

"He even called you 'old man'." Cu Chulainn mused.

"Oh, you find that funny, do you?" Gabriel smiled warmly, *"Do not expect me to call you father, Hound Of Culann."*

Cu Chulainn sputtered as his face turned cherry red, *"Scathach would murder me if I had a kid and she didn't know about it."*

Ren set the grappling hook aside and scooped up his notebook and pen, crossing 'repair grapple hook' from his list. Ren pulled his duffel bag closer and dug around in it, flipping to the list of Metaverse items.

"That reminds me of the time we called Arsene Bird Dad!" Alice said, clapping her hands.

"Do you have to bring it up?" Satanael groaned, *"I thought we moved past that."*

"Nope!" Alice chirped.

"You were awfully agreeable when Ishtar threatened to ground the Trickster. Sounds to me like you're still the father of the group, while she is the 'Mommasona'." Yatagarasu said as he puffed out his feathers, *"Oh! Perhaps we need a new nickname for Satanael!"*

"Please no."

Ren tapped the notebook with the pen, brow pensive as he stared at the meager list, a tiny fraction of what they came into this world with.

A small hand full of healing stones and SP items(he made a note to fill several thermoses full of Master Coffee), revival medicines, a pile of useless Metaverse items like Goho-M's that didn't do anything. Other items like Smoke Bombs, the Perma-Pick, and the Ofudas were safe within his costume.

The various armors, weapons, and accessories he gave to the rest of the team did nothing to help in their training battles, save for preventing more severe injuries that would have been healed anyway. Ren had equipped the Crystal Skull again, flooding him with inhuman strength despite how it oozed ancient and disturbing power. He made sure Eri didn't see it.

"A fatherly nickname for Satanael?" Gabriel looked the other Persona up and down, *"... Bat dad?"*

"Vetoed!" Alice said.

"Dark father of freedom?"

"That's even worse, Yatagarasu!!" Pixie shouted. *"Definitely vetoed!"*

"Why must you all do this." Satanael groaned as he facepalmed.

"We art thou, thou art us." Baal raised his goblet with an elegant smirk, *"It is our duty, Bat Dad."*

"I thought you were a sensible one, Baal." Satanael muttered, *"And 'Bat Dad' has already been vetoed."*

"Sinister Sire of Sovereignty!!" Black Frost cackled.

"What? No!" Satanael curled his wings around himself.

"Are you all so terrible at coming up with names?" Orpheus Picaro asked with a languid tilt of his head.

"Do you have any better ideas, music boy!?" Pixie asked.

"... Music boy?"

"Demon Dad of Doom!!" Cerberus roared.

"Now that has a good ring to it!" Pixie said.

"I suppose I can't veto it?" Satanael asked.

"Nope, you're stuck with it now." Ren chuckled, *"We dub thee Demon Dad Of Doom."*

"Betrayed by my true other self once again." Satanael put a hand over his heart, *"How will I ever recover?"*

"I don't think a Salvation can cure such a mortal wound." Ishtar's musical chuckles drew Ren from his work, and he smiled at her when she helped Eri with another tie.

"Even I have more dignity than you at the moment, Demon Dad Of Doom." Byakko said as his motorboat purrs rumbled through the attic.

Morgana watched everything with a raised brow.

Kaito and Manami sat up here, too. Kaito watched Eri with muted fondness, while Manami's eyes were trained on her computer screen, lines of code flowing from her fingertips.

"You look good in pink, Byakko." Ren said.

Byakko held back a huff, stating dryly, *"You wound me so, Trickster. Blue is obviously the superior color."*

"Oh please." Ishtar scratched Byakko's head, *"Don't lie to yourself. We know you're enjoying this."*

"Let's add more pink!" Pixie giggled as she buzzed around Byakko's ears.

Ishtar grinned and handed Eri a bunch of hot pink ties.

Morgana approached and looked Ren up and down, frowning.

"What?" Ren said.

"Are you holding up alright?" Morgana whispered. His eyes flicked between the three Personas, "We didn't train in the Velvet Room for you to *willingly* wear yourself out."

Ren eyed the Velvet Room door over in the corner, where Tobita trained with Atsuhiro and the Attendants. Like Ren, Tobita made significant progress. It was amazing what a little bit of life and death stakes could do to make them all stronger.

As for Ren, each Persona kept their individual strengths and weaknesses, but any damage they received traveled back to the source. If Ren took too much damage from multiple Personas, enough to where it went over his current HP... it didn't paint a pretty picture.

If he had too many out at once, then his energy drained at an alarming rate. He passed out by trying to summon all of his Personas the first time. Lavenza bonked him on the head with the Compendium for that scare. Elizabeth drilled her own lessons in his skull the *hard* way. Ren couldn't decipher her mannerisms. Serious, yet mournful and nostalgic. Small glimmers of anger were buried deep within the woman's eyes.

Theodore's too.

Margaret and Lavenza adopted a more professional demeanor, even if they were all utterly terrifying.

"I'm a little tired, but I can handle it. Any more than three is where it starts to drain me." Ren shook his head, "Besides, Eri's having fun and this is good practice. Right, Eri?"

Eri turned to them, her moonlight hair dressed up in a crown of flowers. Eri firmly nodded and wrapped another tuft of Byakko's fur in a flowery pink hair tie.

Morgana leveled Ren with a deadpanned stare.

"Lighten up, Morgana." Ren put pen and paper aside and scratched under Morgana's chin, "Let her have some fun while she can."

"I... I guess you're right."

"Hey, sorry to interrupt, but I might've found something." Manami looked up from her laptop.

"What's wrong?" Ren asked.

"The Shie Hassaikai's activity has been... strange."

Ren raised a brow, "Strange how?"

"Several reports indicated that they were all over town before, then today they all just... disappeared off the streets." Manami shivered, "I've picked up some radio chatter from the heroes, and they're desperate to figure out what's going on. I don't like it."

"Let's keep an ear to the ground." Ren grimaced. "Just in case we need to move before we get to U.A."

"What's U.A.?" Eri asked, staring at Ren.

“It’s a school for training heroes.” Ren erased his grimace with a warm smile, “We’ll be going there soon. All of us.”

“Oh...” Eri tightly gripped Byakko’s fur, “Will Deku-san be there?”

“Deku-san?” Ren recalled the long list of heroes and sidekicks Manami provided, “Midoriya is interning with Nighteye.”

“Have you met him before?” Kaito asked Eri.

“I bumped into Deku-san first when I ran away from... f-from...”

“It’s okay, dear.” Ishtar hugged Eri closer. “That man can’t hurt you.”

“What happened?” Ren asked softly.

Byakko purred louder when Eri pulled on his fur, “I-I didn’t want Deku-san to get hurt... So I made him let me go.”

“They *let* you go back?” Morgana asked, eyes wide.

Eri bit her lip and nodded.

“We don’t know the full situation.” Ren said to quell his own anger, “They probably didn’t have a choice. We know how dangerous Overhaul’s quirk is.”

Alice’s energy flared.

Satanael and Alice had resistances against curse and bless attacks, so they concluded that Overhaul’s quirk translated to an Almighty insta-kill. Vasuki’s Makarakarn wouldn’t work against Almighty. He had a few Homunculus items and made sure everyone else had one. They gave him strange looks, but accepted the weird little mud dolls after he explained their purpose.

Better to be safe than sorry.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t sit right with me.” Kaito crossed his arms.
“Letting a little girl go with a monster like that...”

Ren waved his hand, “What’s done is done. All that matters right now is that Eri is safe and we’ll be long gone before Overhaul finds us.”

A disquiet settled in the attic. Byakko’s purrs rumbled pleasantly, and Ishtar and Pixie managed to get Eri to put more flowers in Byakko’s fur. Pixie distracted Eri by showing her how to braid a particularly long tuft on Byakko’s chest.

Ren leaned back against Byakko and stared out the open window. The autumn sunset painted everything in fiery colors. There was a nip in the air, and he wondered if the fall trees were as gorgeous here as they were back home.

Still, he didn’t want Eri getting cold. He stood up and worked the crick out of his neck, his joints popping.

“And you call me an old man.” Kaito remarked.

“Shush,” Ren smirked, “I’m not the one with white hair.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Not ours!” Morgana stuck his nose in the air, “Your hair was already white when we met you. Or is your memory already failing you, grandpa?”

Kaito rolled his eyes as Ren went to the window to close it.

“Trickster.”

“What is it, Yatagarasu?” Ren paused with his hand on the window sill.

“I’m nervous about the Lover’s information.” Yatagarasu warbled,
“The Yakuza must be up to something heinous. I want to patrol the skies to ensure our safety.”

"It's a sound plan." Satanael said, *"But it also comes with drawbacks."*

"I am invisible in the dark." Yatagarasu's nerves wriggled against Ren's own, *"No normal human will be any wiser."*

"Are you okay?" Manami asked, grabbing his sleeve. "You're staring off into space again."

"Yeah." Ren smiled at her, "Yatagarasu wanted to patrol around the city. The Yakuza disappearing makes him nervous."

"But the strain on you, Trickster." Ishtar said, her brow furrowing. "Three Personas is your current limit, any more and you will tire easily."

"I'll go back to the mindscape!" Pixie hovered in front of Eri and ruffled the girl's hair, "I'll play with you soon little sis, 'kay?"

Eri nodded, "Okay."

Pixie vanished in a blue flurry. Eri'd seen this before as Ren gradually introduced other Personas. Orpheus Picaro strummed on his lute when Ren read the next chapter of *Arsene Lupin, Gentleman Thief* to Eri last night. Lavenza and Alice had a tea party with her after an especially rigorous training session in the Velvet Room yesterday afternoon, and like Byakko, Cerberus let her run her hands through his snowy white mane, his tail thumping on the floor. Black Frost played games with her and Cu Chulainn told her other fairy tales.

For now, Personas like Fafnir and Kohryu were off limits, either due to sheer size or in Fafnir's case, unpredictability.

Ishtar pointed at Ren as he held out his arm to summon Yatagarasu, Eri watching with sparkling eyes.

Ren didn't know what happened.

Yatagarasu materialized on Ren's arm. There was a terrified cry and a flash of light, Ren's vision blinked out and he felt himself falling, a twisting, ice cold pang resonating with Ishtar and Byakko's bonds. Yatagarasu screeched when he was thrown back into the mindscape.

"Ren!?" Morgana called.

Just as fast, it stopped. Ren gasped as his eyes snapped open, his head throbbing from where he hit the floor.

"Are you okay!?" Manami gripped his shirt, her face stricken with fear.

Ren sat up, blinking rapidly as he rubbed the back of his head. "My head hurts a little. What just happened?"

Manami looked behind him, and he followed her gaze to Eri. Kaito was crouched over Eri as Ishtar held the girl in her arms.

Eri was hyperventilating, staring at Ren in a way that made his chest constrict.

"Eri, what's wrong?" Ishtar asked as she gently turned Eri's face to her, "What was that?"

"I-I'm sorry!" Eri burst into tears, "I'm sorry!!"

"What are you sorry for?" Ishtar cast a worried glance at Ren, Byakko was on his feet and pressed his nose on the girl's head. "Eri, please talk to us."

Eri shook her head and buried her face in Ishtar's chest, her cries inconsolable.

"I-I think it was her quirk?" Morgana's hackles stood on end, "That light came from her horn! I saw her flower crown go... backwards? Instead of wilting, they turned into buds and then disappeared!"

“I felt weird for a second...” Ren stood up and gave himself a once over, Manami hovering beside him. Kaito hadn’t moved. “Kaito? Are you okay?”

“Er, earth to Kaito?” Morgana propped his front legs on Kaito’s arm, “What’s wrong?”

Kaito jolted so hard he displaced Morgana, the not-cat’s paws falling to the floor. Kaito’s ashen face was covered in sweat, and Ren’s stomach plummeted as Kaito looked at them, his eyes shimmering like sunlight through water.

“Kaito’s Quirk Suppressant is on Eri!” Satanael stated.

Ren saw the glimmer of the suppressant on Eri’s upper arm. He felt another pang of fear as Kaito looked at Ren last, his skin turning nearly translucent as he bolted down the stairs.

“Kaito!”

“M-Make sure he’s okay!” Manami said, “Morgana and I will stay with Eri!”

Ren chased after Kaito. The bathroom door slammed shut, and Ren recoiled at the sound of Kaito getting violently sick. The horrible noises subsided after a long, harrowing couple of minutes. Ren heard the squeaking faucet and running water, and eventually Kaito opened the door.

The man’s damp hair fell flat over his face. He collapsed against the door frame and slid to the floor with a soft *thump* .

“Kaito,” Ren knelt next to him and grasped his shoulder, “Do you need me to heal you?”

Kaito could barely nod.

Ren drew from Ishtar’s power and cast Salvation, purple ribbons of light flowing around Kaito’s body.

Kaito sagged in relief, color returning to his face, "That... sucked."

"What *happened* ? What did Eri do?"

Kaito scrubbed his face, "Eri's quirk *rewinds* living things. I lived through her erasing my... no, *her* father from existence and then... Overhaul experimented on her. He drained every drop of her blood, and then reset her when she was at death's door... sometimes she didn't make it."

Ren's blood chilled as Kaito gripped his hair, the man's breathing turning erratic.

"Overhaul reset us over and over and over *and over* . He drilled into our heads that this power is nothing more than a curse." Kaito's voice cracked, "How are we still sane...?"

"Kaito, breathe." Ren rubbed circles into the man's back, "You're here with *me* . Don't forget where you are."

Kaito's shaking fingers went into his shirt collar, gripping his pendant.

"Right... you're right." Kaito took a few deep breaths, his hand opening to stare at his family crest. He calmed down after a few moments, letting the crest hang from his shirt. "I didn't mean to lose myself again. I haven't used my quirk in so long..."

"It's okay." Ren sat next to Kaito, their shoulders touching. "What set Eri off?"

"Yatagarasu."

"*What* ?"

"Overhaul and his closest advisors wear plague masks. She thought Yatagarasu was one of *them* . She doesn't know how to control her quirk when she panics..."

Ren cursed under his breath. "But Yatagarasu appeared when we fought Overhaul in that alley."

"My wings shielded her from the worst of the violence." Satanael murmured, *"She did not see."*

Ren couldn't gather his thoughts before Kaito grabbed Ren's shirt, his expression darker than Ren had ever seen it. Kaito would excel at intimidating Shadows.

"And then after Eri, I saw everything *you* went through since the Summer Camp," Kaito growled, "I swear, If you hadn't promised Ishtar not to do something that stupid again-"

"I-"

"I've just died a dozen times over between you and Eri. I felt Morgana's agony as he was burned and then he had to go revive you from a *morgue* . Manami was so terrified she made herself sick several times, she hasn't even shared that with Tobita." Kaito muttered.

Ren's throat tightened, his Personas dead silent.

"I-I'm... sorry?" Kaito's glared sharpened. He cleared his throat and looked Kaito in the eye. "I just... didn't want to worry anyone. They went through enough because of me."

The heat in Kaito's expression withered away and he let go of Ren's shirt, "We could write a whole book on the things you keep to yourself." Kaito's tone softened as he ruffled Ren's hair, "Haven't you learned you can trust us with things like that? That's what family is for, right?"

Ren scratched the back of his head, unable to meet Kaito's eyes.

Kaito sighed as he forced himself on his feet, Ren following, "Come on, the others are probably worried."

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’ve been through worse.” Kaito muttered, “That healing spell works wonders on-”

Kaito looked down the hall to Shuichi and Magne staring at them with bug-eyed expressions. They winced as they were caught eavesdropping. Ren shivered when Kaito’s eyes glimmered.

Ren stepped in front of Kaito, “Were you two there the whole time?”

“Yes, we were.” Magne’s eyes flicked between Ren and Kaito, her brow heavy, “We heard a noise from upstairs and wanted to check up on you, when Kaito-”

“This is between us.” Kaito’s voice hardened into cold steel, giving Magne a sharp glare, “We’ve got it covered.”

Magne blinked several times, “O-oh, right. Y-You’re right. I’m not... actually one of you, it’s not my business.” Magne cleared her throat, “I... I need to finish my chores before the bar opens anyway.”

Magne disappeared into the bar front.

“Hey, what the heck was that about?” Shuichi asked, “That wasn’t very nice!”

Kaito scowled, “That’s between Magne and Atsuhiro. Let’s go upstairs before we make everyone else worry.”

“Uh, I still need to help Magne with the bar. We’re opening in about ten minutes and with the kitchen closed for tonight...” Shuichi poked his fingers together as he looked between Ren and Kaito, “But let me know if you need anything? You guys are *okay*, right?”

Kaito nodded and marched upstairs without another word.

Ren shrugged at Shuichi’s conflicted expression before following Kaito. Ishtar had put Eri to bed, the girl curling into herself with her

face buried in Ren's handkerchief.

"She got a fever after the incident and fell asleep after I healed her." Ishtar said, "We should leave her for the time being."

Ren nodded, "Thanks for taking care of her."

Byakko and Ishtar bowed and returned to him.

"Trickster, are you alright?" Lavenza stood beside the Velvet Room door, Atsuhiro and Tobita had returned, too, "We felt a... disturbance within the Velvet Room. A strange ripple of time, there and gone within a moment."

"I'm alright, Lavenza." Ren forced himself to smile. "No harm done."

"Well, what happened then?" Atsuhiro frowned as Kaito stared at the floor, before studying the rest of their dour expressions, "Clearly, we missed *something*."

"We figured out what Eri's quirk was." Morgana said as he clambered up to Ren's shoulder. "... the hard way."

"She can rewind living things to a previous state." Kaito said as he turned towards Eri, "Ishtar got the brunt of it. Who knows what could've happened if I didn't put the Quirk Suppressant on her in time."

"Well, that's..." Tobita blinked rapidly, "Quite unexpected."

"Ishtar hummed, *"I'm alright. As far as I can tell, our bond and the rest of the mindscape remains unscathed, Trickster. Perhaps being some of the oldest deities is why Byakko and I weren't affected as much?"*

"Perhaps," Byakko said, *"I'm glad Eri was away from the Trickster, otherwise we wouldn't have been as lucky."*

"Who knows what could've happened if she rewound the Trickster directly." Satanael hummed, "It... could have been devastating in any number of ways."

"I'm sorry," Yatagarasu warbled, "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"You do not bear the blame, Yatagarasu." Gabriel said, "It is Overhaul's fault for causing her pain."

Ren snapped out of it when soft footsteps trailed to Kaito.

"Here, put this on." Tobita held out a familiar cuff.

"But don't you need-" Kaito looked up to Tobita, his eyes dancing with subdued light. He clutched his family crest, blinking, "You got control of it."

"Only just. There are many mysteries about my quirk's current state, but I figured out the off switch." Tobita chuckled as Kaito took the cuff and put it on. "Elizabeth is an effective teacher.... albeit a horrifying one."

"I do apologize for Elizabeth's behaviour... again." Lavenza sighed as she tucked a stray hair behind her ear, "I thought my chainsaw was well concealed. Margaret, Theodore, and myself could not stop her from chasing your friend with it. I'd truly fear for his safety if the disturbance didn't interrupt us."

Atsuhiro chuckled, "It was a sight to behold. If only our phones worked in the Velvet Room! I could've recorded it for prime blackmail material."

"Easy for you to say, Atsuhiro." Tobita said with a dignified pout. "You weren't the one running for your life from a madwoman wielding a chainsaw."

Atsuhiro shrugged, smirking shamelessly, "She got you to control your quirk, didn't she? That's a victory in itself."

Morgana groaned, "I'm glad you got your quirk under control Tobita, but we have more important stuff to worry about!"

Their eyes lingered over Eri's sleeping form.

Kaito sat by Eri's futon, the others choosing random spots in the attic. Lavenza sat next to Ren, curiously watching as Kaito revealed the full extent of Overhaul's crimes against a helpless little girl.

A shadow clung to the darkened city streets, idly wandering from dark alleyways to sleepy avenues, and eventually to a dingy district thriving with unsavory types. He walked past a thief taking a drunkard's wallet, the man passed out in the mouth of the alleyway with a bottle inches from his fingertips. No heroes or police dared come here this time of night.

Nobody bothered to look too hard at the patchwork of scarred flesh peeking underneath the shadow's hood, either.

"Doshn't that lizard fella look familiar?" A whispered conversation came from a pair of drunkards limping down the street, "I shwear I shaw him before..."

"Eh? You drank way too much, old man! I can barely understand you!"

"The lizard! That... that green one from the bar down the street, with the pink hair?"

The shadow stopped as the drunkards passed.

"Okay, what about him? He served some wicked drinks, I'll give him that!"

"I shwear I've seen him before...."

“W-well... now that you say it... he *did* look familiar. Maybe he’s famous or something?”

“A *famous* person, working in this shithole? Get real!”

“... Maybe we’re just confusing him for someone else. There are a lot of animal based quirks out there!”

The shadow followed as the pair fell over each other into an alley, deeper into the bowels of the most wretched part of the city.

“Which bar does this lizard work in?”

The drunkards whirled around to him. The middle aged one stood in front of the older man.

“Who are you!?”

“Just answer my question.”

“Why should we!?”

The shadow held up his hand as swirls of bright blue flame flickered to life.

“G-go back to the street and take a left, then f-follow 51st until you see a building with a wooden sign outside! I-its a western styled bar called Hole In The Wall! Th-that’s the bar with the lizard!”

The flames died as the shadow turned away, “Thanks.”

Dabi smirked as he left the two blubbering men behind.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Shuichi asked when there was a lull in customers. The bar was extra loud tonight despite the kitchen being closed, “You’ve been acting off since Kaito-”

"I'm fine." Magne wouldn't look at him as she polished a sparkling glass mug, "Why wouldn't I be?"

He ran a hand through his hair, scaly brows furrowed, "I've never seen Kaito react that way to *anyone* . He's a really nice guy once you get to know him! A bit reclusive, but nice!"

"Have I offended him somehow?"

"I don't think so? Maybe he was grouchy because his quirk... well..."

Magne finally looked at him, "What about his quirk? What does it do?"

"From what I understand, he relives your whole life up until the moment his quirk activated on you. Uh... he *did* say it was something between you and Atsuhiro, but didn't specify." Shuichi blinked as Magne flinched, "Are you okay? You're looking a little green."

"I just... there are some things in my past that I'm not proud of."

"So? Don't we all have baggage like that?"

"This is different." Magne stared at the mug in her hands, her expression unreadable, "I'm trying to atone for something I did to a friend. Maybe Kaito thinks its not good enough?"

"... Why wouldn't it be good enough?"

Someone rapped their knuckles on the bar. They looked to see a tall figure standing there, his face shadowed by a hood. Unnatural chills crept up Shuichi's spine when the figure looked up, the painted light highlighting bright cerulean eyes and a smirk marred by purple scars.

Magne backpedaled and Shuichi reached for the knife in his belt-

“Relax.” Dabi huffed as he tossed a folded piece of paper in front of Shuichi, “Do me a favor and give this to a... mutual acquaintance.”

Magne recoiled when Dabi’s eyes flicked to her, the man’s eerie smirk widening, before pulling away from the bar. Shuichi stared in shock as Dabi disappeared into the bustling crowd.

Shuichi snatched the paper and unfolded it.

Joker - Meet me in the alley behind the bar. Alone .

If Shuichi could sweat, he’d be covered by buckets of it.

“M-Magne, could you-”

“Go.” Magne turned her back to him, “I’ll cover the bar.”

Shuichi bolted for the kitchen.

“This poor kid.” Atsuhiro whispered in the heavy silence.

“Her own mother gave her away to the Yakuza?” Morgana’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates, “I... I can’t even imagine...”

“And then Overhaul...” Ren growled, “Just what was he trying to accomplish, using her like that?”

“What a wicked human.” Lavenza kept her expression neutral, but a fire burned in her eyes. “He’s as dastardly as any Palace Ruler.”

“It’s no wonder she was scared when you said Ishtar was like her.” Kaito gave Ren a knowing glance.

“Was Overhaul trying to harness her unique power somehow?” Atsuhiro gained a thoughtful frown, rolling a few marbles between his hands, “Like a drug, or some sort of weapon?”

“Manami, has there been any recent reports about anything like that on the streets?” Ren asked. “The Shie Hassaikai would perform field tests for something like that.”

“What better way than to put it in the hands of rambunctious villains?” Atsuhiro said sourly.

“I’ll check around,” Manami said as she went straight to her computer. “What about Eri?” Morgana asked, “She was really upset.”

“Let me talk to her.” Kaito put a hand on Eri’s head. Eri’s horn had shrunk significantly. “I know how she feels. If I can help her understand that her power can be a gift, then maybe she won’t be so afraid.”

“Kaito wants to be there for Eri in a way no adult was ever there for him.” Satanael whispered. *“He knows what it’s like to be trapped between white walls, to hate oneself for their own power.”*

“True birds of a feather.” Shiva trilled.

“Okay,” Ren nodded, “Please take care of her.”

“I will.” Kaito threw Ren a weak smile. “Thank you.”

At that moment Shuichi rushed into the attic, panting.

“What’s wrong?” Ren asked as he got to his feet.

“As if we need *more* trouble.” Manami muttered.

“It seems the fates keep throwing drama our way.” Atsuhiro shook his head, “And not the *fun* kind.”

Shuichi shoved a piece of crumpled paper into Ren’s hands, “We have a problem.”

A few minutes of hushed planning later, Ren took a deep breath and hesitated in the storage room.

“Merp?” Lady Stubbs sat on the pile of boxes next to him.

“I’ll be fine.” Ren scratched behind her ears, “Just stay here.”

Ren threw open the bar’s back door, stepping out into the cool night air as Byakko paced at the front of his mindscape.

“How did he find us?” Byakko growled.

“I don’t know.” Ren said as his footsteps echoed down the alley, *“But we’re about to find out.”*

“Let’s hope the eldest Todoroki sibling doesn’t do anything he’ll regret.” Cu Chulainn said as he tightened his grip on his spear.

“My claws certainly won’t regret cleaving him in half should he dare.”

“I’ll devour him first!” Fafnir growled.

“He wouldn’t be stupid enough to come out here by himself without a good reason.” Ren stopped in the middle of the alley, Morgana’s gentle wind caressing his face, *“His fire can’t hurt us with you active, Byakko, and the others are watching from the rooftops.”*

Footsteps echoed within the shroud of darkness ahead. Without a second thought, he activated Third Eye. His surroundings shifted into monochromatic blue hues and the stark *gold* aura made the approaching figure stand out like a burning star.

Ren’s heart shot into his throat at the Arcana card above Dabi’s head.

Reverse Justice.

The card lazily spun upside down, charred around the edges.

He struggled to keep his indifferent expression as Dabi stepped into the light. His hood covered most of his face, but the purple scarring

and the horrible gleam of surgical staples around his lower face were visible.

“Todoroki Touya,” Ren tilted his head, letting Third Eye and the Arcana fade away, “Or would you rather be called Dabi?”

A flare of rage shone within cerulean eyes, but the anger was covered by a dry huff.

“Just Dabi.” He deadpanned as he threw back his hood, his expression twisted with a smirk of his own. “How did you know my real name? I haven’t used it in over a decade.”

“Be careful,” Byakko warned, *“He isn’t mentally stable, but he’ll see through any lie.”*

“It was your quirk.”

Dabi sneered, “My quirk.”

“Cerberus knows fire better than anyone else.” Ren narrowed his eyes, “He tasted Endeavor’s fire in Hosu, and then made the connection to your flames when those fires broke out around Musutafu, I don’t forgive you for that by the way. Both of your quirks have the same *soul* to it. It only took some research to make the connection.”

“Of *course* .” Dabi threw his head back, laughing like dry cinder blowing in the breeze, “That bastard ratted me out without even realizing. Typical.” His expression fell and he stared at Ren again, his eyes piercing, “How much do you know about Endeavor?”

“Not much.” Ren shrugged, “He has a reputation for not being the *nicest* hero around.” Ren’s mouth went dry, remembering another face other than Dabi’s, “I know he’s your father, but-”

“Don’t you *dare* .” Dabi snarled, “That bastard doesn’t deserve to be called my father after what he did to me!”

Ren waited several moments under Dabi's scathing glare, his voice barely a whisper when he spoke next, "Why did you come here? What do you want with me? I doubt it was to chat about the new number one hero."

"Because I'm done with Shigaraki's bullshit, I want out." Dabi paced in tight circles, "Shigaraki's so obsessed with putting your head on a spike that the group is falling apart, he's lost his *reason* for being the Leader of the League. He's even teaming up with a bunch of lowlife Yakuza to try and take you down."

Panic struck Ren like ice cold water, "It wouldn't be the Shie Hassaikai, would it?"

"You hit the nail on the head." Dabi stopped, facing Ren, "You really know how to piss off the wrong people, don't you Joker? Whatever you took from the Shie Hassaikai, they want it back. They said they know how to exploit one of your weaknesses to get at you."

Ren's mind echoed with various snarls and angry threats, his own heart rate skyrocketing as the world tilted, "What weakness?"

"They didn't clarify." Dabi shrugged. "How about we make a deal?"

Ren frowned, "What kind of deal?"

"You'll help me save Toga and Twice from Shigaraki's twisted bullshit. I don't want them getting killed when League crashes and burns. In return, I'll help you out with whatever Shigaraki and Overhaul have planned for you. Throw a monkey wrench in the works, and all that."

Ren found himself stupefied. "... What?"

"Those dorks don't want to be in the League anymore, but they're too scared to leave." Dabi searched Ren's face, "The Shie Hassaikai knows that Mr. Compress is still alive, and Shigaraki almost killed Toga without thinking twice."

"This can't be a trick, can it?" Ren asked.

"I do not know, Trickster." Gabriel whispered, *"He is being... sincere."*

"What fool presents themselves in front of an enemy to grovel for their comrades?" Cu Chulainn's laughter turned bitter, *"What a coward to be unable to do it by himself."*

"Well?" Dabi tilted his head, "Do we have a deal or what?"

Ren opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Look," Dabi blinked at his silence, "They'll be gunning for you whether you like it or not, Joker. Don't you want someone on the inside?"

Ren's eyes widened, "You're really suggesting...?"

"Yep. Shigaraki and Overhaul might have a common enemy, but they still *hate* each other. It won't be that hard to screw things up."

He rolled the thought threw his mind. Dabi tucked his hands in his tattered hoodie and leaned against the wall, studying him.

"It won't hurt to have another ally on the inside." Satanael said.

"Hmph, he's no ally." Baal muttered. *"You've fought against him before, no? It would be foolish to trust him now."*

"But he's not our enemy anymore either." Ishtar crossed her arms, *"He has grown since the Summer Camp."*

"It is up to you, Trickster." Satanael's tone held a note of finality, *"Whatever you choose, we'll support you."*

"What do you want out of this?" Ren asked when he finally found his voice, scanning over the horrible scarring around Dabi's body, "I could do more than try to save your friends. I can heal-"

“I don’t want to be healed. Just make sure that Toga and Twice survive what comes next, that’s all I’m asking.” Dabi stuck out his hand, the staples on his wrist made Ren’s stomach churn, “I’m only offering once.”

“... Okay.” Ren hesitated, but ended up shaking Dabi’s hand. The skin felt ice cold, and the Arcana card above Dabi’s head rippled across Ren’s soul.

Dabi rubbed his chest after he let go, barely raising a brow at the weird feeling. He shoved his hands back in his pockets and turned on his heel, “I’ll see you whenever shit hits the fan.”

“Wait!”

Dabi stopped with his back to Ren, tilting his head to listen.

“Are you still after revenge?” Ren stated before he could stop himself, the *Reverse Justice* Arcana slithering sourly through his heart. Dabi went rigid. “I remember the Summer Camp. You said you wanted to see Endeavor squirm for what he did to you, so much that you don’t care about what happens to the rest of your family.”

“So?” Dabi turned and raised a scarred brow, “He has other victims besides me. Isn’t that what you’re all about, getting *Justice* for those society trampled on? Why shouldn’t I be able to take Justice into my own hands like you?”

The way Dabi spat the word *Justice* stung Ren to his core. Akechi’s smirking face ghosted Ren’s mind in a way that screamed ‘I told you so.’

“It’s funny,” Ren dryly chuckled as he pinched the bridge of his nose, “how you remind me so much of somebody else. In many ways, he was just like you. His father caused his mother’s death, and he grew up wanting revenge. He was so consumed by it that he didn’t realize what he could’ve had instead.”

“What’s your point?” Dabi asked, his lip curling.

“He was our friend, once.” Ren’s voice trembled, “We tried to convince him that there was another way, that we could *help* him. We almost got through to him, but in the end he was killed by his own father’s machinations.”

Dabi scoffed, “Are you seriously telling me I should abandon my revenge for the sake of *friendship* ? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s not that, Touya-”

“*You tread on thin ice.*” Byakko whispered when Dabi’s expression turned livid.

Ren didn’t care. Nothing was stopping him from what he had wanted to say to Akechi before it was *too late* . The *Reverse Justice* Arcana mercilessly taunted him, slamming against his mind like heavy steel doors.

“You came here to get help for your friends, Touya.” Ren took another step closer, “Shouldn’t that count for something?”

Dabi’s piercing stare skewered Ren as the silence stretched on.

“I don’t care who you think you are, you don’t know me.” Dabi snarled, “I am *not* the same as your friend. I came here to get back at Shigaraki for all of the bullshit he dragged me and the others through.” Dabi turned his back to Ren and stomped down the alley.

“Stop right there!” A familiar voice echoed as a figure dropped down from the rooftops.

Ren tensed, Byakko’s icy magic flowing under his skin when Dabi raised a hand wreathed in blue flame, but he stopped when the figure was lit up in the darkness. Mr. Compress stood to his full height, streaks of blue shining on his Arsene mask.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Dabi huffed as he extinguished his flames, “You really did survive.”

“Yes, I’m alive and kicking no thanks to the League.” Mr. Compress’ voice held nothing but pure vitriol, “You’ll understand if I don’t buy your little story. How do I know you won’t go back to the League and reveal our location?”

“Why would I bother making a deal with Joker if I wanted you all dead?” Dabi scoffed, “I would’ve let the League and the Shie Hassaikai ambush the bar. Between them, the new High-End Nomu, and Gigantomachia, I doubt any of you would live if you were taken off guard.”

“High-End Nomu? Gigantomachia?” Ren said as Mr. Compress glared holes through his mask at Dabi.

Cu Chulainn looked at his spear, *“I doubt that refers to one of my attacks.”*

“The High-End is the doctor’s latest plaything. Its ridiculously powerful.” Dabi hasn’t broken off his staring contest with Mr. Compress, “Think of all of the previous Nomu and combine them into one.”

“And this Gigantomachia?” Mr. Compress snapped, “That name is familiar.”

“All For One’s top subordinate. A literal walking calamity with a bunch of quirks stuffed in him. I doubt that petrified potato kept Gigantomachia around for kicks. Shigaraki wormed his way into the giant’s heart, and both of them are dead set on getting revenge on Joker.” Dabi grinned at Mr. Compress, “Is the interrogation over? I have other shit to do, you know. Places to be, crusty assholes to piss off.”

Mr. Compress looked at Ren, who nodded. Mr. Compress stepped aside, but watched Dabi like a hawk as he melded into the darkness.

He curled his hands into fists.

"You're too trusting for your own good, my boy." Mr. Compress stated dryly, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I just... I want to help him, too."

Ren sensed the pity radiating from Mr. Compress, "Some people don't want to be helped, Ren. In this case, it may do more harm than good. I sincerely hope your good will won't come back to bite us later."

The others jumped down from the rooftop, wearing varying degrees of worry. Except for Lavenza, who remained as calm as can be.

"We heard everything." La Brava stated, deeply frowning, "Do you think we're compromised?"

"I do not think so." Lavenza said as she looked to where Dabi disappeared, "He was not lying when he came to ask the Trickster for assistance. He formed a... damaged Arcana. I know not what to make of it."

"Lady Lavenza's right. I'm not sensing anyone else in these alleys, so he *definitely* came alone." Morgana said, curling his tail around himself.

"It's no wonder the Yakuza disappeared off the streets," Gentle Criminal stroked his facial hair, "If they're plotting something alongside the League."

"But Dabi wasn't clear as to what 'weakness' they're targeting!" Morgana stated.

Byakko's glacial breath washed over Ren's soul, "*I suggest getting aid from the heroes. It's simply too dangerous to keep this to ourselves. Your lives depend on it.*"

Ren's eyes widened, "*I never thought I'd hear that from you.*"

Byakko snorted, but said nothing more.

“But we can’t bring them here.” La Brava said when Ren told them.

“Gee, it’s almost as if we have an isolated location *perfect* for secret meetings.” Mr. Compress said, his sour tone colored by amusement. “Or a brilliant hacker, maybe we won’t have to meet them face to face.”

La Brava rolled her eyes.

Gentle Criminal looked at Ren, “So, what’s the plan?”

Ren took a moment to think, the others waiting patiently.

“Tonight we’ll sleep in shifts.” Ren steeled himself and looked at La Brava, “Detective Tsukauchi has been involved with the investigation since the USJ, he’s a good middle man without being one of the heroes currently searching for us. Send an encrypted message to Tsukauchi with a warning. We’ll cover our tracks and go to the harbor if we have to. Our safety, and Eri’s especially, takes priority.”

There was a round of uneasy agreements and the Thieves returned inside.

“The bastard was moved again.” Gran Torino grumbled.

“*I know.*” Tsukauchi massaged his temples, the map of Japan on the table had been burned into his retinas after staring at it for so many weeks, covered in red string and X’s, “I was hoping to catch either Gigantomachia or Kurogiri by now, but they’re playing it smart.”

“Do you think they’re being fed info?”

Tsukauchi frowned, “I don’t know. Its possible that there could be leaks...” Tsukauchi yawned and rubbed his eyes.

Gran Torino scoffed, “I thought you were used to pulling all-nighters by now.”

“A few all-nighters in a row, yes. Going on several weeks worth of combing through mountains looking for a someone with a warp quirk and their charge? Not so much.” Tsukauchi did a double take at the light draping in from the opening of the command tent, “So much for narrowing down Gigantomachia’s next location before sunrise...”

“Bah, get yourself together. Drink some coffee and let’s get to work.”

Tsukauchi wanted to slam his head against the table as Gran Torino laughed and walked out, chilled mountain air freshening the staleness of the tent. His stiff muscles protested as he stood from the hard chair. At the moment, his phone pinged.

He picked it up to see a message that was *supposed* to arrive several hours ago. The reception all the way up in the mountains was spotty in the best of times, but of all the luck-

[???

SOS: *Shie Hassaikai and League Of Villains working together to target Joker’s weakness. Warn other Pro Heroes ASAP.*

Tsukauchi’s tried to reply or call the number back. Nothing went through.

“*Shit !*” Tsukauchi bolted out of the tent.

By the time they realized what the message meant, it had already been too late.

Haru’s quirk filled her vision with dancing auras, each person in the Blue Lotus weaving together ribbons of breath-taking lights that nobody else could see. Haru looked at Risumi as her gentle lavender

aura trembled against the massive morning crowd. She felt for Risumi, watching as the woman worked tirelessly against an endless wave of hungry customers.

Despite Haru's gentle prodding, neither Risumi nor Ayumu wanted to hire any additional help. They didn't have to say why.

Haru sighed and finished her tea. She was about to continue her day when something dark crept along the edge of her quirk's range, appearing as if from nowhere. Oily smudges that sapped life from the other colors. Auras that crumbled and molted and shifted into undulating waves of blackness... and they drew near liked a cursed tide.

Haru's heart pounded as two shadows sailed across the front window. One paused to stare at the mask charm hanging on the window, a tendril of hatred skittering through the air. The chime of the bell was muted to Haru's ears as she stared at the pair.

One wore ragged dark clothing, their hood hiding their features save for a few strands of pale hair.

The other was a man wearing a green jacket with a feathered purple collar, his face half-covered with a strange bird mask.

Haru looked at Risumi; the woman was so busy she couldn't see Haru.

She shuffled along and kept her head low as she went to the door, the pair not paying an old woman any mind. Being so close to them made her blood freeze, but she pushed through. For Risumi. For Ayumu. For young Hitoshi. For another poor boy that was so lost in the world.

Haru frantically looked around when she was out the door. At first, heroes and police patrolled this area nonstop. But as the months rolled by and signs of any nefarious activity remained at zero... their presence faded. From multiple daily check-ins, to once every other

day, to once a week... to none. Now, the only one who stuck around was Officer Akane, who dozed in an unmarked car down the street.

Haru hobbled to the car as fast as her old bones dared, and he startled awake when she knocked on the driver window. He rolled down the window, his smile fading when he saw her expression.

"Haru-san?" Akane's brow wrinkled in concern. "What's wrong?"

"St-strange men went into the cafe! Th-their auras... they're like walking *death* . Akane-san, I don't think they stopped by for coffee."

Akane stiffened, "Do you think they're hostile?"

"I-I don't know, but I couldn't warn Risumi without tipping them off. Please, you have to do something!"

Akane reached for his radio, "Calling all nearby heroes to the Blue Lotus, we have a potential villain situation at hand."

Haru couldn't understand the static garble that responded when Akane hopped out of his vehicle.

"Stay here, Haru-san." He said as he placed a firm hand on her shoulder, "I'll scope out the situation before the heroes arrive, so just sit tight, okay?"

Haru nodded as Akane casually walked towards the cafe. Perhaps it was a blessing that he came in an unmarked vehicle and wore civilian clothes, but that didn't stop her from wringing her aching hands together as Akane's aura joined the others, a clear raindrop falling into a bleeding black lake. She waited a long, agonizing minute.

Suddenly, all the colors ceased to exist.

The earth ruptured and buildings were torn apart. She was thrown off her feet, Akane's car partially shielding her from chunks of concrete

and glass raining down from the sky. Haru forced herself to her feet as an ear-ringing silence permeated the whole street.

Her hands flew to her mouth.

The corpse of the Blue Lotus was a broken and twisted thing. The roof was blown away, windows gouged out with glass peppering the ground, the charming tables at the front reduced to innumerable splinters.

Tears ran down Haru's face as she traversed the deadly terrain, stopping where the front door had been. The first thing she registered was the *horrible* silence, broken here and there by ominous creaks or groans. Shards of sunlight pierced through the heavy clouds of dust, the staleness eradicating the scents of sugar and spice, the smells she had associated with *love* .

"Risumi!? Ayumu!?" Haru screamed, her voice carrying over the hollow remains. "Akane!?"

No answer.

She jumped as her foot knocked something, a familiar chiming noise louder than the ringing of her ears. She knelt down and picked up the bell that had been attached to the door, next to it was Joker's mask charm, nearly cracked in half and plastered with grime. She held them to her chest, the itchy dust clinging on her face cleared with fresh tear stains.

Several bodies came into view when a sudden breeze cleared the lingering cloud. Alive, but bleeding heavily.

"Akane-san!" She rushed to the officer's side.

He was unconscious, impaled in several places by debris. His left leg was a mangled mess of flesh.

Sirens howled across the city as heroes arrived on the scene. She barely felt herself being gently pulled away by first responders, her eyes not leaving Akane's body as other emergency workers swarmed Akane and the other injured patrons.

Another oily stain appeared over the cafe's corpse, cards raining down from a cloud of black mist. Hundreds, *thousands* fell over Musutafu that morning.

One fluttered down in front of her, as soft as a feather, and landed on her shoe.

With a trembling hand, she picked up the black and gray card reeking of death.

For the insufferable thief, Joker,

You took something from us, so we stole something precious from you in return. We demand a trade. We'll give you 24 hours to respond before Ayumu and Risumi are painfully dismantled, piece by piece, and delivered to various police stations around Japan.

We'll be waiting.

- The Shie Hassaikai

Sips tea from the safety of a submarine somewhere deep under the ocean, smirking

See you guys on August 13th!

Also Chapter 8 of the Thieves Den will be updated with the Arcanas.

Broadcast Accident

Chapter 78: Broadcast Accident

“Are you alright, Iida?” Hawks asked when Tensei frowned at his laptop.

“Yeah, it must’ve been a glitch or something.”

I'm not responsible for any broken devices caused by this chapter ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Check my [Twitter](#) for some exciting news!

Hitoshi wrinkled his nose as the grass tickled his face, barely holding back a sneeze as he rocked to and fro on his stomach. His main predicament? He’d gotten himself tangled up while practicing with a capture weapon, his arms knotted behind his back, one of his legs painfully bent over his back where a strip of fabric pulled at his ankle. His other leg floundered as he tried to right himself like a fish out of water.

A sigh came from somewhere behind him, “I told you not to practice by yourself.”

“Uh...” He contorted his neck to look at Aizawa, grinning sheepishly, “I’m not sorry?”

“Of course you’re not.” Aizawa huffed, an amused smirk hidden by his scarf, “This is why you should always have a knife on hand.

There's nothing worse than one of your strengths being turned against you in battle."

Aizawa unsheathed the large knife at his lower back and cut him free. Hitoshi face-planted into the dirt when there was no tension to keep his head off the ground. He rushed to his feet and wiped the dirt off his gym clothes.

Hitoshi cleared his throat to mask his embarrassment, "When did you get back? You've been gone a lot recently."

Aizawa studied Hitoshi, his smirk disappearing, "I returned late last night to check in on my brats before I head out again this morning with some of my other brats. I apologize for not being around to help you train. Some missions... take longer than others."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Aizawa opened his mouth, but they were interrupted by a small parade of footsteps. They turned to the approaching group of teachers. Hound Dog, Ectoplasm with a few of his clones, and Nezu, who rode on Ectoplasm's shoulder. Nezu's eyes sent off warning sirens in Hitoshi's head. How such glossy black eyes could hide so much fury and sorrow, he'd never know.

He was used to silver.

Aizawa frowned, "What's wrong?"

"Shinsou Hitoshi is coming to my office." Nezu stated, his tone bordering on frigid, "There's been an incident."

Hitoshi froze.

Aizawa's brow was heavy, but he urged Hitoshi to follow. They headed for the main building, the early morning sunshine reflecting off of it like a bright beacon of hope, if only the dour atmosphere

wasn't choking Hitoshi with a sudden sense of doom. Stifling silence dogged them until the door to Nezu's office clicked shut.

The Ectoplasm clones stood guard outside, while Hound Dog and the real Ectoplasm took seats around the office, the way they stared at Hitoshi sent butterflies into his stomach. Nezu went to his chair, gesturing to the seat across from his desk.

Hitoshi ignored Admiral Feesh as he sat down at the edge of the chair, his heart pounding.

"What's going on?" Aizawa stood at Hitoshi's side.

"I'll not mince words," Nezu clasped his paws together, "The Blue Lotus has been destroyed and Ayumu and Risumi Shinsou have been kidnapped by Yakuza."

Hitoshi's heart stuttered, every beat accompanied by a startled stab of pain. His skin prickled as his ears rung, the sounds around him muffled as his world turned gray.

"Wh... what?" Hitoshi whispered, his tongue suddenly felt like a lead weight in his mouth.

"What happened?" Aizawa snapped as his whole body went rigid.

"Less than an hour ago, a patron tried to warn the police about potentially hostile persons entering the Blue Lotus." Nezu looked at Aizawa, "From Haru-san's descriptions, we conclude that Overhaul was one of the main perpetrators."

Nezu set a gray and black card in front of Hitoshi. It was nearly identical to Joker's calling cards, the righteous Phantom Thief insignia replaced by a plague mask and bowler hat. A sick mockery of the real thing.

Bile crept up Hitoshi's throat as he read and reread it.

"It seems my theory was correct. Joker *did* rescue Eri and escape Overhaul's clutches, the Shie Hassaikai wanted revenge... and now they want to trade your parents for-"

"Grrrrr, Nezu. " Hound Dog snapped as he went to Hitoshi's other side. A strong, but soothing hand clasped Hitoshi's shoulder, "That's enough. Ectoplasm and I will stay with the boy. *You* and Aizawa have an important mission ahead of you."

"N-no, let me... let me help." The four adults stared at him with wide eyes, "I can... I can help!"

"Shinsou, we can't allow that." Aizawa's pained grimace was a slap to the face.

"Indeed." Nezu tried a smile, but Hitoshi only saw it as another punch to the gut, "Yes, I know what you can do. You are talented, and your skills have been honed by many a fine teacher. However, unlike us or most of your peers in the Hero Course, you don't possess a Provisional Licence. Your actions could be considered vigilantism, and I would have to rethink your position as a hero hopeful. Am I understood?"

Hitoshi opened and closed his mouth, frustrated tears pricking at his eyes.

Nezu sighed, "That said, I know this is painful for you." The rat-mouse-thing scooted his chair back and deeply bowed to Hitoshi, "I apologize for not preventing this. I thought we made the proper preparations, but clearly I was wrong."

"I don't want your damn apology!" Hitoshi yelled. His voice cracked and tears streamed down his cheeks, "Just... just bring them back!"

Nezu firmly nodded. He approached Hitoshi and squeezed his hand, Hitoshi barely felt it over the blanket of cold detachment overtaking him.

Aizawa knelt in front of Hitoshi, “I promise we’ll get your parents back, safe and sound. Nezu, let’s go.”

“I feel like a damn hypocrite.” Aizawa said after they left Hitoshi to Hound Dog and Ectoplasm with heavy hearts.

“It cannot be helped. They’ll take care of the boy while we’re gone. In the meantime,” Nezu climbed up his shoulder as they pounded down the hall. “I already sent the message to the interns in 1-A and 3-A, instructing them to meet us at the entrance ASAP.”

“Is it wise to bring them?” Aizawa growled, “They’re too emotionally attached to this case with Joker, Eri, and now the tragedy of the Blue Lotus. They should stay here too.”

Nezu chuckled coldly, “Oh, but if we did that, then we might as well replace the whole team at Nighteye’s agency. You and I would be taken off as well. Would you prefer a different team to handle this dire case on such a short notice?”

“... No.”

Nezu nodded, “I thought so. I cannot even imagine Joker’s rage when he hears of this atrocity. What fools. The villains have signed their own death warrants... and I only hope we can prevent something truly catastrophic from happening this time around. Let’s not fail this boy and young Shinsou’s parents again.”

Aizawa rushed out of the building. The group of interns, true to Nezu’s word, hovered at U.A.’s entrance with costume cases in hand. The Big Three were at the head of the group, resolve rolling off of them in waves. For the 1-A interns, traces of fear in their eyes were overwritten by determination, the will to *act* and *protect* clear in their body language.

Aizawa gave them a stern glance, “Let’s go.”

No other words were needed as they marched out of U.A.

Kaito's stomach knotted at Eri's troubled sleep.

At his urging, the others went downstairs and left him alone with her, both to make their final preparations and to give him the privacy he wanted for this incoming discussion.

Eventually Eri stirred with a rustle of fabric, the blankets falling around her as she sat up. Ren's handkerchief was clutched tightly in her hands before her sleepy gaze landed on him.

He smiled, "Morning, sleepy head."

She blinked a few times, "Morning..."

Then the memories hit. Her eyes widened, her exhaustion washed away by mounting horror.

Tears came freely as she trembled, "I-I'm sorry. I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean-" A hiccuping gasp escaped her lips, "I-I didn't mean it *I'm sorry!*"

"Eri, it's not your fault." She flinched, but didn't shy away as he rubbed circles on her back, "It's *not* your fault. Ren is okay. Ishtar and Byakko are okay. Nobody was hurt."

"B-But I-" She buried her face in the handkerchief, "Ren-nii could've disappeared! I-I could've- I-I almost killed him! I don't want him to get hurt because of me!"

Kaito steeled himself against the raw agony in her voice. Such a young girl should *never* experience such pain.

"Eri, look at me." She shuddered against a muffled sob, but complied, "It's *not* your fault," He reiterated, "What you went through

is *not* your fault. What happened with your father is *not your fault* . You didn't do anything to deserve this."

Eri stilled, "How did you....? How do you know...? I-I'm... *cursed* ."

"Do you remember what Ishtar said?"

"Y-yeah."

"She's right. You're *not* cursed, you just have a power you don't know how to control yet." Kaito's expression softened, "Believe it or not, we're pretty much in the same boat. Both of our quirks mutated so far off the mark that nobody could've predicted it."

"... What?"

"Do you want to know what my quirk is?" Eri blinked away the last tears and nodded. "I relive people's lives whenever I look into their eyes. Think of it like... like a witch's spell. I can't control it, or stop it when it's active. I'm forced to spend *years* living as somebody else, and when I come back... sometimes I don't feel comfortable in my own skin for a while."

Man. Woman. He spent so many years as either, and spent a few lives as neither.

Eri furrowed her brow, "So, not a spell... a curse?"

"... Yeah. My quirk first activated when I was younger than you are now... and from a crowd filled with *hundreds* of people. My sense of self was lost for a long time, and I *hated* my quirk when I finally came back to myself so many years later. I practically spent my whole life in a hospital. I hid from the world so my cursed power wouldn't hurt me anymore."

He never told a soul about his escape from that weird government hospital. Not even Ren or the others knew the full truth, and he wasn't about to go into details with Eri. He hadn't trusted his own

parents not to send him back to that place, so he robbed them of nearly every yen and had been running away ever since. An old gnarled knot of guilt throbbed in his heart when we wondered how they were doing, or if they ever wondered what became of their coward of a child.

He pushed those ancient thoughts aside when Eri sniffled and looked at him with her big, watery eyes.

“Do you... still hate your quirk?”

“I used to, until Ren and the others came along.” Kaito looked to the stairs, Eri’s eyes followed, “They accepted me for who I am, for what I’ve been through, and they’re helping me learn that my quirk shouldn’t control my life anymore.”

He swiveled his head back to Eri. Kaito took the handkerchief and gently wiped away her tears.

“I lived through your life last night, Eri. Your power is soft and gentle. Ren, Ishtar, Morgana, me, and the others will help you see that, if you let us.” Kaito placed his hand over her arm, their suppressant cuffs clinking together, “Okay?”

Eri nodded as she lay her other hand on top of his, “O-Okay. I... I’ll try, Kaito-san.”

She would need a lot more than one conversation to heal *years* of trauma, but the seed planted by Ishtar would be watered with his and Ren’s reassurances. Maybe, after a lot of sun and gentle rain, that seed could bloom into the most beautiful flower.

“You don’t need honorifics with me, Eri.” He patted her head, “Do you want to take off the Quirk Suppressant?”

“N-no.” Eri traced the silvery band around her arm. “N-not yet.”

“Alright, but we’ll have to take it off eventually.” Kaito ruffled her hair, “Are you hungry? We can go downstairs for breakfast, and you can see Ren for yourself.”

Eri wiped away the last of her tears, settling back into a neutral expression. Her growling stomach answered for her. Before he could say anything else, claws frantically scrambled up the stairs.

“Kaito!”

Kaito turned to Morgana, whose eyes were nearly black from terror, and got to his feet, “What’s wrong now?”

“I-It’s.... I-It’s...” Morgana wildly shook his head, “Just hurry downstairs!”

Morgana was gone in a flash.

“Stay here until I know what’s happening, okay?” Kaito said.

Eri nodded and buried herself in her blankets.

Kaito raced downstairs, through the kitchen and into the bar front. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end as he walked into a glacial den, his stomach plummeting as an animalistic terror gripped him. The culmination of countless years of experience screamed at him to *run* .

He saw Ren leaning over the bar counter with blazing gold eyes, glaring at nothing. Ren’s fingers were bone white as they clawed into the wood, small cracks splintering the counter like a shattered mirror.

Kaito had never seen such *frigid rage* consume Ren before. It wasn’t the type of volcanic anger where someone lashed out in the heat of the moment, but seething hatred that swallowed any other emotion in ice, sapped the very life and color from their surroundings. Deepened the twisted shadows around him.

Kaito had to stop himself from fleeing as he looked to the others.

Atsuhiro paced around the bar, expression grim. Tobita and Manami frantically whispered to one another, Manami close to tears as her eyes flicked to Ren. Tobita comforted her. Shuichi and Lady Stubbs were behind the bar, trying and failing not to panic at Ren's odd stillness as the golden storm brewed in his eyes.

"What's going on?" Kaito whispered, his voice too loud in the frozen silence.

"Look." Morgana glanced at the laptop on the bar.

Kaito's heart pounded as he scrolled through pictures of the Blue Lotus' remains. Other tabs were open to various news sites and social media, all of it plagued by images of the horrible black and gray card.

BREAKING: Blue Lotus Destroyed By Villains!

How To Prepare For A Spontaneous Typhoon And Other 'Natural' Disasters.

The Imminent Rise And Fall Of The Yakuza.

Fake Calling Cards Rain Over Musutafu!

Are The Heroes Responsible For Failing The Blue Lotus!?

Japan Holds Its Breath As People Await The Fate Of The Shinsou Family; How Will Joker React?

Kaito clicked away from the articles and to Joker's Spotlight being flooded with random comments.

'Oh my god, Japan's not ready for another typhoon!'

'How could they do this!?! The Blue Lotus was my favorite cafe!!'

'Welp, the Shie Hassaikai or whatever these losers named themselves had a good run. I hope they have nice plots picked out

for their graves.'

'I wonder what Joker took that was so important??'

'Uh.... are they DUMB??'

'WRECK THEM JOKER!!!!'

'Wow, I'm going to need so much popcorn for this shit show.'

Kaito thickly swallowed and turned to Ren, "What do you want to do?"

Ren stood there, hunched over as his unseeing eyes glowed a dazzling citrine.

Morgana put his paw on Ren's arm, "Ren?"

The bar creaked when Ren snapped out of it. A renewed chill seeped into Kaito's bones as the air became smothered by Ren's power. The others weren't as subtle.

"I promised Eri she would be safe. Giving her up isn't an option." Ren spoke slow, but each syllable dripped with unimaginable strength plucking at their souls, "But I won't abandon Ayumu and Risumi either."

"If being with you taught me anything, Ren," Tobita whispered, "It's that there are always more than two options."

"Ah, yes." Atsuhiro gained a sharp smirk, his face pale against Ren's soul-searing aura, "Give up Eri to trade for the Shinsou couple, but I doubt they'll let us go that easily. Or, we stay away and seal the their fate. Both are unacceptable."

"S-so...?" Manami asked, her hands tightly clasped together.

"So we find our *own* solution. The secret third option, if you will." Atsuhiro looked at Ren, "The villains think they have the upper hand,

but they've forgotten a vital little detail about you. As much as I loathed this idea before, teaming up with Nighteye and the other heroes will give us the advantage we need."

"All of us, plus a huge group of Japan's top heroes!?" Shuichi cried, "They don't know what they've gotten themselves into!"

"Merp!"

Ren closed his eyes. Morgana and the others gaped as Joker's costume slowly materialized, not within a burst of blinding flames, but from a silky veil of cold blue cinders falling over him like fresh snow. Even the shadows within the bar seemed to recoil as Joker's icy golden eyes snapped open. The atmosphere hummed with the power of a Demon Lord.

"La Brava."

"Y-yes?"

Joker pulled at his gloves, "It's finally time to meet the heroes." He chuckled, his smirk ice cold, "We'll be crashing the meeting they're undoubtedly having right about now. Hack into Nighteye's agency and see what our options are."

Manami squared her shoulders, "Okay! I put a backdoor to Nighteye's security days ago just in case. I'll comb through their information first before you make yourself known, see if they found anything concrete on the Shie Hassaikai."

"Ooh, that'll give us time to set the stage; the proper lighting, the background, the actors!" Atsuhiro beamed as he scanned Joker from head to toe, "All of it must be *perfect* if you are to present yourself! Leave that part to me, Joker!"

"At least someone's excited..." Shuichi muttered.

“Ren needs to calm down first.” Kaito said, Joker blinked at him. “I talked to Eri about last night and she’s doing a little better, but we don’t want to scare her. She’ll blame herself if she sees you like this.”

“Sorry.” Joker clenched his shaking fists and took long, deep breaths. After a few minutes, the hellish power withered away, almost slinking back into its master. Joker opened his eyes, his rage tempered into his razor sharp gaze. “Get started, La Brava.”

“O-on it!” Manami swiped the computer and they went upstairs.

“Ren-nii!!” Eri bolted from her futon and crashed into Joker, who had knelt down in time to wrap her in his arms. “I-I’m sorry…”

“Don’t be sorry, Eri. You did nothing wrong.”

Joker tightened his hug as her little fingers dug into his tailcoat. Joker whispered encouragements Kaito couldn’t hear, and they pulled back after a few long minutes.

“Eri, can you do something for me?” Joker rested his gloved hands on her tiny shoulders. Eri stared at him with wide, watery eyes, “I need you to stay with Kaito while we do something important. Can you be a brave big girl while we work?”

Eri sniffled and wiped her eyes. She stood as tall as she could for a child her size, and nodded with determination. Joker gently ruffled her hair and stood up, looking between Kaito and Tobita.

“Can you two take care of her while we set up?”

“Of course.” Tobita smiled despite his pallor complexion, and bowed to Eri, “Shall we go make breakfast, Eri? I know a delicious recipe for strawberry crepes with whipped cream.”

“O-okay.”

She looked at Joker one last time before she went downstairs, hand in hand with Kaito and Tobita.

“Now, I know *just* the trick to make you look far more intimidating for the heroes!” Kaito heard Atsuhiro say before they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Risumi thrashed against her restraints.

The burlap sack over her head made her vision swim in darkness, the suffocating fabric clogging her mouth and nose whenever she tried to gasp for breath. But no matter how she fought, her hands were bound behind her back in thick leather gloves to make her quirk useless, and those themselves were attached to cold metal chains on the wall.

She could barely get her bearings before the bag was ripped off of her head. She clenched her eyes shut against the startling brightness.

“Risumi!!”

Risumi forced her eyes open, staring across the white room to Ayumu. They had both been chained to the opposite walls, so close but yet so far from each other. Ayumu had some sort of collar around his neck, with sharp spikes digging into his skin.

“Did we say you could talk?” A raspy voice scraped into her ears, and a man with pale hair and a hand attached to his face kicked Ayumu. “Shut it, you useless NPC.”

“Enough.” Another man with a white hood and mask said, “The boss wants to talk to them.”

The pale-haired man scoffed.

Risumi’s blinked rapidly to study the crowd as her eyes finally adjusted. The pale haired man stood within another group of people; A girl with twin buns wearing a school uniform, a man with deep purple scars wearing a long black coat, another man in a full

bodysuit, and a... *creature* crawling on all fours, its hungry golden eyes digging into her.

The other group wore plague masks, builds of all shapes and sizes. She recognized the leader from the cafe as his shadow fell over her, the one in the gold and red plague mask that pushed himself to the front of her line.

“Nemoto.” He droned, his voice lacking any emotion.

A person in a black plague mask and bowler hat stepped forward, “Do you know why you’re here?”

“No.” Risumi shivered as control of her own mouth was taken away.

“Do you know any of Joker’s weaknesses?”

“N-No, I-”

“Leave her alone, you cowards!” Ayumu screamed.

“You insolent worm!” Nemoto shouted, “Be quiet, otherwise I’ll silence you myself! Overhaul has deemed you-”

“Enough Nemoto.” The man with the red mask said. Nemoto obliged with a bowed head. This must be Overhaul. “You should be grateful, Ayumu and Risumi Shinsou. Your sacrifice will be used for a higher purpose.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Risumi snapped.

A weird little stuffed plush at Overhaul’s ankles cackled and jabbed a sharp finger at her, “It means you should be overjoyed to be bait for Joker! We’ll wipe his disease from the face of the earth thanks to you!!”

“Yes.” Overhaul sighed as Risumi exchanged a horrified look with her husband. The man knelt in front of her, “If you cooperate, I’ll

make your deaths quick and painless. But if you try to cause trouble before Joker gets here-”

Risumi did what any sane woman would do when being held captive by crazy villains.

She spit in his face.

An inaudible gasp swept the room. Overhaul’s eyes shrunk into pinpricks as his eyebrows twitched like malfunctioning clockwork, his skin bubbling with hives as her spit dribbled down his cheek. Risumi continued to stare Overhaul in the eye with defiance.

His hand was over her face in the blink of an eye.

“Risumi!!” Ayumu screamed.

Chains strained as Ayumu tried to reach her. She couldn’t see how the weird abomination with golden eyes tackled him, cackling as it clutched Ayumu’s head in its meaty hands, forcing him to watch.

Risumi was frozen as Overhaul’s fingers clawed into her hair, every atom in her body *screamed* as her whole being was taken hostage. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t *move* . Somewhere in her heart, she knew Overhaul could *end her* without lifting a finger. She didn’t know how much time passed, an eternity or a few seconds made no difference when death had you in his grasp. Eons passed before Overhaul slowly pulled away.

She gasped and frantically backed herself against the wall.

“Are you alright, Overhaul?” The man with the white hood asked as if *Overhaul* was the threatened one.

Overhaul wiped his face with a clean rag from his pocket, and threw it on the ground. He then turned on his heel and approached one of his masked subordinates, the largest muscled one with metal knuckledusters and a skin tight black mask in the shape of a bird. A

scream was locked behind Risumi's throat as the person exploded in a crimson wave, staining the wall and floor. She violently flinched when blood splattered on her face and the knuckle dusters crashed onto the ground with a loud clang.

The other people in plague masks hardly reacted as Overhaul breathed hard, while shock overtook the other group.

"Why the hell did you do that!?" The pale haired man snapped after an extended silence, "You should've killed *her* off! We only need *one* NPC."

"We need both of them alive, Shigaraki." Overhaul growled as he stared at her in disgust, the bloody mask of his former comrade clutched in his hands, "I could kill her and bring her back... but I don't want to disturb the natural process. *This* could prove a more useful hostage than the both of them."

Shigaraki tilted his head, "... *What ?*"

"I sensed a specific bundle of cells in your womb." Overhaul's voice was like a blade across her skin. He burned her with the manic sheen in his eyes, "Congratulations, Shinsou Risumi. You're *expecting* ."

The news struck her worse than the blood on her face.

"... Risumi?"

The whole world tilted when she looked at Ayumu, the beast still holding him down. Many emotions flickered through his expression. Happiness. Awe. *Terror* .

"I... I didn't..." She whispered. "Y-you could be lying..."

"We could get you a test. You're far enough along to where the results would be immediate."

Something in Overhaul's voice told her he wasn't lying.

“Regardless, you know why you must obey.” Overhaul headed for the door. He opened it and paused in the door frame, “Soramitsu, Yu, Toya, clean up Rikiya’s mess. Shigaraki, you and your group watch the prisoners until Joker arrives with my asset.”

Overhaul left with his remaining cohorts, leaving a trail of blood in their wake. The three who stayed behind turned towards the giant bloodstain, the one with a burlap sack around his neck, tied with a thick rope around his neck, and with eye holes and a creepy stitched smile, lumbered over to the grisly scene.

The scarecrow-like man stopped before the bloodied knuckle dusters, slowly pulling the knot that kept the sack in place. Instead of moving knuckledusters away like a normal person, he lifted the bag on his head to reveal a too-wide mouth with straight teeth, and *began eating* . A bubble of nausea rose into Risumi’s throat at the solid crunch of metal and slurping of blood. The other group visibly recoiled. Aside from the girl with twin buns, who watched with devious fascination.

The bald man with the plain white face mask sighed, “I’ll get a mop.”

The last Yakuza, another plague masked man with a crazed look in his eyes and shoulder length yellow hair, cackled, “Hurry up before Soramitsu finishes his meal.”

How can they be so callous? They just watched their boss murder one of their so-called allies in cold blood right in front of them, and their response was to... eat his remains and make jokes? Do they even have any human emotions left?

“Eugh.”

“Dabi! Where are you going?” Shigaraki snapped at the man with purple scars.

Dabi stopped by the door, scowling, “Getting the lady something calming to drink and a washcloth to wipe her face. A pregnant

woman shouldn't be too stressed out, you moron. If you even *think* about touching them while I'm gone, I'll light your crusty ass on fire. Kurogiri's not here to stop me this time."

Shigaraki rolled his eyes, before glancing at the Yakuza in utter distaste, "I'm not sticking around with these circus freaks. Hood, you're with me. Toga and Twice can play babysitter."

The cackling beast crawled off Ayumu and followed Shigaraki out the door.

"Oh MY GOD! That... was... *awesome* !! I'll remember the look on Overhaul's face *forever!* " The school girl rushed to Risumi with stars in her eyes, bouncing happily. Risumi barely understood her past the *crunch crunch*. "Do you really have a baby in your tummy!? Twice, we should have a party! Go tell Dabi to get a cake!"

"Whaaaaat, we have to throw a baby shower!!" Twice flailed his arms, "Ew, *no!* Children are gross! Why do we have to babysit!? THIS. IS. TORTURE!"

Risumi locked eyes with her husband. His expression broke her heart. They couldn't come close enough to comfort one another. She took a breath as the girl babbled on excitedly, and tried to convey Strength and hope through her eyes.

After all, Joker would come for them.

It's only a matter of time before these villains would sorely regret their actions.

Midoriya tapped his fingers on his knee, staring at the horrible pictures on display via the projector. He still couldn't believe what happened to the *Blue Lotus*. It was unrecognizable now, all twisted metal and the bare warped frame of the building. His classmates' expressions were all sickened by the photos, and Kirishima barely

held back tears before Fat Gum gave him some silent encouragement.

“I believe they escaped because the Shie Hassaikai had Kurogiri,” Iida Tensei said as he read a report from his laptop, “Detective Tsukauchi gathered several witness statements around Musutafu saying they noticed a black and purple cloud before the cards poured out.”

“So the League has teamed up with the Shie Hassaikai to get at Joker.” Nighteye steepled his fingers, expression grim.

“Those bastards!” Miruko slammed her fist on the table, “Why’d they have to bring innocent people into this!?”

“They’re villains.” Endeavor stated dryly, “They don’t care about civilian casualties if it means they can get what they want.”

Gang Orca radiated fury, “Why aren’t we out there doing something about it!?”

“We located their compound right before things went south,” Hawks scratched the back of his head, frowning, “But even so, I can’t send in any feathers to stage a rescue since they have a warper on hand.”

“I agree. If we make one wrong move, *anything* to tip off the Shie Hassaikai, then the hostages will be killed.” Eraserhead said with a dark expression, “We can’t rush into this blindly.”

“So we just sit here and waste time instead? The card said they’d only wait 24 hours before-”

“Gang Orca,” Ryukyu turned to him, her own posture fragile, “I *know* . I want them to be safe alongside Joker and Eri, but our hands are tied until we have more information and a solid plan of attack.”

“Any news on Joker’s Spotlight, Iida?” Fat Gum asked.

Iida Tensei sighed, “None. He still has about 20 hours to respond before...”

The projector screen turned fuzzy. A moment of static before it returned to normal, but Midoriya’s eyes snapped to it.

Nobody else seems to have noticed, except for Nezu, who suddenly grinned as his tail happily bobbed back and forth.

“Are you alright, Iida?” Hawks asked when Tensei frowned at his laptop.

“Yeah, it must’ve been a glitch or something.”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s a mere glitch!” Nezu chirped.

A velvety chuckle echoed around the room. Midoriya jolted as several gasps broke out.

“Nezu, you should know better than to ruin a perfectly good entrance.”

The projector changed to a spinning icon of a red top hat and a mask. Midoriya’s jaw dropped when Joker appeared on screen, an icy thrum running down his spine like the tip of a knife. His costume was different, accented with deeper void blacks and brilliant gold, his white domino mask equally changed to fit the new color scheme.

Darkness clung to the edges of the screen. The camera was put on a lower angle to look up at Joker, with a cold light highlighting the underside of his face and clothes, but made his blazing golden eyes gleam like drops of pure sunlight. *Cold* sunlight. A sort of righteous light threatening to burn evildoers with a single glance.

Midoriya felt like an ant while Joker looked like a regal king staring down at his subjects on a throne of wooden crates, his legs elegantly crossed while he rested a cheek against his fist.

Seeing Joker with unrivaled glory sent a jolt of cold fear and excitement through his heart, One For All thrummed under his skin in response to his terror. He exchanged horrified looks with Todoroki Shoto. Kirishima gawked at Joker, unshed tears building up in his eyes again.

Tsuyu let out a low croak while Uraraka covered her mouth with both hands, eyes so wide they could pop out of her head.

Tokoyami's feathers bristled out and his crimson eyes held nothing but thoughtful respect.

The Big Three were deadlocked, exchanging certain looks that traded several sentences in a second.

The heroes within Joker's estranged group openly gaped at the vigilante. Eraserhead locked on Joker with an unreadable expression.

A long silence strangled everyone. Joker's smirk widened, and he opened his mouth to make the first move-

"Is Eri okay!?" Midoriya blurted. Joker looked to him, and Midoriya shuddered as *those eyes*, a gaze that swallowed the hearts of stars, stared into his very soul. "Is she... she's okay, right?"

"Eri's fine." Joker's lips tugged upwards in a semblance of a softer smile, but it was as cold as ice, *"We've been taking good care of her. I won't let Overhaul get his hands on her ever again."*

Lemillion flinched.

Midoriya shivered, his core struck with guilt.

"Oh?" Nighteye glared at the screen, "And who's fault is it now that Ayumu and Risumi Shinsou are in their clutches? If you'd let her go back with Overhaul like Lemillion and Deku did, they would have been safe."

“Nighteye, you go too far.” Best Jeanist said, his voice trembling.

“Really?” Nighteye adjusted his glasses, “We would’ve *handled* it. My agency specializes in taking down Yakuza, we already had significant leads and we were close to-”

“Let’s get one thing straight, Nighteye.”

Midoriya shrank down into his chair. He would never know how the temperature plummeted from Joker’s scathing glare, a sudden pressure squeezing his lungs. His mind briefly flashed to All For One’s aura during the Kamino Crisis, but this was somehow *worse*, striking a deeper fear Midoriya hadn’t felt before.

The power of a *true Demon Lord*, not the fake that All For One claimed to be.

Joker slowly uncrossed his legs and leaned closer to the camera.

*“I will **never** apologize for saving someone who needed help. I won’t sit around and let a little girl be tormented by her captor simply because some other hero decided it wasn’t her time to be saved.”*

Nighteye scowled, standing in the face of such immense power, “Even so, it doesn’t change the fact that *your* actions led up to this point. Had you waited, the Blue Lotus would still be standing, and Risumi and Ayumu Shinsou would be safe. We would’ve rescued Eri in time.”

“You can’t possibly know that.” Joker outmatched Nighteye’s fiery gaze. *“You have **no idea** what Overhaul has put her through.”*

“Come on, you guys,” Hawks held up his hands, “What matters is what we can do *right now*. The past is the past, so let’s move on. There are people counting on us.”

Joker snorted, the atmosphere returning to some semblance of normal, *“Fine.”*

“... Fine.” Nighteye grumbled.

“Now, as for the information you all worked so hard to gather...”
Joker reached into his pocket for a burner phone, which he unlocked and idly scrolled through. *“Following a known member back home with your feathers before they went to ground? Good work, Hawks. It’s unfortunate that you heroes couldn’t do anything else without... crossing lines.”*

The hero in question stiffened, his wings poofing out.

“How do you-” Nighteye started.

“Your cybersecurity is dreadful, Nighteye. Truly dreadful. It seems you don’t have a full list of Shie Hassaikai members or their quirks, let alone any information on the League’s new ‘recruits.’ ” The heroes exchanged troubled glances, *“Give me a few hours and I’ll hack into their security to provide a full scope of the situation. It’ll be untraceable, of course. They’ll be none the wiser until it’s too late.”*

“My, my.” Nezu’s chuckle drew Joker’s curious gaze, “You could’ve silently taken this information to stage an attack all on your own. But the fact that you revealed yourself to us like this instead... Joker, do you wish to join forces with us?”

Joker grinned, *“Why else would I bother doing this? I already have a plan to rescue Risumi and Ayumu, but we’ll need everyone’s cooperation.”*

“Why should we follow your plan?” Endeavor asked, his tone surprisingly neutral, “It is our job to take these villains down.”

Joker hesitated, pinning Endeavor with an odd look Midoriya couldn't decipher.

Eventually, Joker huffed, *“Because they’re after **me** , and if we mess up then Ayumu and Risumi will die and I won’t be around to-”* Joker

waved his scarlet gloved hand, Midoriya noticed how Todoroki flinched in the corner of his eye, *"That outcome is unacceptable."*

"Wait," Eraserhead stood up with a glare. It wasn't a heated glare, more of the same unimpressed look he'd give his students when they tried something stupid, "You're not seriously suggesting you use yourself as bait?"

"Absolutely not!" Gang Orca's slamming fists cracked the table, knocking over cups and displacing papers. His chair screeched back as he rose to his feet, "Joker, *please* don't do this. We just... you've been through enough. Call me selfish if you want, but I don't want to see you get hurt again! This is too dangerous!"

Joker's citrine eyes glimmered with something that made Midoriya's heart sink to the floor, *"I know, Orca, but I can sneak a team of pro heroes into the Shie Hassaikai's complex without detection."*

"You... what?" Fat Gum asked. "How?"

"We know Mr. Compress is with you." Nighteye stated, "Don't you think they'd search you for those marbles before you even entered their compound?"

Midoriya swore he heard an indignant huff somewhere off screen, but it was so quiet he must've imagined it.

"No, we aren't using his quirk. They know he's with us and would know what to look for, it'd be the obvious method to set a trap. This other method is... unorthodox, compared to what you're imagining."

"Oho!" Nezu leapt onto the broken table, paws clasped behind his back as he faced the screen, "Would this 'unorthodox method' be tied to your true *home*?"

"... You're sharp as usual, Nezu." Joker chuckled, his shock erased with an eerie smirk, *"That it does."*

Miruko mouthed 'true home?' to Hawks, who shrugged. Endeavor, however, pushed aside their cryptic words.

"So you're proposing a pincer attack?" Endeavor stared smoothly into the screen. "Bring a team of seasoned pros on the inside, while another, larger force waits on the outside?"

"Precisely. I'll unleash this group once I know where Ayumu and Risumi are being kept. The rest of you will hang back on the surface and wait for the signal to attack. With any luck, it'll be over so quickly they won't know what hit them."

Miruko cackled and smirked proudly at Joker, "A kick ass plan! I like it!!"

"Give me a few hours to gather intel, then I'll send messages to certain heroes with a meeting location to share the plan in full detail." Joker glared at Nighteye, "And **only** these heroes. I'll know if you try anything fishy."

Nighteye glowered.

"Wait, Joker." Hawks stood up, his feathers rustling, "There's something about this plan I don't like."

"Oh?"

"I... I don't see a way out for you once the fight is over." Hawks tilted his head, concern bleeding through his eyes, "You'll be *surrounded* by police and pro heroes. Are you... going to fight your way out, or...?"

Everyone held their breath.

Joker's silence rippled through the room. His eyes trailed over Midoriya, to the rest of his classmates, until finally they landed on Nezu and Eraserhead. Joker released a long sigh as he sagged into his throne.

Midoriya thought he looked beyond exhausted. A young but powerful monarch who had seen too much war and fighting and *death* . Emotions someone their age shouldn't have.

"No."

"What?" Hawks asked.

Joker rose from his throne in one fluid motion, golden eyes piercing the camera lens, *"Once the Shie Hassaikai and the League Of Villains are taken down, and Risumi and Ayumu are safe..."*

Every pro hero in the room waited on the edge of their seats. Midoriya's heart thundered in his ears. Only Nezu seemed to know what Joker was going to say, his black eyes sparkling in unrivaled glee.

"Then I, alongside Mona and the rest of my team, will turn ourselves in to U.A."

A collective record scratched in their brains. Similar looks of dumbfounded shock and dropped jaws littered the expressions of highly seasoned pros and young interns alike.

Joker turned away from the camera to hide a pinched expression, *"Wait for my message. Until then, toodles!"*

"Wait, JOKER!" Eraserhead roared, but it was too late.

Joker was gone, leaving behind a screen of white static. Several seconds of silence drowned the room as they stared at the blank screen. Joker's words, and the barest hints of his plan, replayed across their minds.

"Um..." Kirishima spoke over the dismal atmosphere, his voice trembling, "Are we... I mean, are we really going to follow his plan...?"

Nighteye glared at Nezu, *"We can't."*

“What choice do we have?” Nezu countered, “It’s true what he said. We currently don’t have a way to stage a rescue as is. Even if we break down their doors with a warrant, there is nothing stopping the Shie Hassaikai from executing their captives before we even get close. Doubly so if the League are in the ranks.”

Nighteye sank in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose, “Let’s take a recess. I think we all need time to... digest what just happened.”

Eraserhead wordlessly turned on his heel and left the room first.

The door closed too softly for Midoriya’s liking.

“What are you dorks doing?” Dabi asked.

Toga and Twice whirled around to him, trying and failing not to look guilty.

“Nothing!” Twice shouted, “We’re totally not planning anything!!”

Toga smirked at him.

“So you’re planning nothing... in a dark supply closet?” Dabi deadpanned.

“Yep!” Toga chimed in, grinning.

“... Okay, but if any of those bird freaks catch you they’ll probably force you to tell the truth with Nemoto’s confession quirk. Who’s watching the captives?”

“Kurogiri! He came back a while ago.” Toga said, laughing, “They already used that on us to say our quirks, remember? And asked if any of us would betray them.”

“Shigaraki was so mad!!” Twice said.

“Toga, you shouted that we wouldn’t ‘stab them in the back’ before any of us could reply. You’re lucky they believed you like the morons they are.” Dabi leveled her with a raised brow. “But I know a concealed threat when I see one.”

Toga blushed as she covered her face with her sleeves, “And?”

Dabi peeked out into the hall. The coast was clear for now, but it wouldn’t be much longer before one of the Yakuza idiots found them. He ducked back inside with a mischievous smirk.

“You two need distractions?”

The devious pair looked at Dabi like he had hung the stars.

Once again, the tiny waiting room was filled with anxious students. The meeting was hours ago, but it felt like no time at all as they were lost in their own heads. Midoriya’s classmates gave him strange looks when he mumbled under his breath, his knee bouncing as he tried to put his thoughts in order to no success.

They looked up as the door opened and their teacher stepped in.

Eraserhead leaned against the door with a heavy sigh, “Joker was true to his word.” He droned as he looked at each of them, “Twenty minutes ago Iida received camera footage and detailed blueprints of the Shie Hassaikai’s compound. We’ve confirmed that the League Of Villains are there too, along with sightings of the hostages.”

“I’m sensing a *but*, Eraserhead.” Tsuyu croaked as she tilted her head, “What’s the catch, kero?”

Eraserhead buried his face into his capture weapon, “Iida also received a time and place for the meeting with Joker.”

“Who’s going?” Kirishima asked with stars in his eyes.

“Me, Nezu, Ryukyu, Hawks, Best Jeanist, Gang Orca, Iida Tensei, and Miruko.”

“Oh!” Uraraka beamed with excitement, “Are we going with them!?”

“No.”

Tokoyami startled, “What? They can’t leave us behind!”

“You’re not being left behind.” Eraserhead held up his hand before the others protested, “This situation is delicate. If it were up to me, all of you would be taken off of this case and sent back to school, not only because of your emotional ties with Joker, but also because of 1-A’s history with the League.”

“Then why aren’t we?” Todoroki growled. His balled hands and icy eyes revealed his true emotions, “We’re not the *only* ones with ties to either.”

“Since Principal Nezu is on this case, his word counts more than mine. Frankly, I think he’s being illogical.”

Kirishima clashed his hardened fists together, sparks flying, “We can help Aniki! We’ll totally kick the League’s butt!! Let us come with, Sensei!”

Eraserhead pinched the bridge of his nose, “That’s *precisely* why you’re being placed with the surface group.” He pulled his hand away, leveling each of them with an intense glare, “Let the professionals do their work. I expect each and every one of you to follow the heroes’ orders to the *letter*. Anyone who goes against orders will be expelled on the spot. Do you understand?”

The students exchanged uneasy glances.

Tokoyami relented first, “Yes, Eraserhead.”

Others followed. Todoroki agreed last, glaring at the floor.

“S-sensei.” Midoriya could feel his expression crumpling, but he tried to force his tears at bay. It wasn’t working. “C-could you... um...”

Eraserhead raised a brow, his eyes softening, “Could I what?”

“C-could you give Akira a message?”

“Like what?”

Midoriya couldn’t form any words. There was *so much* he wanted to say to Akira that he couldn’t convey all of it at once. He looked to the others, but they all had the same dilemma.

Eraserhead stepped forward and placed a hand on Midoriya’s head, “Whatever it is, you can tell him yourself once we all return to U.A. Got it, Problem Child?”

“Y-yes, Sensei.”

The man snorted, “Its Eraserhead while on the job, kid.”

There was another knock on the door before a furry white head poked in.

“Ah, there you are!” Nezu chirped, “We’re about to leave, Eraserhead. It’ll take some time for our little group to discreetly cross the city.”

Eraserhead nodded. He gave his students another pointed look before walking out with Nezu.

“Kaito,” Atsuhiro said as he rolled a few marbles between his fingers, “I already told Magne about our departure days ago. What’s this about?”

Kaito sighed and glared at a pile of dusty crates in the corner of the storage room. Magne was as stiff as a board, staring at Kaito with something akin to terror.

“I usually wouldn’t meddle in this sort of thing, but you deserve to know after everything that’s happened.” Kaito glanced at Magne, who flinched under his gaze, “Tell him, or I will.”

Kaito left the room on that note, leaving Atsuhiro gaping.

“Magne, what’s going on?” Atsuhiro asked, his fingers stilling, “Usually he’s not so... intense.”

Magne rubbed her arm, “I...”

“Whatever it is, I promise I won’t be mad.”

Magne sighed as she collapsed against the wall, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Sako. You’d have every right to be angry with me.”

The marbles in Atsuhiro’s hand ground together under his grip, “Magne, whatever it is, just spit it out. The tension is killing me. You know it’s not good for my complexion!”

“Okay.” Magne looked at him with such striking intensity that it made his stomach churn. “It’s... my fault that the League of Villains recruited you.”

Atsuhiro blinked. Then blinked again as he absorbed her words. “Come again?”

“It’s because of *me* that the League was interested in you!” Magne suddenly yelled.

“But... we...” Atsuhiro scratched his head, “You approached me about it and I obliged. I thought *our plan* was to scope them out first and then make the decision together, but you ducked out before I joined. I didn’t even hear from you again until a few days before the Summer Camp.”

“N-no, I...” Magne scrubbed her face with her hands, “I was in a dark place for a long time, Sako, and I joined them shortly after Hosu

because I was desperate.”

“Okay?” Atsuhiro’s voice tightened.

“They were looking for someone with a quirk capable of capturing Joker... And my first thought was *you* . When I mentioned I might’ve known someone with a suitable quirk, Kurogiri took me straight to All For One. You *know* nobody can say no to that... that demon. I just... I couldn’t stick around after.”

“So you lied me?” Atsuhiro snapped, “Lured me into the group with the promise of camaraderie and fame, only to tuck your tail between your legs and run away? They nearly *killed* me! Not to mention what they did to *Joker* -”

“I wanted to make it up to you!” Magne shouted. Her posture wilted at his glare, “I thought if I helped provide everyone with a safe place to rest, that you’d-”

“That I’d what? Forgive you for lying, or were you hoping that I’d *never* find out? Would you have told me if Kaito didn’t forcibly drag us here to have this exact conversation?”

“I...” Magne trailed off, the silence answering for her.

“Save it.” Atsuhiro stomped past her. She nearly grabbed his arm, but his dark look made her think better of it. “No wonder Kaito looked so angry. Be glad that he didn’t tell the whole group, or I doubt you’d even be standing here.”

“But what about me? What about the bar? Sako, I don’t want to lose you!”

“Well, it’s a bit too late for that, isn’t it?” Atsuhiro scoffed, “I’m leaving with the others. We won’t be coming back. As for the bar, I don’t care what you do. Keep it open for business, close it, sell it. Turn it into a barber shop for all I care.”

Atsuhiro left. She didn't chase after him, not that he wanted her to, but the whole interaction left the sour taste of betrayal in his mouth and thorns in his heart.

He suddenly understood Ren's urge to *get out* of this place the day of his Second Awakening.

Thankfully, they'd leave within the hour and he'd never have to see this sad little bar ever again.

Hawks held back a sneeze at the smell of salt. He copied Eraserhead and buried his face in his fluffy jacket.

"What's with that look, Hawks?" Miruko, who covered her hero costume and brilliant white hair with dark baggy clothes, "Scared of the ocean?"

Hawks scoffed, "I'm not scared! But I'm supposed to be a *hawk*, not a seagull!"

"I don't know." Miruko tilted her head with a smirk, "Sometimes you act like a blue footed booby."

"*What?* What does that even mean!?"

"Knock it off, both of you." Ryukyu snapped. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, her fingernails digging into her arm.

"They're just nervous, Ryukyu." Best Jeanist whipped out a comb and ran it through his hair, "I'm nervous too."

"It's not just that, Jeanist." Eraserhead droned as he shifted his weight. Nezu remained silent on the man's shoulder, "Being here brings a certain sense of nostalgia, and not the *good* kind."

"Rusted warehouses beside the ocean, knowing Joker is here, a sense of lingering dread..." Ryukyu shivered, "It's like the Musutafu

Raid all over again.”

“But we’re not here to arrest him.” Tensei said, keeping his tone light, “We’re here to *help* .”

“Can we get on with this?” She muttered.

“I agree.” Gang Orca snorted, his disguise bulging over his body, “Is he here, Hawks?”

Hawks bit the inside of his cheek as he tapped into feathers floating around the harbor, “I sense some sort of weird movement in the northern most warehouse. That’s where he said he’d be, but we’re not alone out here either.”

“What do you mean?” Ryukyu stiffened, her eyes glowing through the shadow of her hood, “Were we followed?”

“Not by a human.” Hawks looked up. The others had to squint at the small dark shape circling over them, nearly invisible against the cloudy night sky. “I think its a bird?”

Eraserhead hummed, “One of Joker’s summons is a 3 legged raven, its probably there to keep watch... to make sure we don’t betray him.”

Ryukyu and Eraserhead shared similar *knowing* looks.

Hawks was glad he dodged that bullet, otherwise he might be drowning in the same sense of guilt these two were.

Miruko stomped past them, “I’m not waiting around any longer! You chumps coming or what!?”

The group moved as one, trailing to the rickety warehouse bordering the seawall. Hawks sensed the other heroes’ heart rates rising when they stopped in front of a heavy metal door. At least he wasn’t the only one.

Gang Orca flexed his giant hands and pushed open the large door with a grunt. Dust and salty rust stained the air as the door screeched open.

“Watch your step.” Ryukyu said as they went inside.

“Did nobody think to bring a flashlight?” Best Jeanist asked, his voice echoing through the warehouse

“Give it a minute.” Eraserhead growled, “Our eyes will adjust.”

“What ever do you mean?” Nezu asked, amusement coloring his tone, “I can see just fine!”

“Same!” Miruko said.

“Hey!” Tensei pushed aside some rubble with his foot, “Not all of us can’t see in the dark!”

Best Jeanist gave Eraserhead and Tensei a deadpanned stare, “We’re the only ones without animal mutations to help us see in the dark. Go figure.”

Gang Orca huffed as Eraserhead released an exhausted sigh.

Hawks froze when he sensed a gentle *whoosh* of air behind them. He looked over his shoulder, wings splayed, but nothing was there, not even the sound of footsteps or breathing.

“Hawks?” Miruko and the others stopped, “You have something?”

“I thought I did, but-”

They sensed it only by the standing hair on their bodies and the battle forged sense of *not being alone* . A lurking shadow moved through the warehouse. Swift enough to seamlessly cross the lingering blackness with ease, yet it wouldn’t disturb the delicate flame on a candle.

Ice prickled at the back of Hawks' neck as he turned towards a particular patch of darkness deeper than most.

"Guys..." He whispered.

A shape in the darkness, barely detectable even to Hawks' eyes, separated itself from the void. Hawks felt a bundle of emotions balling in his throat as footsteps neared, until the splashing colors on the ground highlighted a familiar form.

Joker appeared under the skylight shedding the faintest ray of light, but to Hawks it might as well be the brightest sunlight on a summer's afternoon.

Hawks' eyes watered against his will. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking as he stared at Joker, and he at them. Joker... the kid looks so grown up compared to the last time Hawks saw him, so tiny, frail, and *lifeless* on that cursed metal slab. His new costume was a sight to behold in person, an unknown power radiated off of Joker and tingled over Hawks' wings.

Joker smirked and waved a blood red glove, "Hey."

A wail pierced the air as Miruko launched herself at Joker, the kid's shock covered as she tackled him in a hug. Fat tears dropped from Miruko's face as she lifted Joker off of his feet and rubbed her face in his fluffy hair. Hawks heard the *pops* of Joker's spine.

"YOU'RE REALLY HERE!!" Miruko bawled as she tightened her embrace. "I THOUGHT WE'D LOST YOU FOR GOOD!!!!"

"I appreciate the hug, Miruko, but c-could you-" Joker wheezed as a few more of his vertebra crackled, "You make a *fantastic* chiropractor, but could you please put me down before you snap my spine in half?"

Gang Orca approached as Miruko set Joker unsteadily on his feet, Hawks never thought he would ever see the giant whale man cry

when Joker smiled at him.

“Go ahead.” Joker said as he tilted his head towards Gang Orca.

Gang Orca ruffled the boy’s hair, humming in pure happiness as he wiped away tears with his other giant hand.

Ryukyu held back sniffles as she rushed to Joker’s side after, gently touching his face and prodding his shoulders.

“Have you been eating enough?” Ryukyu asked with the urgency of a mother hen, “You *have* been getting enough rest, right?”

Joker’s face reddened, “Y-yeah, I mean it took a while to recover after Kamino, but I’m alright now, I swear!”

Ryukyu narrowed her teary eyes, “Uh huh.”

“Where did you get this new costume?” Best Jeanist’s eyes were puffy too, not that he’d openly admit it, “It’s not denim, but it’s still very stylish.”

“I, uh...” Joker looked down at himself, “*Technically* made it myself?”

Best Jeanist nodded in approval.

“It looks good on you, Joker!” Tensei had an easy grin and he wrapped Joker in a bear hug, the kid tensed before he seemingly melted into the embrace, “I’m so glad to see you again! You have *no* idea how much my baby brother still talks about you.”

“O-Oh.” Joker chuckled as they parted, though his mirth drained away, “I’m sure I’ll bump into him once I get to the school.”

Joker stared at *him* next. Hawks pressed down that mixed ball of joy and disbelief and threw on his best grin.

“Have you grown, squirt?” Hawks asked as he put his hand on the top of his head, then leveled it out towards Joker, “I swear you were

shorter before.”

Joker chuckled, “What, are you jealous, shorty?”

“Shorty!?” Hawks put a hand on his heart in mock hurt, Miruko burst out with watery cackles. He flapped his wings and rose a few inches in the air, “There, I’m taller now!”

“That’s cheating!” Joker said, his grin stretching from ear to ear.

Hawks matched the kid’s grin as he landed. He couldn’t hold it in anymore as his smile collapsed. His vision suddenly blurred and he hastily took off his visor and wiped the tears away with the palms of his gloved hands.

“Are you okay?” Joker asked sincerely before he looked around to similar expressions, “I didn’t think... you’d all react like this?”

“Why wouldn’t we!?” Miruko’s lips wobbled, and she lightly punched Joker in the shoulder, “We’re just so happy to see you, kid!! Right, Eraser!?”

They turned to Eraserhead, who had yet to move. The man might as well be a statue. Hawks knew, as an underground pro, Eraserhead was one of the best at concealing his emotions... until now. He never thought he’d see such a brooding hero be ready to break into pieces.

Joker walked past them and stopped a few feet from Eraserhead and Nezu.

“Do you want a hug, Eraser?” Joker asked as he held out his arms. “This is a limited time offer.”

Nezu chuckled as he hopped off Eraserhead’s shoulder, claws prodding at the man’s calves, “Go on, Eraser. We know you want to!”

“Damn rat...” Eraserhead muttered as he stumbled forward.

Hawks hid his watery smirk behind his gloved hand. Eraserhead's hug was short and a bit awkward, but it was still as genuine as the rest of their reactions, and Eraserhead was actually hesitant to let go. Eraserhead buried his whole face in his capture weapon afterwards, his ears blazing red.

"I brought you something," Joker said as he reached into one of his costume pockets. "My best coffee. There's enough for everyone! I figured we'd need it when we go over the plan."

Aizawa took the small thermos in both hands, staring at it as if it were a gift from the gods, "... Thanks."

"Now, with the reunions out of the way..." Nezu stepped around Eraserhead and stopped in front of Joker, "I am curious about your plan, Joker. As you know, time is against us. We best not waste what hours we have left."

"... Right." Everyone took a moment to collect themselves when a powerful aura emanated from Joker, his expression somber. "I asked you for a favor in my message, Nezu."

Nezu's ears twitched, "Yes, but you didn't specify what you wanted me to do."

"I'll get to that." Joker stepped away from them, fidgeting with his left sleeve. He stopped a small distance away. "I'll explain everything as much as I'm able, but there's... something you need to see first, people you need to meet. Everything will have a part to play for tomorrow."

"People?" Hawks blinked as his feathers twitched, "But I don't sense anyone else around?"

Joker pulled something out of his sleeve; a small silver key attached to a chain on his wrist. Hawks could see an intricate 'V' stamped on it. Joker turned away and jabbed the key into thin air and twisted it, as if there really was a door there.

Hawks exchanged confused glances with the others, but all other thoughts were cast aside as a barred door appeared out of nowhere, flooding the warehouse with soft light.

Joker looked over his shoulder, the velvety glow casting his face in contrasting light and shadow. For some reason, despite everyone gawking in amazement, Joker didn't seem too excited about it. He looked.... troubled. Conflicted, yet determined.

He waved them closer when the barred door opened on its own, "Come on. Believe me when I say we don't want to keep them waiting."

Joker stepped through the door and disappeared inside, as if into a thick fog.

Nezu had a toothy grin as he dove in next.

"Nezu!" Eraserhead shouted, but the rat already vanished.

"Let's go." Ryukyu said as she hovered in front of the open door, her shadow stretching out towards them, "I could tell from his expression, Joker didn't reveal this secret to us without good reason. Let's not insult him or whoever else is behind this door by hesitating."

Ryukyu stepped inside.

Gang Orca sighed and was the next to disappear, followed by Miruko and Tensei.

"Well, see you on the flip side, Jeanist." Hawks said as he passed the threshold into the unknown.

Best Jeanist and Eraserhead gave each other equal looks of uncertainty, but they stepped into the door regardless.

Hours would pass before the door opened again.

“-And that was Polaris by BLUE ENCOUNTER! We have more awesome songs coming your way at Put Your Hands Up Radio! Up next is Colors Flying High, sung by none other than the lovely Lyn Inaizumi!” Present Mic shot finger guns into the microphone. Nobody but his team could see him do it, but he didn’t care, “Buuuuut before we get back to the tunes, let’s take a question from one of my amazing listeners!!”

Present Mic gave a thumbs up to his team. He heard the *click* in his headphones as a call connected.

“Listener, I’m glad you called!”

“Hello, Present Mic.” Came a familiar velvety voice. *“I’m glad I could reach you.”*

Present Mic sat ramrod straight as all color left his face. “Uh... What’s your name, Listener?”

A warm chuckle graced his ears, *“Joker.”*

Present Mic laughed, his tone manic as sweat broke out on the back of his neck, “O-okay Joker! What question did you have?”

“I’d like to make a statement instead.”

“Er, okay? Go for it.”

“Great! This little message is for the Shie Hassaikai and League Of Villains.”

Mic looked through the window separating him from his team. They were frantically working behind the scenes to disconnect the call, but nothing was working. His manager stared at him with wide eyes, throwing her hands up in defeat.

Joker cleared his throat, *“Overhaul and Shigaraki Tomura, it seems you actually found a way to one-up me. Congratulations! I accept your offer of a trade and will be at the Shie Hassaikai’s front door*

tomorrow morning with your package.” Joker’s tone darkened, and the shadows around the room seemed to move, “However, should you not live up to your end of the deal, if you harm a single hair on their heads...”

Present Mic shivered. His team looked scared out of their wits as Joker’s voice haunted the line, dark power creeping out of every radio and cellphone tuned into his show. He wondered how many people across the country held the same terrified expressions.

“Then I’ll personally make you regret the day you were born.” The whole of Japan held its breath for a long minute of silence, the tension breaking when Joker chuckled, *“Thanks for your time, Present Mic. I bid you adieu!”*

“W-wait!!”

The call ended. Thick stillness hung over the studio like a death shroud. His manager knocked on the window and made frantic hand gestures.

“W-well, th-that was certainly something, eh Listeners!?” Present Mic hoped his panic wasn’t too obvious, “Let’s take a quick break before we get back into it! In the meantime, how about a word from our sponsors!?”

He heard the noise for the commercial break and bolted out of the room. He dug out his phone, intending to call Nezu, when a text came from Eraserhead.

Bestie!!

Sorry Mic, I thought it was illogical to do it this way

Its been... a very strange night

Presentation Micheal

UH, SHO????

WHAT THE HECK IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN!?!?!?!?!?

Bestie!!

Classified

The rat will explain once it's over

Presentation Micheal

YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME ON THAT SHOUTA!!!

SHOOOOOOOOOOOOUTA!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

*IF YOU DON'T ANSWER ME I SWEAR I'LL GIVE MARSHMALLOW
A WHOLE CONTAINER OF CATNIP!!!!!!*

Eraser never answered.

A door down the hall opened and his manager walked out with a bounce to her step.

"Mic, are you up for continuing or do you want to end it for tonight?
Please tell me you want to continue!"

"Uh, I guess?" He shoved his phone in his pocket, "Why? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing!!" Frenzied laughter escaped her lips, "O-our ratings just shot up by over 170% since the call with Joker! And the numbers are still skyrocketing!! Your Spotlight is getting *flooded* with reactions from fans!"

“*WHAT!?* ” His manager winced at his volume, “Well then, we can’t disappoint our new listeners!”

“Great! We’ll give you a few more minutes for the commercial break. We’re getting paid BIG time tonight!!”

She rushed back into the control room in a blur. He had never seen his manager *this* excited since... well, ever. Present Mic shook out his nerves and plastered on his brightest grin.

He threw himself back into his studio with a new vigor, determined to put on the best show of his life while the iron was still hot.

Kurono walked alone in the darkened gardens, listening to the last of the chirping crickets before the chill of fall fully silenced them. He stalked past the swirling rock gardens and over a vibrant red hashi bridge over a koi pond, stopping under the shadow of a cherry blossom tree along the path. He took solace at how the wind rustled through the leaves. He closed his eyes and allowed the peace to settle his mind.

Until something sharp scraped over bark.

Kurono looked up into the winding branches, eyes widened as he met the gaze of a large raven resting within the branches, partly covered by the flora. It felt as if it were judging Kurono’s soul as it stared back with intelligent eyes. A string of magatama around its neck shifted as it ruffled its wings.

A messenger of the heavens?

A warning, or an omen?

Footsteps crashed through the gardens, and he turned to see Nemoto rushing towards him.

“What’s wrong?” Kurono asked.

“What *isn't* wrong?” Nemoto snapped as he sliced his hand in an impatient arc, “Those heathens are causing another ruckus.”

“Again? They’ve been causing problems all day.” Kurono cursed under his breath, “Whats happened now?”

“Dabi told Rappa he’d never beat that Nomu abomination in a fair fight. Now Rappa is tearing through the place looking for it. There’s so much noise that Overhaul *left his lab* . He *never* leaves his lab! I was hoping you could calm Overhaul down before someone else gets killed.” Kurono felt Nemoto’s scowl through his mask, “As much as I hate those League *scum* violating our halls... we already lost Rikiya to Overhaul’s inflated temper. We cannot afford to lose anyone else.”

“Alright,” Kurono relented, “I’ll talk to Overhaul while the rest of you try to control that idiot. Use Tengai’s barriers to trap him if you must.”

Nemoto nodded and rushed back inside.

Kurono took a moment to gather himself. There were so many questions when they heard Joker’s answer over the radio. How did Joker know where their compound was? Why did he submit so easily? Did he really care for the captives so much that he’d hand over Eri, or was there something else at play?

Kai wouldn’t listen to his concerns. He hasn’t been thinking clearly since Eri was taken, and Kurono feared that this most recent ‘plan’ would be the final straw that broke everything.

A warble drew him from his thoughts. The godly raven’s presence *had* to be an omen, Kurono thought as he went inside to deal with yet another mess.

Some deeper part of him screamed that they had made a grave mistake.

Well, that happened. Once again I'm not going to reveal the characters' full plans until it actually happens.

Important note: Yes, I will be stopping here for now to take a break to recharge, I really need it. I do have the rough draft skeletons for the two Overhaul finale chapters (Big surprise it had to be split, there are So Many character interactions to balance) but I'm not too happy with a majority of the rough draft so it will need to go through reworks and possible rewrites, and I don't think I have the energy to cram all of that within the next 2 weeks. So, we'll leave off here and continue in October!

Colors Flying High - October 15th

Counter Strike - October 22nd

Huh, it's almost as if Mic predicted the next chapter title or something ;)

Colors Flying High

Chapter 79: Colors Flying High

Your flag, your alibi,

Can you hide behind claiming might is right?

Raise your fist to the sky

While below your boots common men die.

Colors fly, tell us who to love and who to hate,

And by the by, will the memories of our morals fade,

Staying true to your own convictions in this haze is harder to do then say.

So choose a color to live by~

Early update? Early update.

Enjoy this big juicy chapter as we get back into the swing of things~

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Important [Update](#) from the previous chapter's exciting news! (It's still ongoing!)

Fanart!

Seasoned heroes entered one by one, ogling at the swaying chains crying with metallic timbres as they hung down from the black ceiling, then to the outer ring of empty cells inhabited by nothing but invisible specters. Delicate folds of velvet silk softened the otherwise bone-chilling space. Their expressions morphed to those of lost children as the endless song washed over them.

Igor and the heart of the Velvet Room remained hidden. Joker and the other Attendants agreed they should be kept a close secret for now, thus they erected a temporary wall.

It was different with his current teammates, but for these heroes? He just... wasn't ready to show that deeper part of himself, and Igor himself was too valuable to reveal at the moment, even if the strange man's smile stretched wider before the temporary wall went up.

Nezu's expression shifted from feral excitement to cold calculation in the span of a heartbeat. He didn't seem angry as he stared at Joker with those beady little eyes, but... it was a look that didn't sit well with Joker.

The heroes finally reached the bottom of the stairs, stupefied at their surroundings.

"Joker." Eraserhead's expression mirrored the others, an ocean of concern and worry swimming within coffee colored eyes, "Where are we?"

"In due time, Eraser." Joker shoved his hands in his pockets and turned on his heel, "Follow me. Stay close and don't wander off, or else I can't guarantee you won't suffer a painful death."

The heroes uneasily followed Joker down the nearby hall to the Challenge Room. They stepped through the velvet fog and into the large arena, where the Attendants and the rest of his team waited.

Kaito, with a bag slung over his shoulder, had Eri behind him. She huddled into Kaito's pant leg when the strangers flooded in.

Joker stopped in front of his team and faced the heroes, the Velvet Attendants stepping to his side. Lavenza was at his right, the rest at his left.

Morgana was in his normal cat form, hopping up to Joker's shoulder as the others shuffled on their feet.

Two sides of the same coin stood in a room bordering on the edge of dreams and reality. Joker wondered what Akechi or the rest of the Phantom Thieves would think.

Akechi would probably call him an idiot for not keeping this a total secret.

Joker cleared his throat before the tension reached unbearable levels, "Welcome to the Velvet Room." He blinked and tilted his head, "Huh, I never thought I would be the one to say that."

"The... Velvet Room?" Gang Orca's red eyes smoldered like embers as he looked to the barred walls and the guillotine looming at the other end of the room. "The prison cells, the chains, and now guillotines. Joker.... what is this place?"

"They don't need to know details." Elizabeth snapped, "In fact, I don't think they deserve to be here at all. Especially the man named Eraserhead."

Eraserhead stiffened and whipped his gaze to her. Her smirk sharpened as her golden eyes stabbed into him with flames of animosity.

"Elizabeth..." Theodore said, ready to step between them.

"Do not be rude." Margaret sent her sister a pointed glance, "We do not govern over whether the Trickster can invite additional guests or

not."

Elizabeth sneered and crossed her arms.

"Elizabeth... actually has a point." Joker took a stepped away from the line of Attendants, Mona remained silent on his shoulder. The heroes stared at him as he allowed a small fraction of his frigid rage to take over. The mist in the Challenge Room stirred. "If we weren't in a life or death situation... if the cards weren't stacked against us, then I never would've invited you in. All you need to know is that this place is meant to aid me on my journey as a Trickster, to help me grow stronger. Let's leave it at that for now."

The heroes exchanged subtle glances, absorbing Joker's mysterious explanation.

"But... the cells, and the chains..." Hawks' wide-eyed expression became tinged with fearful concern, "You weren't- I mean, you didn't get hurt here, did you? I'd recognize such signs of abuse anywhere."

Joker grimaced as Elizabeth bristled, "How dare you-"

He cut off Elizabeth with a wave of his blood red hand, "Like I said, this was a place to help me grow stronger. What's a little pain if it helped me protect those I love?"

Shock and sorrow bounced between them. Miruko balled her hands into shaking fists and Ryukyu looked on the verge of murder.

Hawks opened his mouth, but Gang Orca stepped closer before anyone else could say anything, "Very well, Joker. We'll not break your trust on this." Gang Orca relaxed his posture, leaving himself vulnerable as he turned his simmering gaze towards his comrades, "It takes a lot to reveal such a sacred place, and we'd do well not to abuse this knowledge, hmm?"

Iida Tensei smiled softly, "I promise to respect your boundaries, Joker."

"We'll do everything in our power to help." Ryukyu hesitantly nodded, "This place... it feels different in a way I can't quite put my finger on. You know the rules of this realm, and we'll follow them to the letter."

"You'd better." Elizabeth grinned, "Or there won't be anything left of you to bury. That's a promise."

"She's feisty." Miruko matched Elizabeth's grin, "I like her!"

Joker facepalmed, "Enough. We can't waste any more time." He let his hand fall to his side, "Nezu, let's talk about that favor."

The rat vibrated with excitement, a million questions dancing within that steel-trap mind of his, just waiting to burst out. Nezu's tail sharply flicked as he curbed his curiosity.

"And what is this favor?" Nezu asked cordially.

Joker looked to Kaito and Eri. Kaito firmly grasped Eri's hand and went to Joker and Morgana's side. Lavenza followed, scrutinizing the hero group with a cold gaze.

"Is that...?" Eraserhead and the others were looking at Eri.

"Yep. This is Eri." Joker placed a hand on Eri's head, the heroes' demeanor softening when Eri leaned into the contact. "Eri, why don't you say hello?"

"H-hello..."

"Why hello!" Nezu's tail bobbed back and forth as he inched closer, stopping a respectful distance away, "Am I a mouse? A bear? A dog? No, I am the principal of U.A.! It's nice to meet you, Eri-chan!"

Maybe Nezu expected a laugh or a chuckle out of the tiny girl. He only received a blank stare before she huddled further into Kaito's pant leg.

"You'll understand if she doesn't trust new people right away." Kaito stated as he crossed his arms.

Nezu's eyes locked onto the silvery band on Kaito's wrist, then to the man's electric blue eyes, nodding.

Joker cleared his throat, "This 'favor' is actually the first stage of the plan. My favorite part, actually."

"Which is?" Hawks asked with a raised brow.

Joker's grin stretched from ear to ear as he looked at Lavenza, "The old bait-and-switch."

Yatagarasu soared over a city drenched in tension.

His shadow passed over innumerable police officers and heroes hiding in nooks and crannies around the Shie Hassaikai's compound. He landed on the roof of a nearby building.

Detective Tsukauchi and a short elderly hero spotted him right away. Tsukauchi smiled at Yatagarasu, lined with shaky nerves and a hint of guilt. The elderly hero grumbled something unintelligible. Yatagarasu leapt off rose into the heavens.

"Tsukauchi and the old hero from Hosu and Kamino have joined the ranks, but the surface heroes are keeping their word to hold back, Trickster." Yatagarasu said. "Nighteye commands them with surprising authority."

"At least they're holding up their end of the plan... for now. Any movement in the compound?"

Yatagarasu banked to his left, easily passing over the Shie Hassaikai walls.

“Heavy patrols in the garden and around the inner walls. They seem tense.”

The Trickster’s cold chuckle plucked at Yatagrasu’s bond, *“As they should be. It’s the Shie Hassaikai’s and the League’s final act. Return to the mindscape, Yatagarasu. It’s Showtime!”*

Yatagarasu looked to the heavens, absorbing the warmth of the sun on his feathers.

“Mother Amaterasu, please watch over the Trickster today.” He whispered before he returned to his other self.

Ren shifted in his black hoodie and pants, the silky smooth texture gracing his skin provided some comfort as he looked at the other form standing beside him. The figure’s black cloak, made of the same material, draped around their shoulders and down to their ankles, the hood shielding their face in a mask of darkness. Long moonlight hair spilled down the front of the cloak in stark contrast.

“Are you ready?” Ren asked.

The hooded figure nodded, and they stepped out of the shadowy alley together. The street leading up to the Shie Hassaikai compound was like walking through a ghost town. Half of the city’s civilians seemed to have left the city overnight after his declaration over the radio. After what happened at the Musutafu Raid, he didn’t blame them for being scared, but he’d make sure this battle wouldn’t spawn another massive typhoon... hopefully.

They stopped in front of the tall white wall surrounding the Shie Hassaikai complex. Ren threw on a wicked grin as he button mashed the buzzer by the door. They heard frantic movement and a tiny window opened.

“Yo,” Ren lazily waved as the lookout’s eyes bulged, “We have a date with your boss. Care to let us in?”

The window closed and several locks were undone, before the door was thrown open. Ren walked in with an easy stride, his tiny companion keeping pace.

Kaneshiro's tiny little hovel had nothing on Overhaul's digs.

The interior was strikingly beautiful, complete with a sprawling traditional Japanese mansion and an inlaid stone path leading to the front shoji doors. Well-kept rock gardens and the edge of a koi pond could be seen around the corner. Ren spotted the tree where Yatararasu perched last night, its branches sticking up over the roof.

Ren and his companion were surrounded by towering thugs in an instant. Despite the sea of people, it was quiet. Dead silent. Not even the wind dared disturb the intense atmosphere as the lower Yakuza members stared, weapons and quirks ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

He moved his hand up, the crowd jumping back with guns raised, to twirl a lock of his hair between his fingers, smirking. He was interrupted before he could play with(intimidate) his new friends.

"Kurusu Akira!" A deep voice resonated through the air.

The thugs parted. Ren recognized three members of the Eight Bullets from Nighteye's database.

Nemoto Shin with the black plague mask and bowler hat.

Setsuno Toya, a sleazy man with a crazed look in his eyes. He wore another black plague mask, though different from Nemoto's in that it showed the upper half of his face, his golden hair hanging limply around his shoulders.

The last one had long greasy hair draped over a bone white mask. Sakaki Deidoro wobbled on his feet, laughing as he dangled a green bottle in his hand. The bony man took a big swig of alcohol and grinned at Ren from underneath his mask. Ren idly wondered how

much Sakaki drank for his 'Sloshed' quirk to have any affect on other people.

"The drunken one is already trying to use his quirk on you, and I suspect the others will too." Ishtar's power thrummed through his veins, *"I'll keep their influence at bay, but you need to act accordingly. Sell that they have power over you and it'll draw them like moths to a flame."*

"That's my name, Nemoto Shin. Don't wear it out." Ren pretended to sway on his feet as the group stopped in front of him, "I brought Eri, as promised."

Nemoto glanced at Setsuno, "Check him."

The other Yakuza held their breath when Ren held up his hands, allowing Setsuno to pat him down. Setsuno froze when he felt something in the hoodie pocket. He reached in to pull the items out, blinking at them before staring at Ren.

"Only a pocket knife and a tiny smoke bomb!?" Setsuno gawked at Ren.

"What were you hoping to accomplish with these?" Nemoto snapped.

"Can't be too careful out in the streets. What if we got mugged before we got here? Oh, and be gentle with that smoke bomb, will you?" Ren winked at Setsuno, "It might be small, but it packs quite a punch to those who aren't prepared for it."

Setsuno's eyes were warped by the wicked grin under his mask as he stuffed the items in his own pockets.

"You *really* came alone?" Nemoto's quirk prickled at Ren's skull, only to be eradicated with a swipe of Ishtar's hand. The man didn't seem to notice. "You don't have any heinous plans involving heroes or your other subordinates?"

“Nope. None whatsoever.” Ren said as he stuck his hands in his empty pockets, “It’s only Eri and I. All of my *teammates* left town last night, and there’s no way I’d partner up with those heroes after what happened in Kamino.”

Ren blinked and put a hand over his mouth, as if surprised he spoke the ‘truth’. The trio of Eight Bullets exchanged looks. Nemoto made to grab the small figure hovering behind Ren. He knocked the man’s hand away, staggering a step backwards to feign his dizziness from Sakaki’s drunken quirk.

“The deal was Eri for Risumi and Ayumu. I won’t let you have Eri until I see them.” Ren scowled, “Or have the Yakuza fallen so low that they’ve lost their honor?”

“How dare you.” Nemoto’s hands balled into fists. He took a sharp breath and forced himself to relax. “Fine. Overhaul’s orders were to show you to him anyway. Follow me, but don’t try anything funny. If we see any hint of your demons manifesting...”

He moved his cloak to reveal a gun holster on his belt. The other Eight Bullets had them, too. It looked like any normal pistol, but it had been modified to hold certain type of ammo... like the Quirk Erasing Bullets Fat Gum and his interns encountered days ago.

Fafnir laughed like a chugging steam engine, *“I’d like to give them a taste of their own medicine!”*

“Patience, Fafnir.” Ren said as he smoothed out his expression, *“It’s no fun if we give it away too early.”*

Ren and his hooded companion followed Nemoto into the compound, with Sakaki and Setsuno at their heels. Ren wrinkled his nose as the traditional Japanese aesthetic bled away into too-white walls and the overwhelming scent of antiseptic. The interior was cold and lifeless, so similar to the complex in Sapporo that it left a sour twist in his mouth. He shivered at the drug-hazed memories skirting his mind.

Satanael and the others sent their encouragements as Ren focused on following Nemoto.

A left turn here, two rights, another left. He had memorized these halls from the footage La Brava gathered. Nemoto believed that Ren would be too disoriented under Sakaki's Sloshed quirk to realize the little game they were playing.

But there was something else. A flash of gold lingering within the walls. Ren stared at it when they passed it the third time, and it vanished only to reappear around the next corner.

One of Overhaul's right hands, Mimic, followed them.

"Quite a big place you have here." Ren remarked when they took the fifth left turn.

"Be quiet." Nemoto scoffed, the other Eight Bullets snickered.

In an undisclosed location several blocks away, two figures were splashed with the bright lights of several screens.

"They're walking him in circles." Tensei said as his eyes drifted from one screen to the next.

"We figured they'd do something to disorient him." La Brava, her hands fidgeting under the table, said, "Believe me, Joker already noticed."

"How can you tell? It looks to me like Sakaki has him under his quirk."

"He's a lot more observant than he appears. Watch here." La Brava pointed at another screen, one Ren already passed a few times now. Ren glanced up at the camera with a subtle smirk, tapping his fingers on his side to the exact number of times they had passed under it.

Tensei leaned back in his chair, "I knew he was smart, but damn. Is Sakaki's quirk really not affecting him?"

La Brava snorted. "If only you knew."

Tensei's expression tightened.

"What?" She asked, her eyes not leaving the screens.

Tensei threaded a hand through his short hair, "I know we're following Joker's plan, but the longer they're in the Yakuza's clutches the more I worry."

"I know how you feel. Joker's smart, but nothing will stop him when the people he loves are in danger." La Brava sighed, "We can't signal the surface heroes until Joker's ready. It'll throw everything off and possibly put them in more danger."

"I know." The lines around Tensei's eyes deepened. He turned to the screen when the group trekked down a few flights of stairs, continued their circling game for a while, before stopping at a set of massive double doors. "I hope we won't have to wait much longer."

La Brava traced a finger around the communicator in her ear. Tensei had one, as did several pros who were in on the true plan.

They watched the cameras as they waited for Joker's signal.

The hooded girl clutched Ren's hand as Nemoto pushed open the doors and whisked them into a ginormous room. She blinked rapidly at the blinding white, her only sense was of Ren's hand gently squeezing hers.

The members of the League, along with Overhaul and his Eight(now seven) Bullets, dotted the room. Even with such a large group, they had enough space for a small army. The High-End Nomu hovered behind Shigaraki, bouncing between his limbs like a puppy told to

wait before snatching a treat. 'Gigantomachia' was suspiciously missing from the Villain entourage, as were Risumi and Ayumu.

Shigaraki and Overhaul shared their seething hatred as Ren smirked.

Ren winked at Overhaul, "Too bad we couldn't get dinner first, eh Overhaul?"

"Don't push your luck, you insufferable brat." Nemoto grasped the gun on his belt as Overhaul's eyebrows twitched.

"Hand over Eri." Overhaul growled.

"What, that's it?" Ren's smirk sharpened, "No proper greeting or grand villainous monologue? I'm surprised, given that's exactly what All For One did before he kicked the bucket. Shigaraki, I'm almost disappointed. Have the Shie Hassaikai beaten the fight out of you?"

Dabi let out a dry huff of laughter.

Shigaraki glared at Dabi, before his ruby eyes snapped back to Ren, "Shut up! You better watch your mouth, Secret Boss, otherwise I'll wipe that damn smirk right off your face."

"I'm so terrified." Ren deadpanned.

"Knock it off." Overhaul commanded as he pulled on his white gloves. "Hand. Over. Eri. I won't ask again."

The Eight Bullets fanned out around them. Shigaraki, Hood, and Kurogiri remained where they were, the other League members kept their distance.

The hooded girl could do nothing but hold her breath.

"Bring Risumi and Ayumu first."

Shigaraki's hands twitched, "Kurogiri."

A cloud of mist dumped two forms beside Overhaul. Risumi's arms were bound in thick leather restraints, Ayumu had the same, along with some sort of metal collar around his neck with spikes angrily jabbing at his flesh. Her heart stopped at such brutality to innocents.

Ren's breathing stuttered.

They were alive, their eyes were wide open to reflect their fear, but they moved as slow as a mosquito drowning in tree sap.

"What did you do to them?" Ren growled.

"Chronostasis used his quirk as a precaution. Hand over Eri, or else..." Overhaul ripped off one of his white gloves and held his hand over Ayumu's head, "There will be consequences."

Ren grit his teeth. "You heard him, Eri." He stated, eyes locked on Overhaul, "Go over there."

The hooded girl crossed the no man's land between Ren and the villain leaders. She stopped beside Overhaul, who patted her head. She had to stop herself from jumping away, his touch sending vile slithering serpents through her body.

"So you finally return to your rightful place." Overhaul pushed the girl aside, letting Kurono grab her by the shoulder, "We'll have to repay Joker for taking such good care of you."

"You have Eri, now give me Risumi and Ayumu." Ren said.

She could see Shigaraki's grin from under the petrified hand on his face, "No, I don't think so. We have a little surprise cooked up for you instead."

The girl witnessed a black cloud opening behind Ren, a *BANG* piercing the air before she could shout. Ren stumbled as something hit him in the shoulder, a little vial with a needle.

Toga Himiko exchanged a knowing glance with Dabi and Twice behind the other villains' backs, nodding.

Ren fell to his knees, staring at his hands in horror. "What... what did you do?"

Overhaul shook his head, almost in disappointment, "Did you really think we'd let you leave after the trouble you've caused all of us?"

Shigaraki's dry laughter scraped into her ears. "What else, you overpowered secret boss!? How can you be so stupid!?" His slimy grin stretched from ear to ear, "We took your precious quirk away!"

Tears laced Ren's eyes, "N-no... they... they can't be gone..."

Toga Himiko cackled, but clamped her hands over her mouth. She was looking at Ren with a certain sparkle in her eyes. A mix of bloodlust, humor, and *glee*.

"Can... I kill.... him?" The Nomu spoke slow, and with such a deep, warped voice that it didn't sound human.

"No, Gigantomachia and I want to play with him first." Shigaraki snapped, "I deserve first dibs after what he did to Sensei! Kurogiri, go get him."

"As you wish..." Kurogiri bowed his head before he disappeared into his own fog.

"With my quirk, we can kill him as many times as we want." Overhaul stared at Ren as if he were an insect pinned to a board, "But after we're done I want to study his body. It could be useful for my research."

The hooded girl kept studying the three estranged villains, her heart leapt to her throat at the realization.

Toga *knew* . She somehow *knew*, but she wasn't doing anything to warn her comrades about the danger they were in.

Dabi stared at the hooded girl with a growing smirk. He slowly backed away alongside Toga and Twice as the rest of the villains circled Ren like hungry sharks.

The trio knew Ren was acting.

She put the thought aside when she looked at Risumi and Ayumu, frozen on the floor. Kurono tightened his grip on her shoulder, his masked eyes locked onto her as the rest of the villains basked in their false victory. She couldn't grab them without drawing unwanted attention, nor could she enact plan A from her side. Her eyes fell back on Ren when he sniffled.

The Trickster's acting was second to none, so his faultless expression still sent a cold lance of dread throughout her heart. She never wished to see that pain on his face ever again. His false fear drew the villains in like a honey trap, who tightened their circle like a noose. To these villains, it looks as if the curtain is about to fall on the once powerful vigilante.

The Trickster glanced at her, the golden flecks in his eyes intensifying as she discreetly held up two fingers.

Time for plan B.

"Wow, that was fast." Ren said when Best Jeanist handed him the bundle of clothes.

"Well, it was a special express order." The man chuckled warmly.

"And these will work? I can't don my costume too early or they'll be on edge."

"Yep. I asked Nighteye and Fat Gum for the blueprints on those bullets and crafted these for you." Best Jeanist crossed his arms, pinning Ren with a look he couldn't identify, "It's not denim, unfortunately, but they're woven with kevlar threads and a variety of

different silks. It'll keep you and the little lady safe from those Quirk Erasing Bullets." Best Jeanist looked away, his shoulders hunching to further bury his face in his strange denim costume. "I made sure of it."

"I sense no drugs entering your system, Trickster." Ishtar confirmed.

Shiva hummed, *"The bullet did not pierce the threads, as promised."*

"Hurry and don me as your mask!" Fafnir howled.

Ren kept the terror plastered on his face, the villains' derisive laughter and about all the ways they'd kill him ringing in his ears, *"Not yet..."*

Ren glanced at the hooded girl, discreetly holding two fingers. He slowly blinked in affirmation.

The temperature dropped and a prickling energy laced the room, making the villains hesitate. Kurono startled backwards as the hooded girl knocked his hand away, her footsteps incredibly loud in the sudden, unsettling silence. Overhaul glared at her as she tugged on his sleeve and forced a small envelope in his hands.

"Eri, what's this?" Overhaul growled as she backed away.

"Not yet..." Ren's soul brimmed with ethereal fire as Overhaul opened the envelope, eyes widening when he dug out the black and red card.

"Well? What does it say?" Shigaraki asked.

"To the League of Villains and Shie Hassaikai, The Proprietors of Suffering and False Righteousness, your reign of terror has gone on long enough. For the sake of saving innocent souls, we're putting an end to your regimes once and for all. From, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts." The card was unmade in ribbons falling on the ground,

Overhaul's expression turning livid as he stared at the hooded girl, "Eri, what the hell-"

"I am not who you seek." Lavenza's voice carried throughout the room.

Lavenza cast off her cloak and wig and tossed them at the villain leaders as Joker donned his costume in a dazzling pyre.

"You brat!" Kurono fired at Joker, but the bullet bounced off and redirected itself, the needle piercing Kurono's arm.

Joker didn't wait to find out which bullet Kurono shot himself with, performing a roundhouse kick to Kurono's stomach. Kurono flew back with an *oomph* and landed on his back with his arms and legs splayed, unmoving.

A stream of blue flame shot from Dabi's hand, separating Shigaraki and Overhaul from Joker, "Do we enact the plan now, Shigaraki? You wanted Overhaul and the rest of these idiots dead too, right?"

Shigaraki flinched, "What!? I never-"

Overhaul whirled around to Shigaraki, rage boiling in every fiber of his body, "So this was your plan all along? I should've killed you when I had the chance!"

Joker grinned as the Velvet Key dangled from his wrist, the sound of thrashing chains and velvety light painting the room as chaos broke out.

Toga suddenly pulled a gun from her sweater and took aim as the Velvet door manifested.

"Kai!!" Kurono jumped in front of Overhaul as Toga fired, taking the bullet.

"Were you meaning to use *these* bullets on Joker?" She purred as she waved the gun.

“Toga, what are you-” Shigaraki’s scream was interrupted as the Velvet Room door flew open, and familiar figures stormed out, a single Attendant leading the charge.

“Lavenza!” Margaret threw a familiar chainsaw to her sister, the roar of it accompanying the fresh cacophony of noise.

Overhaul slapped his palms on the ground, ginormous earth spikes rupturing in all directions.

Gang Orca’s sound wave ripped through some of the spikes at the same time as a hail of vibrant feathers darted around the room. Several of the Eight Bullets’ clothes tightened over them and they fell over, invisible strings trailing to Best Jeanist’s fists.

Utter bedlam spread through when a howling roar, vibrating through the walls themselves, shook the entire complex.

“Hood, KILL THEM!!” Shigaraki screamed, “*Damnit* Kurogiri, hurry up!”

Hood’s battle cry reverberated through their bones, giant black wings shooting out of his arms as it jumped over the spikes. A burst of energy shot out its back and it charged at Joker like a freight train. Joker stood still, grinning.

Miruko cackled, her face a mask of battle lust as she jumped, her bone-breaking kick landing on the Nomu’s face. Joker heard the crackle of bones and saw the spittle fly as Hood was blown back, breaking through several spikes and cracking the opposite wall under the force.

Miruko ruffled Joker’s hair before diving into the fray.

The whole building trembled and the ground shattered under their feet like parched earth. A renewed ripple of spikes ruptured through the room, a majority of them towering over Joker and the others to pierce the ceiling. Screams and cries and *bangs* echoed throughout

the maze of spikes, the walls themselves grew louder as a massive tide of purple mist curled in the corners of Joker's vision.

Another, much *larger* roar boomed from Kurogiri's growing portal.

Joker leapt over the spikes to get away from Kurogiri, coattails flaring behind him, as he desperately searched for Risumi and Ayumu through the bedlam.

By that time Hood had burst out of the wall and flew around the spikes, wings splayed as he shot for Joker.

"Fafnir!" Joker shouted.

Hood was upon him again when blue flames swirled around Joker. Fafnir cackled as he curled protectively around Joker, repelling Hood's attack to send him crashing through several rows of spikes and into another wall. The cracks split the room in two and travelled into the ceiling, and Fafnir pounced through the choking dust and tackled Hood.

Joker turned away from their battle, finally spotting Risumi and Ayumu motionless within a small clearing.

"Hawks!!" Joker screamed as he dove for them, a pair of brilliant feathers flying after him.

The floor ruptured beneath his feet, a crisscrossing pair of thinner spikes shooting out. The feathers snagged Joker's collar and yanked him back before the spikes beheaded him.

"Don't move!"

Overhaul's voice rang over the other battles, the spikes clearing the way between he and the Shinsou pair. Murder shown in Overhaul's eyes as Kurono walked behind him, uninjured and quirk restored. Joker's heart pounded as the villains grabbed Risumi and Ayumu by

the necks, with Kurogiri pointing a gun at Ayumu's temple, Overhaul grabbing Risumi by the neck with his bare hand.

"Take one more step and they'll die." Overhaul said.

Joker grit his teeth. He *needed* Eraserhead, but he didn't know where the hero was over the spike maze and the sounds of battle echoing across the massive room. Joker dared not look away, either. They were locked in a stalemate.

"I've had enough of all of you." Kurogiri's billowing body appeared between them, yellow eyes glaring, "We'll finish you off!"

Hawks' feathers shot for Kurogiri, but they were gone in a wave of black mist. Kurogiri's body surged forward in great waves of darkness, sweeping any who were close enough into the unknown. Joker tried to jump away, planning to shoot out his grapple at the ceiling, but Kurogiri predicted his route.

His vision turned pitch black, then startling white as the sensation of falling overtook him.

The sounds of battle cut off suddenly as Joker rolled into his landing, his tailcoats weaving around his legs as he was on his feet. He cursed as purple wisps evaporated around his heels. The white walls and burning smell of antiseptic told him he was still in the Shie Hassaikai complex... somewhere. It was another room as large as the one he was just thrown out of.

The silence was deafening, as if he had been plunged into a deep ocean.

Images flashed in his mind; of Fafnir laughing as he ripped Hood's flesh with rending claws, only for the Nomu's injuries to stitch themselves back together within seconds. Joker shook his head and pushed Fafnir's wild connection to the side so he could focus.

He reached into his pocket for his communicator and popped it in his ear, noise battering his eardrums the second he turned it on.

“La Brava, status update!”

“Joker!” La Brava sighed in relief. *“Several cameras have gone out and the whole place is shifting! Iida’s working on stabilizing the connection, so we don’t have a headcount of everybody yet.”*

“It seems we’ve found ourselves in quite the pickle!” Mr. Compress’s voice crackled in Joker’s ear. *“I got teleported away.”*

“Where is everyone?” Eraserhead droned, his sense of calm easing Joker’s heart, *“I’m alone as far as I can tell, but I feel like I’m being watched.”*

“I dunno, even my feathers are all flustered. Did it sound as if the walls were howling earlier?” Hawks chirped. *“Are they alive or something?”*

“It’s probably Mimic.” Joker took a few tentative steps, straining to listen to anything nearby. “Lavenza, Mona, are you there?”

“Yes!” Mona sounded breathless.

“I am fine as well.” Lavenza hummed, *“If you could summon the Velvet Room Trickster, myself and Margaret could be at your side in a moment.”*

Joker reached for his wrist, his heart stopping when he grabbed empty air. “Oh *shit* .”

“*What is it?*” Eraserhead asked.

“The key’s gone. I-” Joker facepalmed, “The guy with the larceny quirk was right behind me. He must have it.”

Getting Risumi and Ayumu into the safety of the Velvet Room had been their primary objective. The sudden stab of fear was washed

away with a thrash of Fafnir's tail striking the Nomu's head, bravery and rage coursing through them.

No, this wasn't the time to panic.

"You lost your key?" Margaret asked, worry coloring her tone. *"We shall find it, one way or another."*

"We'll have to work around it for now." La Brava huffed, *"Joker, should we signal the surface heroes? I'm working on locating Risumi and Ayumu, but we'll need help-"*

The hair on the back of Joker's neck stood on end. A gaping portal spread over the ceiling, and Joker flipped to the side when a gigantic fist, as thick and stocky as a tree trunk, hurtled out. The ground ruptured with spider webbing cracks. Joker shielded his face before dust could clog his throat.

A veritable giant hauled himself out of the black portal, a jagged mountain of muscle several times taller than Joker himself. His lower jaw jutted out and revealed razor sharp teeth.

A radio was tied by a thick rope around his neck, which crackled to life as the two opponents sized each other up.

"Wait, Gigantomachia! I'd like a word with our friend first."

"You." Joker violently shivered at the familiar, grating voice echoing through the radio, "You're that doctor from Sapporo."

Joker tuned out his Personas' rage and the various concerned voices in his ear, the loudest of which was Mr. Compress violently swearing.

"And you're the prize that slipped through my fingers... just barely." The doctor's cold chuckle was warped by the radio's static, *"You have no idea what trouble you've caused me, having to scour everywhere in that cursed Kamino hospital for your body and for All*

For One's. But I found neither! All For One was already cremated and you... your body went missing from the morgue. I'm glad you're alive though, because Overhaul has another thing coming if he thinks he has any right to claim you for research! With you returned to my lab, my boy, progress on my next set of Nomu will be exponential!"

The mere implications sent Joker's heart rate skyrocketing and shot ice through his veins, Satanael's soothing wings brushing against his mind kept his panic at bay.

"I'll take your silence as an end to this dull conversation." The doctor chuckled again, "Gigantomachia, be sure to make his death as painful as possible as revenge for killing our master, but remember to bring him back in one piece. It'll make my work easier."

The doctor's voice fizzled out and the radio went silent.

"You..." The giant locked onto Joker with rage filled eyes flooding with tears, "You... YOU KILLED MASTER!!!"

Joker's grin felt shaky as he waved the giant forward, "Come and get me, big boy."

Another scream tore through the air as Gigantomachia charged, swinging a fist with the strength of a hurricane. The fist bounced off a mere foot away from Joker's body, the force redirecting itself back onto the giant. Gigantomachia's eyes went wide before his own punch sent him flying through the air, demolishing one of the walls and causing a large chunk of the ceiling to fall on top of him.

Joker shot out his grapple and swung himself to the door, "Glad we had this quality time, Mr. Giant, but I'm afraid I can't stick around to play with you!"

Gigantomachia grabbed what was left of the wall and pulled himself out of the hole, his eyes burning holes into Joker.

"I think we just made him mad." Satanael whispered. "His own redirected power didn't leave a scratch."

"We need a plan." Joker slowly backpedaled as Gigantomachia's snarl rumbled through Joker's chest, "He's too big to fit through most of the complex, and we can't risk anyone from our side getting hurt in the crossfire."

"We need him out of here..." Kohryu snorted, "I have an idea, Trickster, but we need to be closer to the surface!"

Joker turned on his heel and flung himself through the door. Gigantomachia followed, bulldozing through solid concrete as if it were wet cardboard.

"La Brava!" Joker shouted over the mayhem of cascading concrete and rebar, "I need a way to the surface!"

"Wh-what!? But what about what the doctor just said-"

"There's no time for that right now!"

"O-okay! I-I'll do my best!" La Brava said.

"Joker, what's your plan?" Tensei asked, worry heavy in his voice, "We need to summon the surface heroes before it's too late!"

"Not yet!" Joker yelled over Gigantomachia's screams, "We need to get Gigantomachia away first, he's too dangerous!"

"A-alright... I think I see a route to the surface. You're not too far down, but the layout keeps changing. Hurry!"

Joker followed her instructions, his stomach flipping from the thrill of being chased by a monster, pushing away memories of frantically fleeing from the Reaper in Mementos. Every step Gigantomachia took collapsed another hallway, and eventually bits of upper floors collapsed with him. Screams and shrieks of surprise filtered through the cracks. Joker felt the force of Gigantomachia's next attack

through the floor mere feet behind him, his back harmlessly peppered with concrete shards.

Joker drew strength from Fafnir and cast Debilitate, but the orbs of light dancing around Gigantomachia didn't even slow him down.

"Let me try a distraction." Baal smiled as he sipped from his goblet.

Baal's Charge flooded Joker's veins with fire, and Baal stepped into reality after Joker flung himself around a corner. Baal remained calm as Gigantomachia's howls bounced off cracked walls, smiling as he sliced his hand towards the giant.

Three shining arcs of blue light cut through the air. Baal's Ayamur hit Gigantomachia square on, but left nothing more than faint scratches.

"Oh my..." Baal muttered as he turned to blue cinders before Gigantomachia crushed him.

Joker hauled himself up a staircase, using his grapple to escape Gigantomachia's meaty hands.

"La Brava, how close am I to the surface?"

"About two floors! Why?"

"Is there anyone from our side above me?"

"I-I don't think so. You should be below the rock gardens-"

"Fantastic! Tell the surface heroes to get ready!"

"Wh-what!?"

Kohryu rumbled with excitement, *"I hope the Faith will forgive me."*

Joker skid to a stop in the middle of the next hallway, turning to face the cataclysmic force head on. Gigantomachia, covered in dust and

debris, and chunks of the building pouring down around them, raised his fist with an enraged battle scream.

Joker smirked as the hallway blazed with golden scales.

“This is taking too long.” Nighteye said with a scowl.

“Do ya think something went wrong?” Fat Gum asked.

“Aniki’s okay!” Red Riot pumped his fists, Suneater shrunk away from his kohei’s enthusiasm, “It’s just taking a little longer, that’s all!”

“I-I hope that’s all it is.” Deku’s gaze was on the ground, fists clenched.

“Come on, you guys!” Lemillion beamed, “Everything will be fine once we go in! I’ll make sure of it!”

“Everyone, prepare yourselves.” Iida Tensei’s voice filtered through the comm, *“The signal should be-”*

They felt the tremors through their shoes. The sounds of cracking and breaking ruptured through the sky, as loud as if the whole world was about to end. Police and other heroes cried out when huge chunks of earth exploded over the complex, a rush of golden scales dazzling them in the bright sunlight.

Powerful winds buffeted them as Kohryu rose into the sky, his jaws clamped around a giant. Nighteye’s soul trembled as he recognized Gigantomachia, All For One’s top subordinate disappearing up into the clouds with hair-raising screams. Clumps of dirt, plant life, and stone fell around them like rain. Unbeknownst to them, Kohryu’s teeth snapped an old rope around the giant’s neck, causing a silver radio to fall and shatter within a lonely alleyway miles away.

“-Now... Everyone, go!”

Nighteye watched the golden glimmer disappear over the buildings, shaking himself out of his own shock to give the order to attack.

Joker stood at the precipice of the gaping hole that used to be a beautiful garden and a decent chunk of the mansion's first few floors. He squinted as Kohryu's form veered towards a familiar harbor at the edge of the city.

His nerves settled the further Kohryu flew away with Gigantomachia.

Joker turned to stare at the large crowd of Yakuza gaping at him. The winds had knocked them over and chunks of debris impaled the grounds.

An unsettling grin spread on Joker's face as he slowly leaned forward, "Boo."

His voice was barely a whisper. And yet, the Yakuza screamed for mercy and tried to run away, throwing down their weapons in fear. They scrambled over one another, pushing their own comrades down to get ahead.

More cacophonous noise echoed when a familiar dragon rose on her hind legs and broke the outer walls down with a mighty push. Aside from La Brava and Tensei, Ryukyu was the only one who thought it was better to stay with the surface heroes with her interns at her side, as her strength would benefit more. Heroes and police poured into the complex, battle cries and quirks clashing.

One such hero group spotted Joker calmly standing among the chaos of battle. Joker turned his back on them and stepped to the edge of the hole. Another pair followed Nighteye; Endeavor and Todoroki Shoto.

"Joker, *stop* !" Nighteye rushed towards him, accompanied by Midoriya, Tokoyami, and Lemillion. "You don't have to go back in there. Call it quits and let us handle it from here."

The heroes and police lingering behind Nighteye gave Joker stunned looks, a few of them openly gaping. Ryukyu snarled and spread her wings, snapping them out of it as they invaded the compound.

Joker tried to ignore how Midoriya and his classmates' stares stabbed into his back like hot pokers. "That's not how this works, Nighteye. I don't follow your orders. Risumi and Ayumu need me."

"Wait!" Midoriya reached out to him, "Please!"

"There's no time, Deku." Joker couldn't bare looking at the tangled ball of emotions shining through Midoriya's eyes, "See you inside."

Joker jumped, the flutter of gold rimmed coattails the last thing they saw before he disappeared into the darkness.

Endeavor stomped towards the hole, stopping where Joker stood a moment ago to peer into the hole.

"Shoto, stay with Nighteye. Use your ice to reinforce the structural integrity of the complex when needed."

Todoroki glared at his father, "What about you?"

"I'm following Joker."

Endeavor's hands burst with flames and he dove into the hole.

Nighteye sighed as he adjusted his glasses. "Lemillion, you should go ahead, too."

Lemillion perked up, "Sir?"

"Iida lost tabs of the hostages, and you can move fast enough to locate them before it's too late."

"Yes, Sir!"

Midoriya took a shaky breath when Lemillion gently nudged him with a bright smile, before he jumped into the hole after Joker and Endeavor. Midoriya exchanged a long look with Tokoyami and Todoroki, hardening his uncertainty.

With a unified nod, they raced into the complex alongside Nighteye.

The world flipped rapidly, belly under the sky and back to the shrinking ground, and around and around again in countless dizzying twists and turns. Kohryu thrashed as Gigantomachia's screams echoed through the heavens.

The Trickster's presence grew faint as the sun glinted off of a cold sea. Kohryu reared up into a lone column of sun dappled clouds, violently wrenching his head upwards as he released Gigantomachia.

They both hovered in the air a moment, floating in the midst of this sacred place, a beautiful shrine of Kohryu's domain. But unlike Kohryu, Gigantomachia was a creature stuck to the ground and thus gravity worked her cruel nature, fury etched in his rigid expression before he fell.

Kohryu turned a tight circle, his tail catching the giant with a violent *SNAP*. The clouds were blown away as Gigantomachia crashed to the earth, the rusty harbor flattened by the impact. Great waves rose into the sky and rippled through the sea.

Gigantomachia tore himself from the crater, sea water filling the hole in cascading waves. Kohryu felt a new shiver in his core. It trailed up his spine, the orbs in his claws flaring like supernovas. Kohryu stilled as the power surged within him until it bubbled in his throat.

With a great breath, he opened his jaws and fired a Heavenly Ray. It out-shined the sun's brightness as it hit Gigantomachia, the giant flying out and skipping over the water like a rock. Kohryu rushed

forward. Water swirled up around him as he descended to the surface of the sea and caught up with the flailing monster.

He snatched Gigantomachia in his jaws and curled around his body like a python, dragging the both of them down, down, *down* into the cold dark depths of the sea.

Joker shivered when he sensed Kohryu plunge into the water, the image at the edge of his mind. Fafnir's presence was much closer, flashes of claws and fangs tearing the Nomu apart, with the occasional atomic fire searing the Nomu's skin. But the Nomu healed every injury. Not that Fafnir minded. The wild dragon was *playing* with the High-End like a cat with a ball of string.

Joker rushed through another hall, the walls changing with every turn. The pathway behind him had closed as soon as he stepped foot on stable ground and continued to shift since. He cursed under his breath when the layout moved before his eyes, but he pressed on towards another path.

"La Brava, any updates?" Joker frowned when he received static, "Just *great* ."

He wondered if there was too much interference for a clear signal. His teammates were scattered to the wind. Heroes and squadrons of police closed in from above and Overhaul and his Yakuza were laying in wait deeper within, not to mention where Shigaraki and Kurogiri ran off to. Dabi and the other two were a huge question mark. Risumi and Ayumu were still missing, and now Joker found himself at a fork in the road.

He inspected the surroundings with Third Eye. His breath caught when a pair of glowing footprints trailed over the right path, small and delicate. A *woman's* footprint.

"*Should one of us go down the other route?*" Shiva asked.

"It would be unwise to split ourselves further and drain our energy." Satanael said.

"But what if one of our allies needs help?" Ishtar added.

"... The Trickster should trust in his teammates' abilities so we can put our focus on our objective. The Strength need us at our best."

Joker reached into his pockets for the Quirk Bullet he was shot with earlier, still full of the drug that contained Eri's DNA. He'd need one of the modified pistols the Eight Bullets carried to shoot it, as it didn't properly fit in either of his weapons.

His fists tightened around it as he shoved it back in his pocket.

"Hang in there, I'm coming." Joker whispered as he descended further into the complex.

"Those no good traitors." Shigaraki growled as he reduced another patch of wall to dust. "Why didn't you let me stay in that room!? I could've killed Overhaul then and there!"

"Be calm, Shigaraki Tomura. Your safety is my priority... however I don't understand why you wish to stay here? We should flee for the doctor's laboratory, to lick our wounds and regroup. We lost this battle, Shigaraki Tomura."

"Shut up!" Shigaraki was breathing hard, rage pounding through his blood, "I'm going to find them and kill them. Every last one!"

"Shigaraki Tomura, it would be best to vacate completely. It's too dangerous. We simply have too many enemies and not enough information."

"Too dangerous!?" Shigaraki whirled around to Kurogiri, "No, I refuse to tuck my tail between my legs and run away now!"

“But-”

Shigaraki grasped Kurogiri’s pristine outfit, pinky raised, “I *said* I’m not leaving until I kill those traitors. That’s an order! Do you understand?”

Kurogiri sighed, “Very well.” Shigaraki let go and Kurogiri dusted himself off, “I know the general area where my portal caught them off guard. The traitors are separated, so might I suggest we-”

Kurogiri froze, looking over his shoulder.

“What now?” Shigaraki grumbled.

Kurogiri tilted his head. Suddenly, his golden eyes went wide and Shigaraki fell through a portal in the floor, screaming in rage. A silver coil of fabric whipped through the air and wrapped around Kurogiri’s brace as his quirk was erased. He crashed onto the floor.

Eraserhead crept out of the shadows like a ghoul, eyes blazing red and hair floating. He stopped next to Kurogiri, tightening the capture weapon around Kurogiri’s brace.

Kurogiri simply glared as he was at Eraserhead’s mercy.

Suneater’s vision wavered as he leaned against the wall and sank to the ground. Unconscious bodies littered the broken floor around him. He did his job. He took down some of the Shie Hassaikai’s top members so the others could press on.

Suneater leaned his head against the wall, trying with all of his might to not fall unconscious himself. His ears strained when there was a noise on the other side of the door Fat Gum, Nighteye, and the others went through. Did they come back, or...?

The door screeched as a blade tore it to shreds. Suneater was on his feet, staggering as a wave of dizziness took over, his eyes

widening as a person in a black coat rimmed in red stepped in, balancing perfectly on unusually long geta shoes. Suneater couldn't see their face from the samurai-like mask, with two long white ribbons flowing down its back. It stared at him with golden eyes as bright as the sun. The eyes of a *god* .

It readied its long bladed weapon when he fell into a wobbly battle stance. He had nothing left in his belts for his quirk to use, except for some of the crystals from one of the Eight Bullet's quirks-

"Izanagi, hold." A woman's silky voice came from the hallway behind the god.

"Izanagi...?" Suneater mumbled as the god stepped aside and allowed a beautiful woman dressed in blue through.

The mystery woman scanned the room, her eyes stabbing into one of the Eight Bullets before landing on him. Despite all of his years of training, he shivered at her intensity. It was as if death walked over him, and he believed that she could easily kill him without lifting a finger.

He just wanted to go home.

"You are a hero, correct?" The woman asked pleasantly.

"Y-yes. I'm Suneater, Fat Gum's intern..."

"Ah, I see. Then it appears our allegiances align for the time being. My name is Margaret." She smiled at Izanagi, tapping a huge tome at her hip with a perfectly manicured nail, "That will be all for now."

Izanagi placed a hand over his heart, bowed to her, and disappeared in a shimmer of blue ash.

Suneater inhaled sharply, "That's-"

"Izanagi's not one of Joker's." She studied Suneater's tattered costume and the blood dripping down his face, before she turned to

the unconscious bodies on the floor, “Impressive. You really faced three of these villains by yourself?”

“Y-yeah. I stayed behind to fight them.” Suneater’s heart pounded and he wanted to turn away from her striking beauty, but he didn’t want to be rude to one of Joker’s allies, “Fat Gum and the others... you didn’t see them?”

“No.” Margaret frowned as she looked to the door behind her, “I encountered no other heroes besides you. I suspect the layout was changed by the villain skulking in the walls.”

“O-Oh...”

Margaret walked over to one of the Eight Bullets, “Interesting. May I ask why there’s so much glitter?”

Suneater sputtered. Aside from the faintly sparkling crystals made by Hojo’s quirk, the ground and the nearby walls around the downed trio were covered in a thick carpet of red and black glitter. Small pieces stuck to his costume and fluttered off of his cape, but he considered himself lucky to not be covered in it.

“O-one of them thought he was using some sort of smoke bomb, but... it exploded too early, and with glitter instead.”

“I see.” She snorted before a scowl overtook her expression, “They deserve such humiliation from the Trickster.”

She kicked over the one with the larceny quirk and rifled through his pockets. Such cold and calculated maliciousness didn’t belong on her face.

“Ah, here it is. It’s lucky Elizabeth and Theodore were ordered to stay behind. They would’ve shown no mercy.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing that concerns you.” Margaret sighed as she pocketed something on a silver chain, “I’m afraid I’ve no more time for pleasantries. You have two options; Either you wait here and I continue alone, or I could heal you and we go together. My orders were to not directly interfere with any fights between the villains and heroes, but that doesn’t prohibit me from healing injuries afterwards. Your choice.”

Suneater stared dejectedly at the empty containers on his belt, “I wouldn’t be able to use my quirk. I’ll only slow you down.”

The woman hummed. She snapped her fingers, sparkles of green energy floating around his body. A sharp gasp left his lips as his pain eased and his more gruesome injuries healed in the blink of an eye. He gaped at Margaret.

“You’ve already fought valiantly and won a hard battle. Don’t sell yourself short, Suneater.” Margaret’s expression softened with a smile, “Rest now and leave this in the hands of others.”

Suneater watched her leave without another word, too stunned to follow.

... He really wanted to go home.

Mr. Compress stomped through the complex, several marbles full of concrete walls bouncing around in his pockets. Unprepared Yakuza that stumbled in his path were taken care of with ruthless efficiency. He knew the cause of his sudden anger, and surprisingly, it wasn’t Overhaul or the League of Idiots.

The doctor’s words for Joker were hard to hear through the communicator, but it was Doctor Ujiko’s voice nonetheless. The final tie to the False Demon Lord of Kamino, the one who thought he was safe in a lab buried deep under a certain hospital. Mr. Compress didn’t have the time to bring it up to Joker, what with the boy’s slow

recovery and fractured mental state that still wasn't completely patched.

Perhaps... he should keep this a secret from Joker. He could feel Joker's terror before their communications went down. It wouldn't be right to ask the boy to face that monster head on, especially since they're going to U.A. after *this* mess was all cleaned up.

But, if he played his cards right, U.A. and other pathetic heroes like Nighteye would be in his debt. They could take the doctor down, get their own hands dirty and not have a fucking *traumatized child* do everything for once.

Oh, there he goes swearing again.

How very ungentleman-like of him.

He took a breath to calm the unexpected rage taking over his heart, but he made a silent promise to take care of this later.

A low, far away rumble brought him out of his schemes. Right now, they all had to make it through this endless hellscape first.

"Ugh, these villains have no style!" Mr. Compress muttered as he carved the next chunk out of the wall, adding another marble to his growing collection, "As soon as I get my hands on these villains, they'll be sorry!"

He stepped out into another long hallway, groaning. This whole place looked the exact same no matter where he turned or how many holes he made in the sentient wall. He had no idea which direction to go in this ridiculously drab underground labyrinth, and with their communications went any chance of a decent guide.

"Maybe I should make a hole in the floor and descend that way..."

His ruminations were interrupted by the purr of an approaching motor. He blinked as he looked down the hall. No matter what was

said later, he *didn't* shriek like a school girl and throw himself against the wall to avoid getting run over by the Monabus. He. *Didn't!* Anybody who stated otherwise was a blatant liar.

The Monabus screeched to a stop. Black marks dug into the ground as the Monabus went in reverse, stuttering to another hard stop in front of him.

Mr. Compress's jaw dropped as the driver window rolled down, "Lavenza! ?"

"Oh, I am glad you're alright." Lavenza said with a pleasant smile.

Spinner and Lady Stubbs gasped dramatically from the back seat, "She's a crazy driver!! Are we off this ride yet!?"

"Like you're one to talk, Spinner!!" Mona's voice yowled from the radio.

"Er... Are you old enough to drive, young lady?" Mr Compress asked, amused.

"Human ages don't apply to me." Lavenza said with a dignified nod.

"I'm taking that as a 'no'." He opened the door and made a shooing motion with his hands, "Scooch, I'm going to drive now."

"Oh thank *god* ." Monabus said, "I don't know how much more I can take!! Please tell me you're a nicer driver, Mr Compress!"

Mr. Compress shut the door and gripped the wheel, "I have a license under many names, but it's been quite some time since I last drove. Any particular direction we should go? There are baddies that need to be taken down, after all."

"No idea!" Spinner shouted, "We totally kicked some Yakuza butt before Mona and Lavenza caught up to us!" He cackled as he held up Lady Stubbs, "Nobody is a match for us, Right Stubbs!?"

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs trilled as her pudgy paws flexed, revealing her Tiny Scythes of Doom.

“Encounter anyone important?” Mr. Compress asked. “I haven’t seen hide nor hair of Overhaul or his Eight Bullets, or anyone from the League. It’s a bit concerning.”

“Uh, don’t think so? They were all wimpy pushovers.” Spinner grinned, “They couldn’t even scratch us thanks to the armor Joker gave us!”

“Those I encountered underestimated me because of my size,” Lavenza tapped the chainsaw laying on the floor with her foot, “But it wasn’t long before they were all screaming and running away from me. It was... surprisingly entertaining. I think I understand Elizabeth a little more now.”

Mr. Compress and Spinner exchanged long glances, “I’m not going to ask. But enough talk! Let’s find friendly stragglers and prevent anybody from dying today, shall we?”

Mr. Compress put the pedal to the metal and they sped through the underground tunnels.

The walls rumbled underneath Todoroki’s ice.

“How is he so strong?” Tokoyami asked as he warily watched from a distance.

“It seems Mimic has control over the whole complex...” Nighteye scowled, “It’s possible he took a significant amount of Trigger to accomplish something like this. We can keep breaking down the walls, but it’s better to reserve our strength for now.”

“Is it smart for us to continue?” Todoroki stepped away from the wall, a cold mist leaving his lips, “Everyone is being split apart. We lost

Fat Gum and Red Riot, and a majority of the police force to the maze. My ice won't hold for long."

"We have to press on." Nighteye said as he looked to the small group of police behind them, "Everyone else is fighting and we're no exception."

They stopped when the tunnels shook, Todoroki's ice splintering. Screams rang out as the walls and floor warped and shifted like fresh clay.

"Watch out!" Tokoyami shouted as Dark Shadow burst out of his back, tackling Midoriya and Todoroki out of the way when great chunks of ice broke and the floor opened up beneath them.

Nighteye's shout was cut off as they plummeted through the darkness. Dark Shadow's howl echoed as they tumbled down, the quirk protecting them when they finally crashed onto the ground. They all groaned and slowly sat up.

"Is everyone alright?" Tokoyami asked as Dark shadow pulled back, hovering over his partner's shoulders.

"I think so?" Midoriya said as he got to his feet.

Todoroki scowled at the unblemished ceiling, "It looks like we're on our own. Now what?"

Midoriya looked up and down the white hallway, frowning, "Like Nighteye said, we press on."

Tokoyami snorted, "We may be students, but I feel sorry for any villain who faces the three of us."

"That doesn't mean we can be careless." Todoroki rolled his shoulder, "We should proceed with caution."

"I agree, but which way should we go?" Midoriya said.

Dark Shadow twisted away from Tokoyami and floated around them in a wide circle, listening, "There are lots of vibrations all over the place. I don't think it matters which way we go, we'll probably encounter somebody no matter what!"

Tokoyami sighed, "Okay. Splitting up isn't an option. We stick together and pick a route. Which path should we take, Deku?"

"Y-you're asking me?"

Todoroki shrugged, "We can't waste any time and you have a good head on your shoulders. Plus you're our close range fighter."

Midoriya took a deep breath and scrutinized either path.

He chose the hallway leading south, hoping it was the right path as his fellow heroes-in-training followed his lead.

Toga gripped her favorite knife in her right hand while the gun dangled from her left.

Things *were* going to plan, until they didn't. At first, she thought she did something wrong after they shot Joker, only to be unable to stop herself from laughing as he still had the gold flecks within his silver eyes. The same gold that swam in moonlight when they danced together, the *same* gold that stared at her in horror when she wore Risumi's skin at the Summer Camp.

And now, she wandered alone, separated from Dabi and Twice. With the ever changing layout of the compound, she had no way to find them. That, and Kurono had jumped in front of Overhaul and took that bullet, and it was more than likely that Overhaul reset Kurono by now.

She *hated* wasting one of the few precious bullets. Toga's grip tightened on the cold metal of the gun. She wouldn't let Dabi's hard

work go to waste. She just had to press on and hope she found allies, or be strong enough to take down their enemies.

Toga stopped at the sound of shuffling footsteps ahead. A figure hobbled around the next corner with his hand on the disintegrating wall, dark coat tattered with dust and grisly stains, with petrified hands around his body. With every step he took, the walls and floor crumbled around him.

Ice prickled through Toga when Shigaraki hobbled to a stop, gleaming red eyes landing on her.

Silence crept between them for a single heartbeat.

“*You* .” Shigaraki snarled.

Toga set her expression in defiance as she raised her knife. “Me.”

“Why?” Shigaraki clawed at his neck, “You wanted to live freely? I would’ve given you that.”

“Maybe you could before you became obsessed with Joker. But I don’t want to be this way if it means I have to hurt my friends either!” Toga took a shaky breath, her mouth tasting of ash, “Mr. Compress was supposed to be our friend, a-and Joker...”

“Joker is the enemy! He ruined our plans and killed Sensei! We would’ve had everything we wanted if he wasn’t in the picture! Why don’t you realize that!?”

“Joker... he...” She scowled and shook her head, “Even when we were fighting in that mansion, he was the first person to show me kindness! Mr. Compress had that same kindness and we betrayed *him* !”

“So that makes it right for you to betray me and everything the League stands for? Whatever.” Shigaraki took a step closer, his head tilting at an odd angle so that his ruby red eyes sparkled with bitter

hostility, “I suppose *you’re* my enemy now. I should’ve suspected the Rogue... they’re always the traitors.”

Shigaraki charged with inhuman speed.

Toga’s body moved on instinct as she twirled away from him, her knife singing to the tune of her racing heartbeat. She rapidly moved to avoid the decay creeping through the floor. She and Shigaraki danced around each other, the latter’s movements erratic and wild, and if Toga had been any slower she would’ve been reduced to dust. She had no time to aim the gun, her muscles burning as she dodged and sliced at Shigaraki, small dribbles of Shigaraki’s blood flying with every swing.

Hallways crumbled and entire rooms rotted away as they continued their twisted waltz. Bloodshed and ash became their entire world, two sole opponents wishing for the other’s head as they moved like an infernal tide. Shigaraki slowed as the dozens of shallow cuts wept with crimson tears, and her tired muscles protested and her pounding heart threatened to break out of her ribcage.

Then, a new element entered their world of battle.

From the next hallway came a growl and a blast of sound. Toga jumped away as her teeth chattered and her skin broke out in goosebumps. The sound attack barreled past her, as if she wasn’t its true target.

Shigaraki wasn’t so lucky.

A *crack* echoed through the hallway as he was hit in the chest, flying back and crashing against one of the walls. He slid down from the cracked wall and slumped onto the floor. Petrified hands scattered in all directions. Still, decay crept towards them like the withered roots of a dead tree.

Toga took aim.

The gunshot rang in their ears, and Shigaraki flinched when the bullet sank into his shoulder, eyes widening as he slowly turned his head to stare down at it. His rage melted into confusion.

“... What did you do?” Shigaraki’s voice was quiet like it had never been before. Vulnerable. *Scared* .

The massive presence stopped behind her as the weapons dropped from her grasp. Shigaraki’s breathing became raspy and strained. He scrambled onto his knees pressed his hands on the floor, expecting a new wave of decay to execute his enemies. Nothing happened.

He looked at her, his expression slack and almost child-like, “WHAT DID YOU DO!?”

“I-I...” Toga’s throat clogged. “I just...”

“She just acted.”

Toga froze as Gang Orca loomed behind her, his shadow swallowing her small frame. This was it. She clenched her eyes shut and braced herself. Surely he’d use another sound blast to knock both of them out, maybe she’d be lucky to wake up in a dirty cell-

“I’m sorry.”

Toga opened her eyes to see Gang Orca staring down at her, his red eyes holding a different flame of emotions to Shigaraki’s.

“... Huh?”

He knelt in front of her, “You were asking for help during the Provisional Exam, and I didn’t figure it out until much later.” He extended a giant hand towards her, the fear shooting through Toga’s heart was expunged as he gently lay it on her head. A strange warmth twisted through her chest as he softly ruffled her hair, “But

now that I've found you again, you have an important choice to make."

"That's bullshit!" Shigaraki rushed unsteadily to his feet, a twisted snarl upon his cracked lips, "Kill him, Toga! You know the *heroes* would only leave you for dead the moment you turn your back! They can't even help a child lost in the streets, what do you think they'll do to you after everything you've done!?"

Toga found herself shivering at the sudden lack of warmth on her head. Gang Orca stood up, walked around her, and stopped in front of Shigaraki with as pitiful an expression as an orca could get.

Shigaraki lashed out, swiping Gang Orca's chest repeatedly. Toga wanted to turn away and cover her ears as his screams turned desperate and animalistic, Gang Orca's bulk shielding her from the tears falling down Shigaraki's face. Eventually, his howls died away, his actions slowing and losing steam as hopelessness seeped into his body.

"I'm sorry nobody saved you when you were small, Shimura Tenko. There's still a chance for you in my program-"

Shigaraki flinched, "I don't want your damn apology! And there's *no way* I'd ever be in your so called 'rehabilitation' program!"

"No, I thought not..."

Toga covered her mouth when Gang Orca viscerally head butted Shigaraki.

Shigaraki's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed onto the floor in a boneless heap. Gang Orca reached into his hip pouch and cuffed the now quirkless Shigaraki Tomura, then he stood, turning his gaze to Toga.

"Toga Himiko," He walked to her, his footsteps heavy as he held out his massive hand, "Now you make your choice. If you willingly

surrender here and now, then you'll be put under my protection and placed in my rehabilitation program. I'd rather not fight you, young miss."

Her heart thundered in her ears and her limbs shook, "I... I..."

Gang Orca's eyes softened, "You'll be able to get the help you need, and after, choose what sort of life you want to live. I won't abandon you just because of your quirk."

I won't abandon you because of your quirk.

Her mind flashed back to her parents, always demanding that she hide her true self so that her 'evil' quirk would never see the light of day. She had pushed her emotions and true self into a tiny glass bottle to keep her parents happy, suffocating and suffering in silence, until the pressure was too much and that bottle exploded. *Nobody* remained untouched from the fallout, forcing her into hiding.

Until... now.

"What about Twice?" Her watery eyes were wide and her voice shook, "He... I want to help him too."

Gang Orca nodded, "I'll see that he gets into the program, should he be taken into custody today. I promise."

Toga stared at Gang Orca's hand. The hero had the patience of a saint as he waited for her to decide. Slowly, she reached out to Gang Orca. Her hand was a fraction of the size of his, and much colder.

Gang Orca grinned as he helped her to her feet, "I'll have to confiscate your weapons and restraint your hands in cuffs until everything is finalized. For your safety as well as others."

Toga swallowed the lump in her throat, but complied.

Knives of all shapes and sizes clattered onto the floor. A butcher knife holstered on her back. Another strapped to her thigh, which the

hero respectfully looked away for. She dumped all of the needles and other sharp objects tied within her sleeves. A small pile was at Gang Orca's feet when she looked down at her legs.

"... I have more knives in my shoes."

The hero almost gave her a flabbergasted expression as she knelt down and extricated a small collection of pocket knives to add to the pile. Her gaze lingered on the gun within her reach. Gang Orca noticed and picked it up, the weapon too small for him to use.

"Wait, are these the permanent Quirk Bullets?"

Toga grinned, "Yeah! Well, all but one."

"Where's the last one? How did you even get these in the first place? If you don't mind me asking."

Toga giggled as she stood up and smoothed out her skirt, "Joker has it."

"... What?"

She elegantly twirled around, copying a certain moonlit dance as Gang Orca watched, "Dabi provided the distractions while Twice made more of me so we could gather information faster, and with my skills we found out what Overhaul's plans were after listening in to his lackeys and digging around his lab. I found the bullets and the gun he planned to use on Joker, so it was easy switching them up, except for that single bullet."

"I don't quite follow."

Toga resumed her dance, her grin widening as she held out her arms and looked to the spinning ceiling, "Overhaul and the Eight Bullets thought their guns had the permanent ones, but they are only just temporary. But still, Joker was shot with a permanent one."

Gang Orca's eyes widened as anger sparked through him, "Your plan was to get his powers taken away for good?"

"No!" Toga faced him with her hands in a placating gesture, "There's no need to give me that look, Orca! This is *Joker* we're talking about. The man who survived the Kamino Disaster and defeated the Demon King of the Underground. I knew he was smarter than to walk into the lion's den unprepared. My *plan* was to give him a free bullet without exposing myself too early."

"But what would've happened if that plan backfired? You could've gotten him killed."

"But it didn't." She looked at Gang Orca from head to toe, "You're proof of that, aren't you? Whatever gate you and the other heroes appeared from are part of his power too, right?"

Gang Orca grumbled, his grip on the gun tightening.

"I'm hoping Joker will use that bullet on Overhaul." She tucked her hands behind her back, her smile softening as her eyes turned wistful, "I only wish I could see the look on Overhaul's face when he becomes permanently Quirkless. His ultimate goal is to get rid of all quirks, but he'll be completely powerless if his own gets taken away. Kinda ironic, don't you think?"

"... I see." Gang Orca tucked the gun away and sighed, "Do you have any more weapons? If not, then I suggest we get moving. I'll need to cuff you before we continue."

Toga frowned, but held out her hands. She shivered when the cuffs clicked in place, but that giant warm hand was placed on her head again, and the cold and empty heaviness in her body faded away. She couldn't help the weak smile spreading on her face.

Gang Orca turned away with a firm nod, throwing Shigaraki Tomura over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, "Let's go, Toga Himiko."

Toga glanced at the pile of knives gleaming under the flickering lights with a tightness in her chest, then to the various petrified hands, and finally to the gun hidden somewhere in Gang Orca's costume. The weapon she used to permanently end the next Symbol Of Evil. The gun she snatched when she wanted nothing more than to protect those she cared about.

The hero watched as she turned her back to the pile of knives, the one comfort she's had over her time as a villain. Her part was done, and now it was all up to Joker and his friends. She kept her eyes forward as she walked side by side with Gang Orca and, with any luck, into a brighter chapter of her life.

Dabi thought he'd be used to the scent of incinerated flesh by now as his shoes left sooty footprints behind him. The smell always soaked into him for days after, and turning those lowlife Yakuza to ash wouldn't be any different. His only regret is that he hadn't found Overhaul or any of the Eight Bullets.

... Or Shigaraki.

He paused when a loud noise clambered from somewhere down the battered hall.

Wild mechanical laughter, Hood's inhumanly enraged battle cries, and-

A manic grin tugged painfully at Dabi's staples when the unmistakable sound of Endeavor's shouting and the roar of flames bathed the hallway in unbearable heat.

Welp, that happened. And there's still more to come! The Overhaul finale had to be split into 3 chapters because there are SO MANY CHARACTERS AND INTERACTIONS TO BALANCE that it couldn't be contained in 2 chapters.

Current Update Schedule

Counter Strike - October 22nd

Take Over - November 5th

Freedom & Security - November 26th

Also despite being on a break my mental health decided to take a straight nosedive and explode all over the place... so please be patient with me if the schedule or anything else needs to be moved around.

Counter Strike

Chapter 80: Counter Strike

Nothing went according to plan at first, but now it's time to turn the tables.

Aaaahhhhh I got so many nice comments about last chapter and they really lifted my spirits. Thank you so much for the patience and kindness after that break. I always seem to convince myself that every single chapter I write is garbage and expect people to react repulsively and treat it as such... so to get the opposite reaction so frequently throws me off in the best way possible.

(And yes, I have believed it for literally *every single chapter* that's been updated but I digress augdfghobjafn)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Eraserhead dragged out a sigh as he tugged on his capture weapon, hauling Kurogiri across the floor like dead weight. Kurogiri wasn't keen to teleport as long as Eraserhead kept hold on Kurogiri's neck brace, but the villain went limp and made himself a problem.

"I demand you to release me." Kurogiri grumbled, "As we are both in a bit of a rush."

"No." Eraserhead growled, "There's no way I'm letting you go free after all the crap you put me and my students through."

"It's a shame." Kurogiri tilted his misty head, "I wonder how Shigaraki Tomura is faring. I hope he was able to take his revenge against

those who've wronged him."

"Be *quiet* ." Eraserhead sharply tugged on the knot holding Kurogiri's brace, "I think he was pretty stupid not to run away while he had the chance. I wouldn't be surprised if he rots in Tartarus after this."

"I doubt he will be taken down easily."

"Right." Eraserhead rolled his eyes, "A man-child who can't think for himself will clearly win the day and exit this hellscape unscathed."

"You should give him more credit."

"Why?" Eraserhead groaned, "You know what, never mind. Why is it that *you* are so obsessed with Shigaraki?"

"I've taken care of him since he was young because Sensei ordered me to. Shigaraki Tomura was quite small when Sensei took him in, but Sensei was often absent because he had other important matters to attend to. Thus, I was given the job as caretaker."

"... How old?"

"He was only five years old, scared and alone. A terrified child who had just lost his whole family."

Eraserhead frowned as a stone sank into his gut, "You're being... awfully forthcoming with this information."

"I was never ordered to keep silent about such things."

"Is that all you can think about? Orders this, orders that. Shigaraki Tomura this, Shigaraki Tomura that. Do you think about yourself once in a while? Do you even care that you got captured?"

Kurogiri went silent as he seemed to think it over, leaving Eraserhead to drag them through the white tunnels, dust raining down as another tremor spread through the complex.

“No.” Kurogiri hummed, “My only directive is to take care of Shigaraki Tomura’s needs, and to follow his orders since Sensei passed away.”

“Directives and orders...” Eraserhead rolled his eyes, “What did you even do before you were All For One’s lackey?”

“I... don’t recall.”

“You ‘don’t recall’?”

“Yes. I have been under Sensei’s care for as long as I can remember.”

“Anything before that? Friends, family? What about your childhood?”

“I...” Kurogiri’s mist curled, “I don’t recall anything before Sensei.”

Eraserhead slowed to a stop. “No memory of your life before, and unable to think for yourself or go against orders.” Eraserhead’s eyes widened. “That sounds pretty similar to a Nomu.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not a-” Kurogiri’s mist trembled again, “No, that’s impossible. I voluntarily served Sensei because I believed in his ideals... didn’t I? I don’t remember...”

“Kurogiri-”

“N-no, I... I did feel a strange sort of kinship with Hood. But why would I? I’m not... like him... I...” Kurogiri’s mist undulated in a way Eraserhead never thought mist could, like ripples of water caving in on themselves, “Why can’t I remember *anything* ? No, wait...”

That rock in Eraserhead’s stomach sprouted thorns, “*Kurogiri -*”

“I do remember something... locked away in the darkest corner of my mind, it’s... hazy... A voice in my ear... a collapsing building... a hospital... Sho-” Kurogiri screamed and hunched over.

Eraserhead rounded Kurogiri and crouched in front of him, “Hey, snap out of it!”

Kurogiri’s mist shrank down. He looked up at Eraserhead, the barest wisps curling around a more human-like head, streaks of silver tears falling from golden eyes. Another twitch, another scream that jolted through Eraserhead’s veins before Kurogiri sagged forward, eerily still.

“... Kurogiri?” Eraserhead shook Kurogiri’s shoulder, “Kurogiri!”

The villain(?) awakened with a start, the mist flowing over his form as usual. Golden eyes narrowed at Eraserhead’s hand on his shoulder, before they trailed to the hero’s face in contempt.

“I have no idea what you think you’re doing, *Eraserhead*,” Kurogiri spat, “But I demand that you release me, as we’re both in a bit of a rush.”

“You... you don’t...” Eraserhead drew his hand back and stood over Kurogiri, a powerful wave of *sorrow*, of all things, coursing through him, “Do you remember anything we just talked about? About... your past?”

Kurogiri scoffed, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Eraserhead swallowed as his stomach churned. If his suspicions were correct... then Kurogiri could be as much a victim as any other Nomu. To be torn apart and sewn back together with a whole bunch of quirks stuffed into you was a fate he’d wish on nobody.

His mind briefly trailed to Joker.

“Kurogiri.” The misty man looked up, eyes narrowing at Eraserhead’s strained tone, “I promise I’ll get you the help you need.”

“I don’t need your help, Eraserhead. I’d rather toss your rotting corpse into the ocean.”

Another rumble broke the stilted silence as they stared at one another.

Eraserhead sighed, "... Let's get moving."

"You're the one who will do the moving."

Eraserhead grit his teeth and continued dragging Kurogiri. No other words were exchanged as they trudged through the shaking compound. That was, until Eraserhead heard the tell-tale sounds of battle around the next corner. He grimaced as all went silent after a moment and footsteps travelled closer, widening his stance as he tightened his grip on Kurogiri.

Figures appeared around the corner and stopped, either party staring at one another.

"Eraserhead?" Best Jeanist gaped.

"Jeanist! And-" Eraserhead raised a brow at the tiny hero behind him, "Gran Torino? What are you doing here, old man?"

"Bah, I have as much stake in this raid as you! I came in here after that golden dragon flew off with Gigantomachia. After all the trouble Tsukauchi and I went through to try and find him, he gets stolen by Joker. Figures."

"I ran into him after we all got separated." Best Jeanist said, "He's been... an interesting companion."

"Oho!" Gran Torino's eyes flicked to Eraserhead's captive, a grin sprouting as he marched up to Kurogiri and sharply tapped him with his cane, "Where've you been hiding, you coward?"

"Knock it off." Best Jeanist and Gran Torino gawked at Eraserhead's sharp tone. Eraserhead buried his face in his capture weapon, "It's possible that Kurogiri is another of All For One's victims. A Nomu."

"A Nomu!?" Best Jeanist asked.

Gran Torino scoffed, “Well, Kurogiri? Is that true?”

Kurogiri glared in silence. If looks could kill, Eraserhead was pretty sure he’d be six feet under already.

They tensed as another quake rumbled from somewhere below.

“We should get out of here.” Best Jeanist said, “Some hallways are unstable, and one passage was completely collapsed. We don’t want to get stuck down here, or worse.”

“Can you take him to the surface?” Eraserhead asked, “I *need* to find my students.”

Gran Torino snorted, “Toshinori was right! You really are a softie at heart.”

“Are you sure?”

Eraserhead’s eyes hardened, “Of course I’m sure.”

Best Jeanist sighed, “Alright. Be careful though, the whole structure isn’t safe.”

“Thank you. Kurogiri can’t go anywhere as long as you hold onto his brace.” Eraserhead straightened out his ruffled capture weapon as Best Jeanist activated his quirk, tightening Kurogiri’s clothes while strings of denim connected him to the hero, “I owe you a favor.”

Best Jeanist’s eyes crinkled with a hidden smile, “Nah, don’t be like that. Just make sure the kids make it out okay. The Shinsou’s too.”

Eraserhead nodded and disappeared deeper into the fractured tunnels.

Fafnir’s claws gouged the bloody floor as he sprinted on all fours, tail thrashing and steam chugging from his jaws.

Adrenaline coursed through Fafnir's metallic blood like an addictive drug. The *thrill* of the chase. Hunter and prey. This is what he was made for. The High-End Nomu might have been handed the title of apex predator on a silver platter, but *he* would put that second rate prey in his place!

Hood looked back, cackling. The walls were wide enough for Hood to stretch his great black wings, using the jet-like growth on his back to fly ahead. They played cat and mouse through this same area over and over, the cracks sprouting over the walls and floor were like delicate egg shells. Despite the pools of Nomu blood on the floor and caked in Fafnir's claws, his prey was unharmed and making fun of him.

Hood rounded the next corner, and Fafnir heard the squelching noise as the Nomu shot out another of its ilk from its body. Claws screeched over tiled flooring as Fafnir threw himself around the corner, his legs banking off the wall to leap on his new prey. A smaller Nomu encased in viscous liquid sloshed around on the ground, his claws stamped out its life in a spray of red before it even sucked in its first breath.

That's how Hood escaped the first time.

Hood wriggled through slime covered talons as it spat out new adversary after adversary, using its own kin as cannon fodder. Fafnir crushed them all while Hood kept his distance and *watched* Fafnir's every move. Studied him like a strange new insect, picking him apart to look for weaknesses to exploit.

As if he'd find any.

Tendrils of steam curled from Fafnir's mouth as the Nomu below him twitched in its death throes, then went still. These *things* were not human. An empty, mindless husk that would never regain what they had lost. Killing them was a mercy in Fafnir's eyes. No different to Shadows. The Trickster was too preoccupied to heed their deaths and Fafnir would keep it that way.

Hood disappeared by the time he looked up.

“Hiding won’t work!” He howled as he crawled off the dead Nomu, “Face me and meet your death like a warrior!”

Fafnir whipped around as Hood crashed through the wall, dark wings splayed like massive sails as he slammed into the ground next to Fafnir. The floor and surrounding walls finally crumbled under the relentless destruction. Hood’s weedy laughter taunted Fafnir as he plummeted to a lower floor. The Nomu continued to swipe at the walls and rip out great chunks to throw down, encasing Fafnir in a veritable mountain of debris. Darkness encased Fafnir as the stones settled with groans, but he released an amused huff as sharp points rubbed harmlessly across his steely scales.

His claws sliced through the entrapment like warm butter, he climbed out and shook the grime from his scales. Hood was perched at the edge of the hole above.

“You’ll have to do better than that!”

Hood jumped down, studying Fafnir with a tilt of its head, “You... strong. Can’t be... injured. Immortal? Who are... you?”

The Nomu’s unnaturally deep and warbled voice was an affront to Fafnir’s ears.

Fafnir reared up on his hind legs and roared, “I have been called many names throughout the centuries! A vile serpent with legs. Wyrn. Greedy dwarf. I am Fafnir!”

“Fafnir...” Hood licked his lips as they circled each other, “Your death... will be a good death...”

“How do you expect to kill me when you haven’t landed a single scratch?” Fafnir cackled as Hood snarled, “What, are you finished sending your brethren to their deaths?”

Hood crouched, ready to pounce, when there was a crunch of a footstep before they were bathed in a crimson deluge. The Nomu shrieked as the scent of burnt flesh pervaded the room, while Fafnir purred as the fire's warmth invigorated him. Fafnir sent the surge of healing energy to Kohryu. The old dragon was growing cold and weary deep into the black ocean as his own opponent continued to struggle in vain, but renewed strength warmed his limbs and healed his broken scales.

The air warped when the fiery torrent stopped. Tongues of flame coated the ground and gave the room a hazy glow.

Fafnir turned towards the largest crack in the wall. Endeavor stood there, fire bursting throughout his costume. A name popped in Fafnir's head courtesy of the Trickster's memories.

"Flameo, Hotman!"

"Not that *cursed* nickname again." Endeavor scoffed, his cerulean gaze drilling into Fafnir.

Hood charged with a wild screech, not at Fafnir, but at Endeavor. The two collided with a sickening crunch, with Hood pushing the hero down on the floor. Hood raised a meaty fist raised to strike Endeavor's head.

"Don't ignore me!" Fafnir hissed as he leapt after them.

Fafnir landed on Hood's back and clamped down on the vertebrae jutting from Hood's neck, the taste of sickly copper flooding his mouth. With a wrench of his head, he ripped Hood off of Endeavor and tossed him into the same pile of debris he used to encase Fafnir.

Endeavor got to his feet, blood dripping from a gash on his arm caused by the scattered shards of concrete.

"Don't bleed out, Hotman! Why are humans so fragile?"

“This is nothing.” Endeavor sneered as he cauterized his wound, wincing as blood bubbled, “Just stay out of my way, lizard.”

“I claimed Hood first! Besides, that didn’t stop you from shooting your flames before.”

Endeavor scowled, “Joker wasn’t hurt by my fire in Hosu. I figured you wouldn’t be either.”

“Hmph.” Fafnir snorted as he shook his horned head, “Well, you’re lucky fire *heals* one such as I.”

Endeavor startled, but didn’t have time to voice his reaction.

Hood climbed out in a cloud of dust, panting. The black hood tied around its neck was torn away, revealing an open brain and large, jagged teeth. The soulless eyes were bloodshot as it glared at them.

“Hood was fun at first, but now I’m growing bored. I suppose I’ll allow you to share in the glory of slaying this High-End, Hotman. With our combined attacks, we may be able to overtake its regeneration.” Fafnir crawled forward, laughing as a blue glow lit the inside his throat, “Give your hottest flames, hero! Don’t you *dare* hold back!”

Fafnir pounced, his scales gleaming crimson as the room was consumed in an undulating sea of fire.

Hood wailed as it flapped its wings to retreat, but Fafnir snatched one of its legs and slammed it down. He took a note from Kohryu and wrapped his sinuous body around Hood, squeezing until the *snap* of bones trembled through the air like broken twigs. Hood struggled and thrashed, rolling several times to try and dislodge Fafnir as the endless wave of flames boiled its skin.

“Prominence Burn!” Endeavor’s shout was swallowed by the roar of fire, the temperature skyrocketing.

Fafnir's strength increased in droves as the heat melted the concrete under them. Hood, howling in rage, stretched out his bony neck, the muscles ripping apart just below its jawline. Fafnir snarled. Was Hood trying to decapitate itself to save the brain? Could it regenerate without the rest of its body? Fafnir didn't want to find out the hard way.

"No you don't!" Blood spurted from the Nomu's brain as Fafnir clenched Hood's head within his jaws, the atomic fury in his throat burning brighter than Endeavor's flames.

A blinding beam shot from Fafnir's mouth and drowned Hood within the Cosmic Flare. Red and blue danced in tandem, a swirling vortex thriving like the heart of a newborn star and consuming the Nomu's whole being in unlimited fury.

The purple-black hue of its skin shriveled, its face an unrecognizable chunk of scorched flesh. Endeavor's fire ceased as the Cosmic Flare in Fafnir's throat slowly died away. Fafnir let go of the head and sunk his fangs into the Nomu's neck, black ash and the taste of ozone coating his tongue as he snapped Hood's neck for good measure.

Fafnir tossed Hood away, his body crumpling between he and Endeavor in a smoking heap. They waited. Hood wasn't moving, nor was there any sign of his regeneration kicking in. Fafnir crawled over the melted concrete and steaming piles of metal to poke what was left of the charred corpse.

Fafnir bellowed out a reverberating victory cry, "It's dead!"

"I can see that." Endeavor grumbled as he fell on his knees, the flames around his costume sputtered.

Fafnir huffed, "I don't have any healing spells, Hotman. Don't die on me or the Trickster will be upset!"

"Shut up, lizard. I'm not dying today." Endeavor wiped the stray ash sticking to his sweat laced body, "I just need a moment to recover.

Prominence Burn isn't supposed to be used in such an enclosed space, and whatever attack *you* did made it worse."

Fafnir cracked the end of his tail like a whip, "You're *welcome* ."

"Well, isn't that a shame?"

A shadow hovered at the edge of the same crack where Endeavor entered. Blue flame flooded the room with a wave of Dabi's hand, Endeavor's startled shout became strangled as he was swallowed by it.

Fafnir leapt in front of the hero, pooling his magic to cast Psycho Force. Reality bent and twisted itself with bright, undulating lights, and Dabi screamed as he fell to his knees and clutched his head.

"What... the hell... was *that* ?" Dabi muttered through harsh pants.

"An attack on your fractured mind." Fafnir growled, "Stand down, otherwise the Trickster's misplaced sympathy for you won't stop me from taking you down!"

"What are you talking about?" Endeavor's voice sounded like rolling gravel as he pulled himself up, clutching his left arm.

The left half of his body had been covered in a carpet splotchy burns traveling up his leg and torso, devouring his whole arm before climbing up his neck. His left eye bled heavily as the burns travelled there, stopping below his hairline.

"Stay out of this!" Dabi snapped at Fafnir, "You have no business interfering, you overgrown snake! He deserves this after all this time!"

Endeavor glared with his good eye, "I've never met you personally, Dabi, but I've read your profile."

Fafnir craned his head towards Endeavor, "You don't know who he is?"

An eerie grin split Dabi's face, "Oh, you've 'read my profile' have you? Is that it? After all this time *that's* what you have to say to me!?"

"I don't-"

"Look me in the eyes and figure it out! I want to see your pain when you finally realize who I am!" Endeavor stared for a long moment, silent. After a few moments Dabi laughed, high pitched and manic. His hands dropped away from his head and he stood on wobbling feet, "Oh come on, old man. Do I need to say it to your face? Figures you'd need help to get this far, even if it's from your very first *failure* ."

Realization slapped Endeavor, his good eye going impossibly wide, "No, it can't be... Touya?

"I don't go by that name anymore, asshole."

"You... you're supposed to be-"

"*Dead* ?" Dabi tilted his head, an ear to ear grin stretching his patchwork face, "Did you really think I'd kick the bucket that easily!? Look at what became of your firstborn son, *Endeavor!* "

The hero looked. He studied the scars along Dabi's body, travelling up to his face to meet crazed cerulean eyes. *His* eyes. Tinged with madness so deep there was no pulling back from such depths.

Endeavor shook his head, horror creasing his burned features, "How? How did you survive that fire? We looked for you and only found bones!"

"What does it matter?" Dabi took a step forward as Endeavor continued to crumble, Fafnir tensed, "Now *that's* the kind of expression I was hoping you'd have! It's not enough, though. Shoto's here too, right? I wish I found him first. I could've slaughtered your precious *masterpiece* and dragged his burnt husk of a body before you. That would've been a real kicker!"

“Why, Touya?” Endeavor stood, hunched over with a mask of pain not entirely born from his burns, “Why are you doing this? Why didn’t you come back to us!?”

“Come back? *Come back!?*” Dabi shot another starburst of searing flames, but Fafnir shielded Endeavor with his own body, “I *did* come back! Three long years after I ‘died’, and you know what I saw?” Dabi jabbed a finger towards Endeavor, expression twisted by pure hatred, “I saw *you* training Shoto. I saw Fuyumi and Natsuo living their lives as if I never existed! *Everyone* moved on and forgot about me!”

“Touya, *no* .” Endeavor clutched his heart, “The pain of a parent losing a child never goes away! It changed all of us! I never... I’ve never experienced such a deep pain before, and your mother-”

“Oh, so that’s why you *abandoned* me after Shoto got his perfect quirk?”

“Your *own* quirk was hurting you! I couldn’t-”

“That night of the fire, I only wanted to show you how much my quirk improved so you would see that *Shoto* was the failure, not me! I waited and waited for you to come, but you never showed up! After everything, why would I return when I was already a forgotten ghost!?”

“I never abandoned you!” Endeavor roared, “Fuyumi still cries every anniversary and she’s kept all the portraits you drew when you were little. Natsuo visits the family grave every weekend and leaves offerings. Shoto may not remember you as well, but he took care of the shrine we set up for you at home. And your mother...” Endeavor blinked rapidly as tears threatened to form, “She may not be able to do much in that hospital, but I know she keeps your memory alive in her heart!”

“Shut up. Shut up! SHUT UP!! I don’t want to hear your bullshit LIES!” Dabi gripped his head, steam wafting from his burnt skin as

his arms limply fell to his sides, a puppet who's strings have been severed. He raised a hand toward them, breathy and manic laughter escaping his jagged grin, "I'm going to end you, and then I'll find Shoto and end him too. I'll kill Natsuo and Fuyumi next. You said Mom's still in that hospital too, right? It won't take much effort to burn that place to the ground. Oh, and I'll give them your regards as I see the life go out of their eyes."

Fafnir's jaws snapped in a screeching metallic timbre, "Enough of your insanity! I'll put you down like a rabid dog!"

"No, stand down, lizard." Endeavor hobbled around Fafnir to stand in front of him, the flames around the unburned half of his costume spurting to life as he raised his right hand, "This is *my* responsibility, and mine alone."

Dabi's wheezing laugh came out bone dry, his grin all bared teeth.

Silence permeated the room as father and son stared each other down.

Flames were shot. Burning red and striking blue met in the middle, Fafnir did nothing but blink away the dust and wait for the spots in his eyes to go away before the twin flames clashed again.

Faintly, Fafnir recalled something deep within the Trickster's cherished memory. The same show in which Endeavor's nickname came from, one of many the Trickster used as an escape when he was young and his parents' abuse got worse.

Contrasting hues of cerulean and scarlet drowned out any other color, the agonizing screams and shouts of dueling family members singing with the boiling heat of a volcano. They clashed like swelling waves and lightning called down from stormy heavens.

Sibling vs. Sibling.

Son vs. Father.

In that show both ended in tragedy. A son, scarred and banished because of his father's icy cold heart. A sibling, so broken with madness. Fafnir was witnessing a depressing mix of both in the duel before him.

And yet, as another flash of scathing heat warmed Fafnir's scales, he was torn on whether or not to stop this foolishness.

Torn because while there was so much *hatred and pain and regret*, Endeavor was willing to step up and change his ways, possibly try and fix his broken family even if that meant he would dig through the broken shards and bleed for it.

The two men were revealing the full extent of their own humanity.

On the other side of the coin, Touya took the Trickster's trust and kindness and threw it back in their faces. He'd stop at nothing to fulfill what his own twisted ego desired. There was no way to reason him back to rationality. *Reverse Justice* indeed.

The next waves of weakening fires faded to ash and curls of black smoke, both Todoroki's were heaving as either of them were on the verge of collapse. The skin where Touya's flesh was stapled together looked painful and swelled with angry burns.

Enji was on the brink of his limit, the fire on his costume was no more.

Fafnir silently compared the both of them to used matches that burned far too long, all black and brittle from overuse.

"Touya," Enji whispered, but they still could hear his voice in the stilted silence, "If you win, if you overcame me and... killed the rest of our family, what would you do after?"

Touya chuckled as he swayed on his feet, "I'd let all of our dirty laundry go public. Your precious family name will be dragged through

the mud for centuries! With any luck, the title of *Number One Hero* will never be the same, forever stained by *your* crimes.”

Fafnir’s had **enough**.

Such pride and integrity meant nothing if they both killed each other.

As Touya and Enji raised their hands for the final blows, Fafnir readied himself to end this charade once and for all. He didn’t get the chance.

Touya suddenly disappeared, a blue orb dropping to roll on the ground where he stood. Several figures stood at the cracked entrance.

“You’d rather die here than make amends like a *proper* father should?” Mr. Compress wagged a finger at Enji as the hero’s good eye was blown wide, “I’m rather disappointed in you, number one hero.”

“Goodness,” Lavenza stepped inside, craning her head this way and that at the smoldering remains, “Whatever happened in here?”

“Wow, it looks like a volcano went off in here!” Spinner ogled at their surroundings with a dropped jaw.

Lady Stubbs, perched on Spinner’s shoulder, pressed herself into the lizard’s neck, nose curling at the acrid scents.

Fafnir puffed out his chest, “I defeated the High-End Nomu!”

“W-we see that...” Mona wrinkled his nose as the crumpled Nomu husk and stared at the hero. Enji didn’t seem to hear them, his horrified focus was on the marble Mr. Compress picked up, “Uh, would you like me to heal you or-”

“No. No, I....” Enji shook his head, “What are *you* doing here?”

“Don’t change the subject!” Mr. Compress threw up his arms.

“We were lost until we found a bunch of charred bodies... we followed the trail all the way here.” Mona shivered, “W-we overheard you guys shouting and came as fast as we could.”

Enji limped over to Mr. Compress, who flipped Touya’s marble in the air several times, as he would a coin, “Hand him over.”

“Why?” Mr. Compress scoffed, “So the two of you can kill yourselves in a pointless duel?”

“Mr. Compress.” Mona chastised, before looking at Enji with softened eyes, “Look, you’re really hurt. Let me heal you and then we can come up with a plan from here on out.”

“I don’t need your help!” Enji roared. Mona jumped behind Lavenza as the man’s half-burnt scowl met the terrifying visage of Mr. Compress’ Arsene mask, “Give. Him. Here.”

“Sorry, number one, but I refuse.”

Enji was consumed in a light blue glow before he, too, was reduced to a marble rolling on the floor.

Fafnir bent his neck and sniffed at it, “This one has finally earned his rightful place as Death.”

“Death?” Lavenza blinked, “Yes, I suppose that man *is* Upright Death now. How... curious.”

“Alice won’t be pleased.” Fafnir quietly mused.

Mona crossed his arms, his brow was knotted in worry.

“Are you sure that was a good idea, Compress?” Spinner asked, “He was-”

“Not thinking clearly.” Mr. Compress swept up both marbles and stuffed them in his pocket. “I *told* Joker that letting Dabi go was a bad idea, and it came down to this. I had no choice.”

“What are you going to do with them?” Lavenza asked, unfazed.

“I’ll turn Dabi over to the authorities. Endeavor will remain stabilized in my marble until we can get him to an ambulance, since he’s so stubborn that he refuses to be healed.” Mr. Compress turned away from the melted room, his ire radiating through his mask, “Let’s get out of here, this place reeks. Are you coming with, Fafnir?”

Fafnir stiffened. He stood on his hind legs, head tilted towards the Trickster’s direction so far below when soul searing icicles of rage stabbed into their being.

“... Fafnir?” Mona said.

“The Trickster...” A snarl clattered in Fafnir’s throat like broken wind chimes, “He has located this world’s Strength... I must return now.”

“Wait!” Spinner waved his arms. “Where-”

Fafnir disappeared, his ash blending with the cooling embers on the ground.

Overhaul’s grip was tight enough to bruise, “Stop struggling.” He said as he dragged Risumi through the white halls, “You’re only making things worse for yourself.”

“Let us go!” Risumi tried and failed to free herself, “Most of your so called Eight Bullets aren’t here, and the heroes will find us any minute. Joker won’t ever forgive you for this!”

“You’re valuable captives. As long as we have you, we have a chance at getting Eri back.” Nemoto growled and pointed his gun at Ayumu, who was restrained in Kurono’s grasp, “Kurono could trap you in slowed time again, or we can kill you and drag your corpses to our next hideout for Overhaul to revive.”

“Do you want your unborn child to die, Shinsou Risumi?” Overhaul asked without a single drop of emotion, eyes shining like a cold star. “Remember that I’m *allowing* it to live... for now. Perhaps it would be useful for study, should I decide to let it come to term.”

“Risumi...” Ayumu whispered, his voice hoarse from the shock collar which prevented him from sleeping during their captivity.

Risumi stared at her husband with teary eyes, letting her body relax.

“Wise choice.” Overhaul said, “Now let’s go.”

Risumi drowned in helplessness as the Yakuza dragged them further into the belly of the beast, probably to a secret exit. She kept hoping, *praying*, to whichever gods would listen that Joker would appear around the next corner to rescue them. She just wanted to go home, to hold Hitoshi and Ayumu in her arms and never let go, to smell Akira’s coffee and see the boy’s radiant smile again...

Risumi shut everything away as her body slowly went numb. She felt like an observer in her own flesh. The occasional rumble and shake of the building cast away a small part of the haze before she lost herself again, Ayumu’s desperate gaze prickling at her back.

It wasn’t until she heard a pair of screams that she violently snapped back into reality.

Overhaul whirled around, dragging her with. Her mouth dropped at the sight of a flaring red cape, and of a young man with golden hair downing Nemoto and Kuroso in one fell swoop. Ayumu fell on his backside, mouth agape, as the young hero’s vibrant cape shielded him from view.

Overhaul’s fingers trembled as his right hand tightened around her neck, “Hold it right there.”

The young hero froze when Risumi tried to claw at Overhaul’s fingers, her breath squeezing through her throat in harsh rasps.

“Let her go, Chisaki!” The hero sliced his arm through the air,
“Release her and surrender, otherwise-”

“Otherwise you’ll *what* ?” Overhaul took a step back with Risumi, the young hero made to follow- “Don’t, or I’ll reduce this woman to a bloody paste. And not *only* this woman... why don’t you tell him of your condition, Shinsou Risumi?”

“I-I...”

“*Tell* him.” Overhaul’s growled in her ear, his grip threatening to crush her windpipe.

“I-I’m pregnant.”

Coldness laced the hallway like a breath of winter, making her hair stand on end as the shadows warped around them. For some reason, she didn’t think it came from the shocked fury radiating through the young hero’s eyes.

“That’s right.” Overhaul huffed, “You’ll stay back and let us leave, unless you want to abandon another child like you did Eri. Your hero name was *Lemillion*, right? You want to save a million people.”

“How did you-”

Overhaul tilted his head like a curious vulture, “By my count, you’re still at zero. You couldn’t even save a little girl that was right in front of you, let alone this woman and her unborn child.”

“I...” Lemillion’s hands balled into fists, the snarl curling his lip didn’t fit what Risumi imagined to be a usually happy face, “I won’t ever abandon anybody again! I won’t rest until you’re in prison and these two are safe! Mark my words, Chisaki, your reign of terror ends here!”

“Hey, *Overhole*, I’d listen to Lemillion if I were you.” Ayumu stood up with renewed confidence, “Do you know what happened to the last

guy that gave Risumi and I trouble?”

“What of it?” Overhaul snapped.

Ayumu’s feral grin stretched across his face, “Joker royally kicked his ass.”

Overhaul scoffed, “Joker’s not here to save you-”

A *BANG* deafened them as a silver bullet whizzed past Lemillion, striking true into Overhaul’s arm. The shadows thickened as more gunshots sounded, blood splattering from Overhaul with each one. Risumi gasped as his hold loosened and she pushed way from him.

Lemillion took this chance and disappeared into the ground, reappearing in a flash to punch Overhaul in the face. Dizziness claimed Risumi as the world blurred, and within moments she found herself being set down next to Ayumu. A kind, beaming smile was upon Lemillion’s face when Ayumu threw his arms around her.

Overhaul, bloodstained and laying on the ground, pulled himself up when loud footsteps echoed ominously through the hall. Risumi’s blood froze when Joker emerged from the shadows, coattails weaving around his heels and dual guns of angelic light and demonic dark smoking.

The new mask didn’t cover the *rage* pouring out of Joker’s molten gold eyes. His footsteps splashed with vibrant colors as he kept his aim on Overhaul, stopping in front of them while Lemillion’s breath left in a sharp gasp.

“Risumi, Ayumu, are you alright?” Joker asked, his voice soft yet flooded with righteous fury.

“Y-yeah...” Ayumu whispered, eyes wide like dinner plates. “W-we’re okay.”

“Good. Just hang in there a little longer.” Joker reloaded his guns, empty ammo clips dropping to the floor with a metallic *ting*, “This will all be over soon, I promise.”

“Yes, it *will* .” Overhaul muttered before the earth ruptured.

An odd trio rushed through the underground tunnels, having found each other through nothing more than sheer dumb luck. Margaret found Eraserhead first, and a mutual nod was all they needed to pair up. Then they encountered Nighteye taking down some lower level Yakuza with weighted stamps that, *somehow*, managed to knock the villains out.

Without so much as a proper greeting, Margaret, Eraserhead, and Nighteye agreed to go together on the condition that Margaret won't fight as long as they held up their deal with Joker.

Eraserhead was formidable, in his own way. He worked well with Nighteye as they seamlessly defeated any lower Yakuza that got in their way, with Eraserhead's fascinating scarf techniques and Nighteye's merciless accuracy.

Nighteye kept giving her sideways glances when he thought she wasn't looking.

“What is it, Nighteye?” Margaret asked courteously.

Eraserhead blinked at them as Nighteye adjusted his glasses, frowning, “Nothing.”

Margaret smiled, “That sour tone suggests otherwise.”

“Do you have a problem with her?” Eraserhead asked in a surprisingly protective tone.

“No, I...” Nighteye glared at the wall as they walked, “It's not a *problem*, it's rather that your and Lavenza's presence during the raid

was unexpected. I don't know where you came from or who you are, and nobody would tell us what happened when Joker met up with them."

Nighteye cast a pointed look at Eraserhead, who stared at the other wall and kept silent.

Margaret chuckled, earning Nighteye's ire, "We're an unknown element that makes you uncomfortable?"

"Such a lack of information could be detrimental to a case." Nighteye balled his hands into fists, "I've no information on you, and its as if you came out of nowhere. *Forgive* me if I harbor suspicions about your true motivations."

The air became chilled as Margaret's beauty gained an icy edge, "I don't care what suspicions you have. I won't have any quarrels with you as long as you uphold your end of the deal with Joker. But if you keep disrespecting Joker, or if you have plans to double cross him..." Margaret stopped, a low hum of magical power surrounding her, "Then nothing will stop my siblings and I from exacting vengeance. Are my *motivations* clearer to you now?"

Nighteye flinched, eyes wide as her aura smothered them.

Eraserhead's shoulders sank with a long sigh, "Nighteye, all you need to know is that they're on *our* side. There's no need to be suspicious of them."

Nighteye turned away, his eyes trained on the floor, "Fine. I apologize for my misgivings."

The inhuman strength around Margaret died away, "Apology accepted... for now. But I sense a deeper wound within you that won't be settled by a mere apology. I suspect your qualms are not actually with Lavenza and I, but with Joker. What has you so bothered about him, Nighteye?"

A thoughtful expression crossed Nighteye, tinged by... envy?

“How does Joker do it?”

“Do what?”

“How does Joker change fate? The events from my visions should have been etched in stone until Joker interfered.” Nighteye stared into her eyes, “He changed *everything* .”

Eraserhead’s eyes widened minutely, but he said nothing as his eyes flicked between them.

“Interesting,” Margaret simply smiled, “As the Reverse Wheel Of Fortune, you believe fate is immovable. You’ve tried to shift it with your own hands before, but you’ve given up after you found it as solid as stone. You’ve noticed Joker has changed the very fabric of fate you fought so hard against in vain.”

Nighteye paled, “How did you know that?”

“It was my own deduction.” Margaret sighed airily.

“... And?”

“I *can* offer advice.” She faced him fully, her golden eyes glittering, “In your quest to change fate, did you ever allow other people to aid you, or did you shoulder everything all on your own?” She shook her head when Nighteye winced, like she would when scolding a child, “Joker gains strengths from the bonds he forges. You need to expand your own horizons, Sir Nighteye, gather those you trust to share the burden with you. Only then may fate turn from immovable stone to malleable clay.”

“I... I see.” Nighteye’s expression turned thoughtful.

They were about to continue, when they heard a noise coming from behind. Margaret stepped aside as Nighteye whipped out a handful of his weighted stamps and Eraserhead readied his scarf.

The heroes stared in confusion as the Monabus sped through the hallway and slammed to a stop in front of them.

Mr. Compress rolled down the window and stuck his head out, "Ah, Margaret! We were wondering where you ran off too!"

She chuckled, "I successfully retrieved the key. I take it you're heading towards the Trickster?"

"We're trying!!" Mr. Compress startled when Spinner pushed him down to stick his head over, "We met up with Fafnir! We gotta hurry though, because Joker found Overhaul!!"

Nighteye scowled.

The floor trembled and loud crashing could be heard somewhere below.

Lavenza rolled down the opposite window, "Margaret, we have no time to dawdle. The Trickster needs us!"

"Get off!" Mr. Compress gasped dramatically as he shoved Spinner off of him, "If everyone is done chatting, we have someplace to be!"

Margaret walked over to the Monabus and opened one of the back doors, looking at Nighteye and Eraserhead, "Are you coming, or shall we leave you here?"

Nighteye exchanged glances with Eraserhead, before looking over Lavenza, Mr. Compress, Spinner and Lady Stubbs. He pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned.

"So be it. I can't believe I'm about to get into a vehicle with a bunch of *vigilantes* ."

"Hey, it could be worse!" Monabus griped.

Eraserhead's expression shifted through several emotions, including shock and startled realization.

“Wait a minute.” Eraserhead’s eyes went wide as he stared at the bus, “... Mona?”

“Er... yeah?”

“So, let me get this straight.” Eraserhead glared in disbelief at the car ears, then to the tail wagging from the bumper, “Back at the Summer Camp when Joker said you’d catch up later *while* getting luggage out of a bus that looked just like you... that was *you* ?”

The Monabus *purred*, “Yep! I’m pretty cool, huh!?”

Eraserhead massaged his temples, “I’m demanding a raise after this.”

Nighteye blankly stared at the bus. Margaret chuckled as she walked over and grabbed their sleeves. The Monabus bounced as Spinner and Lady Stubbs scrambled to the front seat, while she, Eraserhead, and Sir Nighteye took the back. Nighteye was cramped against the door, clearly miserable by his hunched shoulders and constipated expression.

Mr. Compress adjusted the mirror to stare at the heroes. He didn’t wait for them to get comfortable before stomping on the gas.

“COME OUT YOU WITLESS TWO-BIT SACK OF BONES!” Miruko screamed as she bounced off the walls like a hyper ping pong ball, “WHAT SORT OF COWARD HIDES BEHIND THESE WALLS, HUH!?”

Her ears twitched as the walls vibrated with furious howls. She was getting closer, she *could feel it*. Just a little more taunting and the harebrained idiot would reveal his location, and she could put a stop to this never ending maze for good.

“C’MON!” Miruko howled as her feet landed on the ground, “IF ALL OF YOU ARE THIS WEAK THEN OVERHAUL DOESN’T STAND A

CHANCE! HOW COULD YOU DEVOTE YOURSELF TO SUCH A SORE LOSER!?"

The next scream drowned out all other thought, a sharp pain drilled into her sensitive eardrums, but she leapt up to the ceiling without hesitation, her kick breaking it apart and revealing the ugly mug she'd been searching for. She dug her fingers around the edges of the hole, grinning.

"Found ya!"

Mimic snarled in her face and began receding back into the ceiling.

"No you don't!" A younger voice yelled.

Miruko jumped down as a sheet of ice entrapped Mimic. Another howl echoed as a black shadow charged, claws ripping the villain out of the wall, dust and ice shards glittering like snow.

"I got him!" Deku, green lightning sparking around his body, flew into her vision as Dark Shadow threw Mimic, Deku's kick crashing into Mimic like a speeding freight train.

Miruko whistled as Mimic fell to the ground, mouth agape and eyes blank. The walls stilled as Mimic was finally down and out for the count.

She whirled around to the trio of students rushing towards her.

"Way to go, kiddos!" Miruko trapped Deku in a headlock and furiously ruffled his hair. She let go, cackling at the sputtering kid's beet red face, "He was being a royal pain in the ass. I could probably teach you a few things to improve your overall form, Deku, but you all did great!"

"Th-thank you?"

Miruko looked them over, "Where are the others?"

Todoroki Shoto glared at the unconscious villain, "We were with Nighteye when the floors caved in thanks to that villain."

"Thankfully we were still together," Tsukuyomi straightened his cloak as Dark Shadow hovered over his shoulders, "We've been wandering until we heard you shouting, Miruko. I'm glad we could be of assistance."

Miruko nodded. She reached into her hip pouch for restraints and cuffed Mimic's wrists, "There, even if he wakes up he won't be able to use his quirk again." She sighed and faced the trio of young heroes, "Stick with me from here on out, kiddos. I won't let anything get the jump on us!"

As if to contradict her statement, the whole complex rumbled. Not the distant quake she'd hear every once in a while, but teeth-chattering, bone-grinding earthquake that could be felt throughout each and every tunnel within the compound.

Deku fell into a battle stance, "But Mimic is down!"

Miruko crouched and set her ear to the floor, "It's coming from below..." Her previous playfulness melted away with a hardened brow, "If I had to guess, somebody finally caught up to Overhaul."

Another great rumble showered them in dust.

"You don't think *Joker* found Overhaul?" Todoroki Shoto asked. "These earthquakes are too big to be anyone else."

"He did have a head start compared to the rest of us..." Deku mumbled.

"Well, whoever it is we're not going to let them face Overhaul alone!" Miruko righted herself and cracked her knuckles.

"What are you going to do?" Tsukuyomi asked as he stepped back. Smart kid.

“We don’t have time to find the stairs,” Miruko let her feral grin take over, Deku shivered while the other two stared at her in muted shock, “We’ll make our own way down! We’ll win if we can knock Overhaul out of the running, so the more people we have fighting him the better.”

“What about him?” Deku looked at Mimic, frowning.

“Leave him.” Miruko sighed, “He’d slow us down if we brought him with, plus we don’t want him getting killed in the cross fire. You guys ready?”

The kids traded quick glances, then nodded.

Miruko whirled around, swinging her leg in a wide arc to slam onto the ground. Cracks spread, but it didn’t break... yet.

“Hey, Dark Shadow! Mind helping a lady out!?”

“Aye!!”

They took turns bashing the floor in until it caved. Miruko jumped down onto the next floor first, and called them down when it was deemed safe.

“Well, it is faster than stairs...” Todoroki Shoto muttered as he slid down an ice ramp, “I hope we’ll make it in time.”

“Less talk, more destruction!” Miruko ordered.

“Yes, ma’am!!” Dark Shadow roared.

She hoped they would be fast enough. Miruko would *never* forgive herself if she failed Joker a second time.

“Risumi, Ayumu, are you alright?”

Joker couldn't see their expressions as his vision tunneled on Overhaul, but what he had just heard... what Overhaul had threatened to do with Risumi now that she was-

"Y-yeah..." Ayumu's voice cracked, "W-we're okay."

"Good. Just hang in there a little longer." Joker reloaded his guns, empty ammo clips dropping to the floor with a metallic *ting*, "This will all be over soon, I promise."

He felt Fafnir return to him that moment, purring from the satisfaction of a battle won. It distracted Joker for a fraction of a second, but that's all Overhaul needed.

"Yes, it *will* ."

Joker's teeth chattered as the ground exploded with spikes, Risumi and Ayumu's startled screams felt like ice water pouring through him. Blue flames roared around Joker in reaction.

"Cu Chulainn!"

The Persona materialized with a flare of his white cape and lunged his spear forward. Joker felt light-headed as Cu Chulainn's Gigantomachia attack drained his health and decimated the wave of spikes. Thundering crashes shook the complex, chocking dust and shards of concrete rained down upon them.

Joker covered his face as Lemillion shielded the others with his cape.

"*It is safe, Trickster.*" Cu Chulainn said when the rumbles calmed.

Joker lowered his arm and studied their surroundings.

They stood in the center of a massive cavern, waves of destruction had knocked down walls and eradicated entire rooms into flat, craggy plains. Small rocks fell from the ceiling and bounced around

their feet, motes of stale dust clouded the far edges of the space like low-hanging fog.

“Is it over?” Ayumu whispered.

“No, Overhaul wouldn’t go down that easily.” Joker looked over his shoulder and did a double take, “Where’d Kurono and Nemoto go?”

Lemillion frowned, “They were right there! Overhaul must’ve grabbed them?”

“Or they were faking it and waiting for a chance to escape.” Joker said.

“Th-they had guns.” Risumi said, shivering.

“Guns?” Joker looked around with Third Eye, “Were they the quirk canceling ones?”

Risumi and Ayumu exchanged quick glances, with Ayumu whispering, “I-I don’t know?”

“Why are you asking about the guns and the quirk canceling bullets?” Lemillion asked as he helped Risumi and Ayumu to their feet.

Joker sighed when there was no sign of a shiny golden treasure to pick up from the floor. They weren’t careless enough to drop one, so he’d have to get one from Nemoto or Kurono. Joker sheathed his guns and reached into his pocket, Lemillion gasped when Joker held up the Quirk Bullet between his thumb and pointer finger.

“I think Toga Himiko stole the *permanent* bullets, but even if this one was temporary, taking away Overhaul’s quirk would put an end to this fight.”

“Sun Eater was shot with one of those,” Lemillion frowned, “It took his quirk away for hours.”

Joker smirked, “*Exactly* .” He pocketed the bullet and turned to Risumi and Ayumu. Prickles of rage washed over Joker when he spotted the torture device on Ayumu’s neck, “Hold still.”

Ayumu’s eyes widened when Joker approached, unsheathing his knife. With a single swift slice, the shock collar fell from Ayumu’s neck and tumbled onto the floor.

“Thank you.” Ayumu rubbed his neck dotted with irritated skin, “That thing *sucked* .”

Joker nodded and sheathed his dagger, but froze when Risumi reached out and softly lay her hand on his arm.

Her glasses were cracked and her hair was a long tussled mess without a braid. Still, she peered at him with such clarity and unbreakable willpower, even as her eyes watered and her lips trembled.

“You’ve grown so much.”

The coldness throughout Joker’s body disappeared when she cupped his face in her hands, the warmth of a mother’s touch melting the icy wrath within his heart.

“I-I know.” He lay his hands over hers, “Let’s save this until after you’re safe, okay? We can catch up later.”

Risumi nodded and backed away with a warm smile.

“What do you want to do, Joker?” Lemillion placed his hands on his hips.

“Me? What about you?”

Lemillion frowned, “I don’t want you to face Overhaul alone.”

“You’d fight side by side with a vigilante?” Joker asked, eyes widening.

“Of course! I’m partially guilty for everything that’s happened.” He looked at Risumi and Ayumu, his posture soaked with guilt, “I’ll make sure Overhaul pays for everything he’s done.”

“But what about us?” Ayumu asked. “We can’t exactly... fight. And with Risumi’s condition...”

“One of mine will watch over you.” Joker said as his mindscape stirred.

Cu Chulainn bowed his head and returned to Joker.

This Persona just returned to him, but his defenses would make sure they’d remain unharmed...

Fafnir came into reality with a whisper of blue ash, rising above Joker with a metallic trill in his throat. Lemillion gaped as Fafnir crawled around Joker and stopped in front of Risumi and Ayumu, who were equally flabbergasted.

Fafnir deeply bowed, “Greetings, Strength.”

“Uh, hi?” Ayumu said as he gawked in amazement.

Risumi smiled and patted Fafnir’s snout, the tip of his tail thumping on the ground.

“Fafnir will keep you safe, maybe find you a way out of here.” Joker ran his gloved hands down Fafnir’s side as he rounded on the dragon’s head, “Right, Fafnir?”

Fafnir absorbed how Joker’s soul simmered with a sun’s righteous heat since Risumi calmed his rage, and of Satanael whose influence pressed on the edge of Fafnir’s mind in stern warning. The Trickster’s unrivalled power flowed over their bond. It was a single stream within a bottomless ocean of unrivaled potential, and Fafnir had to stop himself from trembling like a newborn hatchling.

“Of course.” Fafnir nodded to his true master, purring when Joker scratched his favorite spot behind his horns, “As much as I would like to devour Overhaul for his crimes against you and the Strength, I’ll follow your orders, Trickster.”

“Good.” With a roll of his shoulders, he turned to Lemillion. “Ready?”

Lemillion took a breath and his face broke out in a determined smile, “Let’s go!”

Joker grinned as he shot out his grapple to the closest intact surface and leapt away, Lemillion following in a flying blur after he shot out of the floor.

“Please, be careful!” Risumi’s muffled words were lost to the wind howling in Joker’s ears.

“Wait!”

Ren and Lavenza stopped at the foot of the stairs within the Velvet Room. It was now well into the night, and Ren was to call Present Mic’s radio station. Lavenza and Eraserhead would go with him as back-up as everyone else finalized their preparations. Eraserhead practically fled outside after Theodore spoke with him in private, he was probably sipping religiously from the thermos Joker gave him as he waited.

“What’s wrong, Kaito?” Ren asked.

“I just...” Kaito caught his breath, “Before Eri and I leave with Nezu, I...”

Lavenza politely smiled at him, “Whatever it is, please make it quick. Time is our enemy.”

Kaito wrung the straps of his bag in his hands, “Promise me you’ll all make it out alive.” Kaito looked over his shoulder, nobody else was in

ear-shot, but he leaned in and whispered, "I don't want to hear how you did something stupid and needed to be revived by Mona again."

"I -"

"And it better not be like the half-assed promises you made before." Kaito glared at Ren, "A real one, this time."

"Kaito, I-"

Kaito held up his hand, his heart suddenly pounding, "No, don't make the promise to that name, I..." He reached up and grasped his pendant, "I want you to make this promise to my real name. I.... my name is Ito. Ito Kazuya."

"You..." Ren's shock bled away, coloring his silver and gold flecked eyes with powerful conviction, "Ito Kazuya, I promise we'll make it back. All of us will return to you and Eri."

"I'll make this same vow." Lavenza said with a curtsy, "Is this satisfactory, Ito Kazuya?"

"Yeah." Kazuya smiled as unexpected emotions tangled in his throat, a unknown weight lifting from him, "Eri and I will be waiting for you at U.A., so don't take too long."

Ren winked before he and Lavenza went upstairs and disappeared into the door of light.

Deep in his heart, Kazuya knew Ren would uphold his promise this time.

Hoooo boyyy does it Go Down next chapter...

Update Schedule:

Take Over - November 5th

Freedom & Security - November 26th

Take Over

Chapter 81: Take Over

We're rolling deep into your underground crib

Thought I sent a prior notice card for you

We wanna make this a party you don't want to skip

Gonna be a show to remember

Take Over, it's time to boogie down

Make over nothing's gonna be the way you might like

It was over when you started with us

You should've thought twice

Walked on thin ice

Hey, game's over!

It's showtime

Joker gets a new bestie

Miruko's more badass than Kaneki

Canon Overhaul should consider himself lucky

The Arcana Is The Means By Which All Is Revealed

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hawks and Gentle Criminal delved into the complex, their eighth time evacuating injured police officers and small time heroes, as well as arresting Yakuza. A trail of small feathers would lead them back to one of the gaping holes to the surface.

“Can I ask you something?”

Gentle Criminal blinked at Hawks, “What is it?”

Hawks tightened his grip on his feather swords, “How was Joker after... you know.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be a little more specific.” Gentle Criminal donned his softest smile at the troubled look in Hawks’ eyes.

“The kid. After... after he came back from Kamino.”

“Hmm, I’d be lying if I said he bounced back right away.” Gentle Criminal pulled on his gloves, frowning, “He couldn’t even walk for a while, and the immeasurable guilt from what happened in Kamino nearly crushed him. It... was a difficult time for all of us. I like to believe we helped him pull through, but there are times where I see him looking more solemn when he thinks nobody is looking.”

“... I see.”

“Why did you want to know?”

Hawks shook his head, “People like him will always help others, but then turn around and refuse to ask for help with their own problems. I just wanted to know if I could do anything to help him after everything he did for me.”

“Yes, that sounds like him.” Gentle Criminal smiled sadly, “But perhaps there is something you can help him with, after this raid is over.”

Hawks nodded. They walked in silence after that, the sounds of other battles vibrating through the floor of this endless maze. They had navigated through a half destroyed corridor before coming to a random door like the dozens they've encountered before.

"Here." Hawks stopped and spread his wings, "This is where I sensed some movement last time. There are four people in there."

"Do you think they're hostile?"

"I don't know." Hawks tilted his head, listening, "There's... a smaller form laying on a bed. Maybe a student."

Gentle Criminal snapped his fingers. A perfect bubble formed around them and over the door, "If they are hostile... they won't escape."

Hawks smirked, "Good idea."

Hawks opened the door. Immediately, they were faced with Rappa, one of the Eight Bullets. Hawks lunged forward, smaller feathers darting out to pin him to the wall. His duel feather blades formed an X over the villain's neck.

"Whoa, Hawks!!" Someone Gentle Criminal didn't recognize stood next to an unconscious Kirishima laying on a bed, covered head to toe in gruesome injuries.

Hawks glared as Rappa struggled fruitlessly against the feathers, "... Fat Gum?"

"Yeah..." Fat Gum sheepishly grinned. "This is what I really look like when my quirk uses up my body fat."

Fat Gum had slimmed down to a much more muscular body, his hair a ruffled mess of platinum-blond. Most of his bright yellow hero costume was in complete tatters and the black mask over his eyes was ripped in several places.

Another of the Eight Bullets was tied up against the wall. A tall, slim man with short spiky hair, wearing a traditional yukata. The one with a barrier quirk, Tengai Hekiji. He scoffed and turned his head away.

“Explain. *Now* .” Hawks demanded.

“Easy, Hawks.” Fat Gum held up his hands, “Red Riot and I encountered these two when the walls caved in. We battled, of course, but came to an impasse.”

“Yeah!” Rappa shouted as he squirmed, turning his masked head to Kirishima, “The little dude fought with all of his might and won against me! *Me* ! I thought, as equals, he and Fat Gum deserved to patch up their wounds!”

“You’re an *idiot*, Rappa.” Hekiji muttered.

“Ignore him.” Rappa said. “He wanted to prevent us from having a real manly match!”

Hekiji rolled his eyes and sulked into his restraints.

Gentle Criminal cleared his throat, “I could heal Red Riot. I don’t have any items to heal him fully, but it will be enough to take him out of the danger zone until we can get you to the surface.”

Fat Gum beamed, “Yes! Please do, the little man worked so hard so I could get the final attack in on Rappa.”

Gentle Criminal took out one of few remaining healing stones Joker entrusted to him. He followed Joker’s instructions, snapping it between his fingers while concentrating on Kirishima. A sparkling light flowed over Kirishima’s body, some of his most gruesome injuries healing over. A hard knot in the boy’s brow softened and he fell into a more peaceful slumber.

Fat Gum’s grin widened as tears came into his eyes, “Thank you.” He ruffled Kirishima’s hair, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if...

if...”

Gentle Criminal nodded, then looked the hero up and down, “Do you need healing?”

“No, please save whatever you have left in case someone else needs it.”

“If that’s everything, then we evacuate you to the surface.” Hawks said after a stilted silence.

“Good idea. We’d only bring others down if we went out there again.” Fat Gum turned and picked up Kirishima as gently as he could, huddling the boy to his chest, “We’re ready.”

“Okay.” Hawks pulled his feather blade from Rappa’s neck, “Let’s go.”

Hawks kept the two Eight Bullets suspended in the air with his feathers as they walked back to the surface, the occasional deep rumble giving them a moments pause before they continued. Aside from a sour Hekiji, the atmosphere with this group was rather... pleasant. As odd as it was, Gentle Criminal didn’t mind Rappa’s bleeding enthusiasm as he retold a colorful version of his battle with Fat Gum and Red Riot.

But deep down, a worm of worry burrowed within Gentle Criminal’s chest.

Joker and the others have been radio silent for quite some time, and nobody could get in contact or find their location despite La Brava and Tensei’s hard work. Both he and Hawks had been unable to find a way down, either cut off by a collapsed hallway or dead ends caused by Mimic.

He hoped the rumbles deep down in the earth were a good sign that his family fought on.

They were complete opposites; one a young hero of sunlight with a billowing scarlet cape, the other a shadowy vigilante steeped in midnight, but they both had the same hints of gold in their hearts as well as their clothing. Like yin and yang, both circling together in perfect harmony as their souls cried out for justice.

Joker shot his next swing when Lemillion spotted three figures crossing the broken floor below.

“There!”

Overhaul, tailed by Kurono and Nemoto, whirled around at Lemillion’s voice. They didn’t blink before Overhaul slammed his hands against the floor. Kurono’s white hood fell as clock-hand shaped hair shot forth like a flurry of arrows, Nemoto took aim with a gun before their surroundings were consumed in a bursting array of spikes and jagged columns of earth.

Lemillion phased through the attacks and disappeared into the madness.

The flowing columns molded themselves like clay, all aiming at Joker with breakneck speed. Joker pulled out of his swing, tailcoats whipping around him as his grapple snapped back into the holster and the earth threatened to impale him mid-air.

“Pixie!”

Pixie’s appearance was followed by the blinding flash of a Megidolaon. Columns and spikes were eradicated into nothingness, and Joker rolled into a landing upon a patch of smooth ground it created. Joker’s vision was filled with thrashing arrows.

Pixie switched with Gabriel, deflecting Kurono’s quirk with her blade. Gabriel charged at Kurono with a valiant cry and a beat of her wings, pushing him into the spikes.

Joker smirked as Kurono stood at the edge of smooth ground, pointing his gun at the vigilante.

“You want to shoot yourself *again*, Nemoto?” Joker said as meaty *thuds* and singing metal echoed from somewhere within the surrounding spikes, “Was once not enough?”

Nemoto flinched, “How did you do it?”

Joker’s devilish smirk grew as Nemoto’s quirk hummed through the air, Ishtar was hardly amused as she erased it with a swipe of her power. The gun in Nemoto’s grip trembled when Joker remained silent.

“Tell me how!!”

“Confession doesn’t work on me.”

“But... but you answered before...”

“Acting was part of the plan, and you fell right for it hook, line, and sinker.”

Joker stepped forward and Nemoto staggered back. He tripped over the edge and tumbled onto the broken earth, staring at Joker in horror as his shadow blanketed him.

“What... what *are* you?” A shaky breath escaped Nemoto’s mask, “Are you even human? You... you really are the True Demon Lord, aren’t you!?”

Joker leaned forward and whispered, “It’s simple, really. I’m the one who’s going to end the Shie Hassaikai. Permanently.”

A dry hissing noise came from the next Persona materializing in beautiful flames, sickly purple scales highlighted by brilliant azure. Pressure bloomed in Joker’s head as he anchored four Personas in reality at once. Nemoto craned his head up towards Vasuki’s six

arms and the serene expression on the giant serpent's human-like face.

"Revel in turmoil." Vasuki whispered.

With an elegant dance, Vasuki cast Brain Jack. Nemoto stilled, relaxing his hostile posture as his fear faded away. Vasuki vanished with deep, weedy laughter.

"We're friends now, right?" Joker's grin smoothed out into an easy smile as he held out his hand.

"Wh-what? Oh, right..." Nemoto took Joker's hand and got to his feet, and Joker wiped the dust from Nemoto's shoulders.

"And since we're friends, you don't mind me borrowing that gun, do you?"

"Of course not." Nemoto droned as he held out the modified pistol.

Joker grabbed it, smirking as he checked the magazine. Two blue Quirk Bullets were inside, a different color to the one he was shot with earlier. Did that mean his red bullet was the Permanent version? He reached into his pocket and added his red bullet before reloading the gun with a satisfying *click* .

He's about to find out.

"Thanks, pal." Joker aimed at Nemoto, "You're such a *great* friend."

Gabriel appeared in a sweeping rush of her blade, batting Kurono into the smooth clearing. He rolled to a stop as Gabriel hovered protectively between he and Joker. His plague mask was gone, his clothes decorated with clean slashes, so his horrified shock was as clear as day.

"Nemoto, what are you doing!?"

Nemoto snapped out of it as Joker shot him point blank. With his other hand, Joker unsheathed Paradise Lost and struck Nemoto on the side of his head with the pommel. The bowler hat fell off as he collapsed onto the ground, unconscious and with a blue Quirk Bullet in his chest.

A jagged shout ripped through Kurono's throat as two strands of his hair shot out. Gabriel slashed through one and Joker leapt away from the other, the point stabbing into one of the nearby spikes.

"How *dare* you!" Gabriel raised her weapon, summoning several floating swords, each as big as a man and pointed at Kurono.

She swiped down, severing the twin strands while commanding the Sword Dance to move. The blades impaled the ground, one at Kurono's feet, another at his side, others all around him until he was kneeling uncomfortably in a sharp cage. His hair writhed as he formed another arrow, but froze when Gabriel's sword touched his neck.

"I'd say there were no hard feelings, Kurono Hari," Joker said, Kurono glaring daggers when he took aim, "But then that'd make me a liar, and Eri doesn't need any more of those in her life."

Kurono snarled as Joker pulled the trigger. The blue bullet stabbed into the man's left shoulder, his hair going limp. Fine white strands continued to fall where his hair was cut by Gabriel's blade, his expression slowly going slack as he hung his head.

"One villain left," Gabriel whispered as she lowered her sword.

Kurono laughed mirthlessly, "You may have taken our quirks, but you'll never beat Overhaul. *Never*."

"We'll see." Joker turned his back on Kurono, "Let's go, Gabriel."

He sheathed Paradise Lost and shot his grapple, Gabriel following with a hard flap of her viridian wings.

Standing among broken concrete was Overhaul, his hands digging into the ground as his skin flowed with earth. Bits of cement fused with the skin around his arms and body, protecting him when Lemillion burst out of the ground in an uppercut. The man's head snapped back, shards of broken rock flying, but the bone breaking force was blunted by his armor.

Joker's boisterous laughter echoed overhead when Gabriel pointed her bouquet of lilies at Overhaul. Lemillion felt his hair stand on end and flipped away when a pillar of searing light erupted underneath Overhaul's feet, consuming him in a blinding curtain.

"Am I late to the party?" Joker said after he landed, colors cascading around his black and gold boots.

"You're just in time." Lemillion went to Joker's side as the Makougan faded.

The scent of burnt hair invaded their noses. Overhaul's skin steamed, what flesh that wasn't protected by rock was an angry swatch of red, his stone armor splintered in several places. Overhaul's wild and bloodshot eyes stabbed into Joker. Overhaul simply touched his own arm, burns and cracked armor repairing itself.

"Where are the other two?" Lemillion asked, eyes set on Overhaul.

Joker smirked at Overhaul as he twirled the modified gun, "Taken care of."

"*You*... you disease ridden abomination!" Overhaul growled, his voice distorted by rolling gravel, "This is all *your* fault."

"*My* fault?" Joker raised a brow, "Why do villains always blame somebody else for their own actions? All of this happened because *you* experimented on a helpless little girl."

“Eri was the key to *everything* ! I’m the only one who can control her curse! She’ll lose control without me to reset her, and anyone she touches will be erased!” Overhaul shook with rage, “And you... you took her away. You don’t know what you’ve unleashed into the world!”

Overhaul slapped his palms onto the ground, spikes erupting in a deadly wave.

Gabriel switched with Cu Chulainn, countering Overhaul’s spikes with another Gigantomachia attack. The spikes were reduced to dust, the whole complex shaking as a new ripple of destruction spread outwards. Joker’s vision wavered as Cu Chulainn’s attack took its toll on his health.

“*Don’t give up!*” Cu Chulainn vanished as Orpheus Picaro took his place, calm even as the earth raged around them, “We aren’t out of this fight yet, so stay focused!”

Orpheus Picaro plucked the strings of his lyre, the weaving musical lights of a Cadenza to ease Joker’s oncoming migraine.

Lemillion looked down at himself as his sore knuckles smoothed over and he felt lighter on his feet. He shook his head and fell into a battle stance as Overhaul stood from within the dusty destruction. Overhaul looked deranged, swaying on his feet as he repaired any damage, his yellow-gold eyes were twin daggers of hatred.

Lemillion frowned, “He shrugs off everything we do.”

Joker glanced down at the modified gun in his grip, “I can’t risk shooting him with a Quirk Bullet while he’s armored, we’ll have to keep at it until there’s a clear shot.”

“Keep your distance and cover me from afar,” Lemillion said as he widened his stance, “We can’t chance getting touched with his quirk.”

“Understood, hero.” Joker chuckled as he tucked away the modified gun and pulled out the Tyrant Pistol, the demonic grin and blazing red eyes on the black gun thirsting for battle.

For a moment, the battle field was frozen, each side watching the other for the first move.

Until Byakko briefly leapt into reality, his booming war cry casting the crimson light of Matarukaja on Joker and Lemillion. Orpheus Picaro readied himself as Byakko returned to the mindscape just as fast as he appeared.

Overhaul lunged at them with a crazed look in his eyes, streams of rock and an explosion of spikes following in his wake.

Joker and Orpheus Picaro jumped in unison, Joker’s grapple shooting out.

Lemillion met Overhaul head-on, their attacks colliding in a *crunch* . Overhaul growled and swiped at him, but the next attack went right through Lemillion’s head.

Joker flipped out of his next jump as a handful of columns collided in the air right behind him. He fell as dust rained on him, shooting at Overhaul while Orpheus Picaro called down fireballs. Overhaul whirled around to put up a barrier of spikes, exploding when the fireballs tore them asunder.

They continued this dance as Joker circled the crumbling arena, shooting the Tyrant Pistol while his personas countered with scorching fire, Shiva’s crackling lightning, and Baal’s howling blades of wind. They careened around the countless stone pillars, and Joker threw everything he had into his acrobatic skills to avoid getting hit. He landed on one of the previous arches and sprinted halfway across the arena, taking potshots when Lemillion wailed on Overhaul with empowered punches.

Lemillion managed to break Overhaul's arm during a flurry of strikes, but Overhaul managed to heal himself when his counter phased through Lemillion's body, instead landing on a nearby spike to absorb it. His armor was restored, broken bones were healed.

They had reached a stalemate.

However.

Overhaul was not the calm and collected Yakuza boss Ren met in that alley. The man fought like a wild animal, with no thought other than the destruction of his enemies. Something vital had broken within him. Perhaps Eri's disappearance sparked desperation, which grew more frantic as his own home and subordinates collapsed like dominoes in front of him.

Everything he worked for was falling right before his eyes.

Joker landed on a smaller arch as Lemillion and Overhaul traded more blows below, Shiva rising behind him.

"Lemillion, get to cover!"

The Persona called down a spear of lightning after Lemillion vanished into the ground. Crackling serpents shot out in all directions when the heavenly spear embedded itself into the shattered ground.

Overhaul raised a high tower to avoid it.

"Just give up!" Joker shouted as Shiva danced, a flare of Lemillion's red cape appearing next to him, "Your hideout is being destroyed, you're outnumbered *and* outmatched, and you'll never lay eyes on Eri ever again. It's. *Over*."

"He's right, Chisaki!" Lemillion said, "This has gone on long enough!"

"No. It doesn't matter what you throw at me. I'll walk to the ends of the earth to reclaim Eri by myself if I have to!"

Joker scoffed, "And they call me dramatic."

Overhaul stood upon his tower, glaring down at Joker as a coating of dirt swirled around him. He looked more statue than man now, the edges of his mask blending skin and stone into a melted harmony. His fingers were tipped in jagged claws.

"He's tenacious, I'll give him that much." Satanael whispered.

"We need to end this soon." Baal said, *"While the Trickster and Lemillion have energy to fight."*

Another crash came from above. They looked up as the ceiling finally caved in, Joker's heart soaring as Miruko burst through with a malicious smirk.

Fafnir guided the Strength into a hallway that was somewhat intact, the vibrations from the battle behind them had taken its toll on many of the underground tunnels.

"Are you sure we should leave him?" Risumi whispered.

Ayumu squeezed her hand, "Joker won't lose. He's got that other hero with him too."

"The Trickster will win!" Fafnir trumpeted, "There's no way he'd be defeated by that failure of a leader, and then the Strength will be reunited with him!"

"Yeah, y-you're right. I *know* you are... but it doesn't stop me from worrying." She shivered and crossed her arms, "He's one of ours, you know?"

"I know, Risumi. But that's why he *won't* lose. He's got something to protect." Ayumu frowned, "By the way Fafnir, why do you keep calling us Strength?"

“Because it is what you are to the Trickster... to Joker. Your Arcana is a bond that empowers him.” Fafnir lowered his head between the two while they walked, claws clacking over stone, “Those who possess gentleness, bravery, and virtue against hardship are worthy to bear the Strength Arcana. You should be proud to hold such high respect!”

“That’s...” Ayumu trailed off, lost for words.

“Strength, huh?” Risumi gently nudged her husband, “It suits us.”

“Yeah,” Ayumu smiled, “Yeah, it does.”

Fafnir suddenly growled and protectively wrapped one of his arms in front of Risumi and Ayumu

“Wait.” Fafnir whispered, “I hear something up ahead.”

“Ehehee...” Diedoro crawled upside down along some exposed pipes on the ceiling, guzzling from a green bottle, “I almost catch up to the boss... and look what I find instead...”

Fafnir, with as much gentleness contained within a dragon of steel and fiery wrath, pushed the Strength behind him.

“I’ll take care of this gnat.” Fafnir snapped his jaws, a burning blue glow warming his throat.

A sly grin stretched beneath Deidoro’s bony mask, “Oh yeah? You’ll be too sloshed to even-”

Fafnir’s deafening roar vibrated the hall as he charged. Deidoro cried out and fell to the ground with an undignified *thud*, the bottle careening away from his reach. He shakily reached for the gun on his belt as Fafnir crawled over Deidoro, his claws resting on either side of the drunkard’s shoulders. Fafnir put his nose right up to the barrel of the gun.

Deidoro was frozen, staring up at Fafnir as the gun trembled in his hands.

A hiss of steam chugged from Fafnir's glowing throat, "Shoot me, coward, I **dare** you."

A small stamp whizzed through the air and struck Deidoro in the temple, knocking him out as the gun clattered to the floor.

Fafnir's head whipped up, tail thrashing, but his anger for a stolen victory were dashed as multiple humans approached. And one not-cat in his Metaverse form, as well as another cat... thing.

"Fafnir!!" Spinner yelled as Lady Stubbs yowled from his shoulder, "You couldn't give us directions before you disappeared!?"

"This is another of Joker's... summons?" Nighteye asked as he wrinkled his nose, still holding several stamps between his fingers.

"... It seems so." Eraserhead stared at Fafnir, "Though I've never seen this one before."

Lavenza chuckled, "Fafnir is new."

Eraserhead blinked, "New?"

"Bah!" Fafnir grumbled, "Don't you know that stealing prey is against the rules?"

"You were toying with him." Nighteye countered, "I simply ended it before it went too far."

Mr. Compress waved an impatient hand, "Fafnir, where's Joker?"

Another great rumble answered for them, stronger than the others in that it didn't end after a few seconds. A jolt of Joker's panic shot through Fafnir. The stones at their feet bounced from the raw force and smaller spikes bloomed on the remaining surfaces and crept across the floor like overgrown ivy.

“Wh-what’s happening!?” Mona screeched.

Fafnir snarled as they were thrown off balance by the violent tremors and stone which tore itself asunder, only to flow unnaturally off into the distance as if it were sentient, heeding the call of an unknown master. The weakened structures crumbled, great chunks of the ceiling collapsing with thundering crashes and thick plumes of dust.

He bellowed as a boulder separated him from the rest of the Trickster’s team, “Take cover, Magician!!”

“Fafnir !!”

Fafnir whirled around towards the Strength. Several moving stone pillars and a sea of writhing dust separated them. Fafnir’s metallic screech reverberated off the rocks as he broken into a frantic sprint. One stone pillar erupted right below Fafnir when he was close, his scales producing a shower of sparks as he was harmlessly tossed upwards and to the side like a ragdoll.

Fafnir and Ayumu met gazes through the final opening of moving rock, which was growing smaller by the second. Understanding and regret bloomed on Ayumu’s expression before he picked up his wife.

“Ayumu, what are you-!?”

Ayumu threw Risumi through the opening. Fafnir scrambled to catch her and protectively wrapped his body around her as she screamed her husband’s name. The lights went out and their thoughts were drowned out by the raging earth, the last of the abused complex collapsing and trapping them all in a dark, stony tomb.

A few minutes before...

Miruko’s laughter was a bone-chilling battle cry as she descended onto Overhaul. The man lunged to the side as her kick sent deadly

shock waves down his tower.

Other familiar forms dove in after her, sliding down a massive ice ramp flowing like a frozen waterfall.

Todoroki Shoto, Dark Shadow and Tokoyami, Midoriya with neon green lightning crackling around him, landed in front of Joker in battle stances.

Joker's gaze snapped back to Miruko and Overhaul as the villain caught Miruko's next punch with a stone-fused hand twice the size of hers.

Fire swirled around Todoroki's left arm and he was about to shoot, but Joker held out an arm.

"No, wait-!" Joker shouted, but it was already too late.

Miruko screamed as blood dripped down the tower. In one monstrous hand, Overhaul clutched Miruko's arm, broken in several places as streams of crimson leaked from half-destroyed skin. The other was clutched around her neck as he held her against him, his thumb inches from piercing through her left eye.

"Miruko!!" Tokoyami and Midoriya shouted in unison.

"You monster!" Lemillion yelled.

Overhaul growled, "It seems, Joker, that you want a repeat of what happened to Mr. Compress. I'll be extra slow and make you *watch* as I tear her apart piece by piece."

Blood dripped through his fingers, and Miruko, to her credit, wouldn't give him the satisfaction of another scream as her broken bones ground together and layers of her skin were slowly unmade.

Midoriya looked at Joker, eyes wide.

"What do we do?" Todoroki growled, "Joker, what are your orders?"

Joker assumed the role as Leader as Shiva returned to him, “We can’t get close without-”

“Oi, asshole!”

Miruko’s blood flecked face warped with a feral grin. Joker’s heart leapt into his throat when she punched the fingers around her neck with her good hand, breaking stone and bones like dry twigs.

“DON’T TREAT ME-”

She twirled around, the arm still in Overhaul’s grip breaking further into sickening angles-

“-LIKE I’M SOME-”

Her knee shot into Overhaul’s stomach, he bowled over and dropped her arm, which floundered uselessly at her side with a nauseating splatter. Miruko didn’t care. She took a step back, her rising kick generating it’s own wind as she struck him a second time right in the face.

“-GODDAMN DAMSEL IN DISTRESS!!”

Overhaul’s head snapped back with a visceral *crunch* . He was thrown off the tower as it began to crumble from the force of her attack, Miruko wobbled on her feet when the top of the structure tilted dangerously, until it snapped. She fell into the rising dust cloud.

“Yatagarasu!”

“Dark Shadow!!”

Yatagarasu materialized and soared alongside Dark Shadow, his wings batting away the dust clouds with a rising gale. Dark Shadow spotted Miruko and rushed forward, catching her before she hit the ground. The rest of the tower collapsed in on itself as Dark Shadow brought her to safety, Yatagarasu landing on Joker’s shoulder.

“Miruko, how are you even conscious!?” Lemillion asked as Dark Shadow gently set her down at their feet.

“This is nothin’!” Miruko said despite her moon white face, “I could keep fighting for hours after an injury like this! Where is that asshole!? I’LL SHOW HIM WHAT FOR!”

Joker held onto her shoulders as she tried to stand, “Just sit still while I heal you, okay? Then we can finished kicking Overhaul’s ass.”

Yatagarasu ruffled his feathers as he cast Mediarahan. The hero interns gasped as streams of light danced around them in a heart shape, healing whatever injuries they accumulated. Most of the light flooded over Miruko’s arm, where it gently faded away to reveal smooth skin. No broken bones or blood were in sight.

“Oh my *god* !” Miruko shot to her feet and marveled at her healed arm. She rolled her shoulder and punched the air, “Tensei told us how it felt to be healed by you, but holy *shit* this is badass!!”

“You’re welcome.” Joker smirked as he looked at Yatagarasu, “Scout the area for Overhaul, he can’t be too far.”

“Understood, Trickster.”

The hero interns gaped when the bird talked, Lemillion’s jaw dropping to the floor, as Yatagarasu rose into the air.

“Joker...” Midoriya reached out for Joker, but hesitated.

A silence overtook them as the three hero students pinned Joker with varying looks.

Joker’s mouth went dry. He knows why they’re staring at him like that, of course. Everything that happened from Kamino onwards probably felt like a stab in the heart, and *he* was the one holding the dagger.

Miruko lightly slapped Joker on the shoulder with her brand new arm, "You kids can catch up later! We still have work to do!"

Joker rubbed his arm, "Yeah, you're definitely the High Priestess..."

Miruko gasped, "I'm one of your Arcana too!?"

Joker blinked rapidly, "You-"

"Trickster! I have found Overhaul with his subordinates. Hurry!!"

Joker jolted, "Yatagarasu found them. Let's move!"

"Right! Okay, team!" Miruko cackled as she followed Joker, "Let's go kick some honey buns!!"

"Is everyone alright?" Margaret asked as their tiny pocket lit up with blue licks of flame.

"F-f-f-f-fine!?" Spinner screamed in a high pitched voice.

"Why are you scared?" Mona griped as Mercurius held up some rocks that would've otherwise crushed them, "You've seen Mercurius before!"

"It's not Mercurius we're afraid of! N-not to sound ungrateful for Mercurius' hard work, Mona..." Mr. Compress pointed to the other Persona, "But *what in the living hell is that thing ?*"

"Not today, Satan!" Spinner yelled.

"Oh, how marvelous." Margaret smirked as she held her Compendium open to one of her favorite pages, "This, in fact, *is* Satan."

Spinner staggered backwards while a strained wheeze scraped past his throat.

Mr. Compress swallowed, "What an unfortunate time for Spinner to guess right."

Eraserhead groaned as he clutched his head and sat up, "What are people screaming about?"

Then he too, looked up to the gigantic six fingered hand holding the boulders over his head, skeletal and wrapped in greyish-blue skin. His eyes trailed over the five other bony arms, to the six insect-like wings sprouting from its back and serpentine lower body, and finally to the twin bone tentacles sweeping around the floor. The terrifying skull face opened its jagged jaws and released a wicked cackle, the air turning frigid at its breath.

In essence, it looked like it enjoyed eating damned souls for breakfast.

Eraserhead blinked, scrubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands, and then stared with another slow blink, "Okay, so we all died and went to hell. Great."

"Don't joke about something like that!" Spinner snapped.

"You should be thankful, Spinner." Lavenza stood up and dusted herself off, "Joker had to execute Satan several times to bestow you the very armor you're wearing under your costume. Had his stock not been full at the time, he would've had this one with him before encountering you. Or Beelzebub... or Lucifer... Perhaps Sandalphon or Metatron... any combination of them, really."

Spinner gulped and trapped Lady Stubbs in a bone crushing hug. The cat thing looked nonplussed as she happily chirped at Satan, who in turn rattled his wings back at her. Margaret raised a brow, but otherwise made no comment.

Mr. Compress pointed at Satan, "Hey Eraserhead, how many heroes would soil themselves if Joker fought you with *that* ?"

“... Yes.”

“If you’re done screwing around...” Their gazes turned to Nighteye, who was crumpled against the wall and holding his stomach.

Mona gasped, “You’re injured! Mercurius?”

“A little busy, Magician.” Mercurius muttered, a few stones falling as he adjusted his burden.

“Allow me.” Lavenza reached for the Compendium at her hip, “Thankfully, Joker has left me with a healing Persona. And... you’re only injured because you pushed me out of the way of the collapse, didn’t you? It’s the least I could do to return the favor.”

Eraserhead furrowed his brow, “... Persona?”

“You saved Lavenza?” Spinner said as he scratched his nose, “I guess not all heroes are bad. Maybe.”

Mr. Compress crouched beside Nighteye, “We’ll have to remove that little splinter before you’re healed, of course.”

Nighteye glared at the massive spike jutting through his stomach and out his back, a curtain of blood dripping over his once pristine suit and into a growing puddle on the floor. He breathed through clenched teeth, tasting copper on his tongue.

“Do it, then.”

Lavenza opened the Compendium and summoned Titania, who blinked and studied her surroundings. She seemed disappointed when she didn’t see Joker.

“You may feel a little pinch.” Mr. Compress deadpanned before he ripped it out.

Nighteye gasped as his whole body was wracked in agony. Then, just as fast, the pain faded with the weaving lights showering their

cramped space.

Mr. Compress tossed the bloody spike aside as Nighteye glanced down in shock. His fatal wound was *gone*. He felt around his abdomen, pulling his hand away to stare at his at it. There wasn't a drop of blood in sight.

Eraserhead cleared his throat, voice shaking, "Are you alright, Nighteye?"

"Yes, I'm..." Nighteye got to his feet, half dazed from disbelief, "I think I'm fine."

Titania winked at Nighteye and disappeared with a playful twirl, but everyone jumped when Lavenza's Compendium dropped to the ground with a heavy *thud* .

"Ah..." She gripped her chest as she fell on her knees.

"Lady Lavenza, what's wrong!?" Mona asked as she rushed to her side, "Are you hurt!?"

Margaret frowned, "The healing did not work?"

Lavenza shook her head, "N-no, it's not that. I am uninjured."

"... Then?" Margaret asked softly.

"I feel like... I'm being split in half again." Lavenza shut her eyes as the others, except for Mona and Margaret, exchanged alarmed glances, "No, it's the Strength Arcana!"

"Risumi and Ayumu!" Mona's expression fell in shock, "Did something happen to them!?"

"... Maybe Fafnir couldn't save them in time."

"Mr. Compress!" Spinner shouted, "Don't say things like that!"

“No, he may be right.” With a grimace, Lavenza got on her feet and picked up the Compendium, wiping it free of dirt with her gloved hand, “Something has happened to the Strength. I can feel their pain as my own. We must find them.”

Mr. Compress reached for his marbles, “I’ve collected enough chunks of concrete from this place, if I can stabilize this pocket long enough for us to dig ourselves out...”

“It’s already claustrophobic in here.” Eraserhead said, “Let’s get this over with.”

“We’ll have to move slow-” Mr. Compress was cut off by ominous rumbles from all around them, “... Or not.”

“From the sounds of it, the *real* battle has just begun.” Nighteye scowled as he pushed up his cracked glasses, “Mona.”

The not-cat flinched, “Y-yes?”

“You’d be small enough to fit through a gap in your... other cat form, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah?”

“You should scout ahead, should one such gap open.”

“But-!”

“I agree.” Lavenza gravely smiled at him, “If possible, you must aid the Trickster.”

“What about you, Lady Lavenza?”

“I can vaguely sense where the Strength is,” She placed a hand over her heart, “The rest of us should focus on finding them while you fight alongside the Trickster. He may get distracted if he’s feeling this same pain. He needs you.”

Mona looked around the others' worried expressions, before landing on Mercurius. His Persona nodded and sent a wave of confidence.

"O-okay. Let's do this!"

Mr. Compress threw a few choice marbles on the ground. With a snap of his fingers, large chunks of concrete appeared and cemented themselves between the floor and collapsed ceiling.

"That should do it for this side. Mercurius, try letting go. Slowly, please." Mr. Compress said.

Mona sighed in relief when Mercurius released the burden. They held their breaths as the extra concrete squished them closer together, but the groans overhead faded as their tiny pocket stabilized.

"Ruler of Power," Satan whispered to Margaret, voice as dry as crisp autumn leaves, "I sense a new passage opening. The Magician may be able to squeeze through."

"He's right." Mercurius pointed to the stones behind one of Satan's bone tentacles, "There's a faint breeze between these smaller stones."

"Allow me." Mr. Compress pulled at his glove, before trapping rocks with his quirk until a faint light pierced through the velvety blue.

Mr. Compress tilted his head at Mona, "Think you'll fit through there?"

Mona winced, but he reverted to his normal feline form. Eraserhead and Nighteye gaped at the sudden change, but remained silent as Mona stepped into the opening. It was a tight squeeze, the rocks pressing on either side of his shoulders, but the tunnel wasn't too long.

“I can fit!” Mona turned to stare at them as Mercurius returned to him, “You guys be careful, okay?”

“We should be telling you that.” Eraserhead muttered, “We’ll be fine. Just go.”

Mona nodded before he crawled towards the light.

“Kai...” Kurono whispered as blood dripped from the deep gashes around his body, the price he paid for escaping that bladed prison in a hurry.

He stood before his best friend, dragging the unconscious Nemoto behind him.

“Kurono.” Overhaul droned, golden eyes glinting.

With a brush of Overhaul’s deformed claws, Kurono and Nemoto were made whole again. Kurono’s pain eased as his quirk returned to him.

Thankfully, Joker shot them with a temporary Quirk Bullet this time, so all Kai had to do was expunge the drug blocking the body’s response to the Quirk Factor. Kai had to waste the only prototype cure they had after Toga hit him with a permanent one earlier during the heat of battle.

If it was a permanent bullet that completely destroyed the Quirk Factor then... not even someone as smart as Kai could rebuild something like that from scratch.

Only Eri’s curse would be able to bring it back without the cure.

They were restored not a moment too soon. A pang of despair filled Kurono when he recognized the familiar raven circled them before it vanished in blue ash, moments later Joker and his fellow hero scum

found them through the wreckage. Kai didn't move as the group descended on them, continuing to stare Kurono in the eye.

"I understand." Kurono smiled as he reached into his pocket for several syringes. With a pained grunt, he shoved all of the needles into his chest and pressed on the plungers, his blood replaced with biting ice as his restored quirk burst with unrestrained power, "Use us as you will, Kai. For our dream."

"Yes," Kai slowly put his hand over Kurono's face, whispering in a deceptively gentle tone, "For our dream."

Kurono's world split apart, never hearing the cries of dismay as his and Kurono's sacrifice, paired with an immense amount of Trigger, turned his best friend and leader into a living nightmare.

Clumps of tangled seaweed and salt water dripped from Kohryu's body as he floated towards the compound. The massive weight in his jaws, a mountain in the shape of an unconscious half-drowned giant, made the journey taxing.

Both of them sustained gruesome injuries. All For One's wicked creation was far stronger than Kohryu gave him credit for.

In truth...

Kohryu would not have won without Fafnir healing him in the nick of time. His blood had seeped into the ocean depths thanks to how Gigantomachia had swelled in size, his grubby hands morphing into devilish claws that tore at Kohryu's belly and made deep rents into his scales.

Perhaps the pressure had gotten to Gigantomachia as they fell into the blackness, or he had finally run out of oxygen after nearly an hour underwater. That last bout was one of desperation, and Kohryu didn't regret running the giant into an underwater cliff face at the deciding moment.

Cries of surprise drew Kohryu out of his thoughts as he approached the Shie Hassaikai complex. Gaping chasms riddled the ground like bullet holes, the largest of which he created.

The Temperance sealed some of the smaller holes with his quirk, while a blur of scarlet wings burst forth from another. Feathers, colored like daggers of flame, darted behind the Star, rescuing both friend and foe who were trapped underground.

Kohryu ignored the startled gasp of an inferior dragon and her interns as he slithered through the sky, blazing ruby eyes focusing on his target. The great dragon stopped over Tsukauchi, the sunlight on his scales casting the whole street with a thousand tiny sunbursts. Kohryu stared the bewildered detective in the eye for several moments before he spat Gigantomachia at his feet, the thunderous *boom* shaking all police cars within a half mile radius. Several crabs dislodged from Gigantomachia's hair and scuttled around the pavement.

"A gift," Kohryu whispered as to not blow out Tsukauchi's eardrums, "From Joker."

Tsukauchi snapped himself out of his shock as he commanded a small army of officers and heroes to restrain Gigantomachia, half of them gaping at Kohryu in unrestrained reverence.

"Hey!"

Kohryu turned his head. A few figures approached in the air; the scarlet sparrow, a flying girl who the Trickster had named 'Nejire', and the other dragon awkwardly flapping about with leathery wings. They had such brave faces for ones facing a god.

"Do you know where Joker is!?" The Star spread his wings in a gentle flutter, "We can't locate Joker or some of our other allies down there! If you could help us-"

Kohryu cried out at a sudden pain in his chest. The humans startled as his tail thrashed helplessly through the air, his claws lightly dragging across the unharmed scales on his belly. The pain surged through his other selves, and he sensed the Trickster clutching his chest with a strangled yelp.

Fafnir's bond went dead silent as he... *rejected* their presence.

"Tragedy strikes..." Kohryu whispered.

"What!?" Ryukyu ventured closer, "What are you talking about!?"

The ground trembled. Spikes slowly bloomed over the Shie Hassaikai grounds like the petals of a deadly flower.

"GET BACK!" Kohryu's voice struck the humans in a crack of thunder.

A violent wind picked up as Kohryu surged towards the shifting ruins, the other flying humans' struggling to keep up.

Time slowed as Joker absorbed the horror before him.

Overhaul stood in a cloud of red mist, *the blood of the man's subordinates*, turning to them as crimson rivulets streamed down his body. The sudden crackle of earth was their only warning.

Satanael ripped himself out of the mindscape, sweeping the group into his arms as his six leathery wings beat frantically. Joker gasped as the space they were in moments ago was devoured by countless spikes grinding together from all directions. Fafnir's defences may have protected Joker, and maybe Lemillion or Miruko could have avoided it, but the others would have been a *bloody paste* at the speed in which it happened. Barely the blink of an eye.

The whole complex broke apart as Overhaul's body contorted, blood thickening and swirling around him as bursts of spikes and

innumerable columns ruptured the earth, all charging *towards* Overhaul.

They could only watch as Overhaul allowed himself to be consumed, blood and bone and massive chunks of earth roiling together.

“We can’t defend ourselves all the way up here!” Miruko yelled as dozens of stone hands and whipping arrow-shaped tendrils burst through the amalgamation.

“Satanael, set us down!” Joker ordered, “Everyone, form a defensive circle when we do!”

“Roger!” The hero students shouted in unison.

Satanael carried them a distance away before he let go, and they landed on their feet just in time to beat back a fresh wave of spikes from below and arches of earth coming in from above. No words were needed as the group moved as one unit.

Todoroki summoned a massive glacier trapping stone in a layer of ice.

Dark Shadow charged out of Tokoyami, swelling in size as he bellowed in rage, claws cleaving through ice and stone like warm butter.

Ice cracked and another wave of stone broke through, but Midoriya, Miruko, and Lemillion attacked together.

“Luna Rush !!”

“Manchester Smash!”

“Phantom Menace!”

Miruko and Midoriya flung themselves through the air, Miruko dove towards the wave of spikes with a flurry of kicks and Midoriya backed

her with an axe kick of his own. Lemillion was a blur as he used his quirk to ping-pong around them, taking out columns and spikes.

Satanael raised his weapon as Joker waved his hand forward, about to finish it with a Riot Gun to break through to Overhaul. That was, until pain exploded through his heart. Joker clutched his chest with a pained yelp, Satanael copying with a startled shout of rage as agony blossomed through them.

“Joker!?”

Massive shadowy arms wrapped around Joker and yanked him back, the rest jumping away from the last ripple of spikes to regroup. Satanael faded from reality as the pain radiated through them.

The arena went quiet as a wall of dust blocked their vision of Overhaul, the other students protectively surrounding Joker as he tried to pull himself together. Joker grit his teeth to contain shouts of pain as his newly forged soul threatened to break at the seams.

“I’m fine.” Joker waved Dark Shadow off.

“You don’t look fine!” Miruko snarled at him.

“Something’s coming!” Tokoyami shouted, Dark Shadow hovered above them, claws ready as a massive shadow moved through the thick dust wall.

The ground trembled as dozens of stone hands supported the huge black shape lunging closer. Dust clouds parted like a curtain, revealing Overhaul, or what he *became* .

A stone colossus rose before them, with bulging black and white veins arching across its body. The arrow shaped tentacles thrashed in all directions from any openings in the stone colossus’ skin, making it impossible to get close. Black and white fabric billowed out of its horribly fanged mouth and around its shoulders like tattered capes, the last remnants of Overhaul’s subordinates.

Overhaul was inside the mouth, the bottom half of his body completely fused with the goliath. His soulless eyes pinned them to the spot.

*"I don't **ha**ve time **to c**ure yo ur sickn **es** s, her **oes** . **Wh**ere's **Eri**?"*

His voice was intermixed with both Nemoto and Kurono's, a familiar ripple of energy churned the air at it's distorted timbre. Ishtar, despite the pain within them, eradicated its influence.

"I don't know!" Midoriya shouted.

"As if we'd ever tell you!" Lemillion said.

"The heroes never said a word about her." Tokoyami muttered.

"She's already at U.A. with Nezu!!" Miruko blurted. Her eyes widened in horror as she slapped her palms over her mouth.

*"U.A.... U.A.... **U.A...** A so **ur**ce spo **ut**ing t **h**e **he**ro **d**ise **ase...**"*
Overhaul's strange voice warbled, *"I **'ll** destr **oy** it and t **ak** **e** her **b**ack!"*

A deafening screech tore through their ear drums as the abomination turned away and grasped the wall with dozens of disjointed limbs, leaving a ripple of spikes with each booming step. It climbed several hundred feet with ease, and the ceiling was unmade with a single touch.

Joker and the others shielded their eyes as sunlight blinded them.

Todoroki glared at Miruko, "Why did you tell him!?"

"I don't know!!" She gave Joker a pleading look, "It just came out all on its own! Joker, I swear I would *never* endanger Eri! Never!!"

"So those blue bullets *were* just temporary." Joker muttered before he gave Miruko a reassuring smile, albeit shaky, "It's not your fault,

Miruko. It was Nemoto's quirk; Confession. Is everyone else alright? No injuries?"

"Are we okay?' Midoriya gaped at him, "What about you? What happened earlier?"

He opened his mouth to answer-

"Joker!"

Tokoyami and the other students startled as a flying feline launched himself at Joker, propelled by blasts of emerald wind.

"Mona!" Joker held out his arms and hugged Mona to his chest when they crashed into each other, "Are you alright? Why are you alone?"

"I-I'm okay!" Morgana rubbed his head against Joker's chin, "They... Mr. Compress, Ladies Lavenza, Margaret, and Stubbs, Eraserhead, Spinner, Nighteye... we were all together when the complex collapsed. Don't worry, they're okay!"

Joker paled further, "What about Risumi and Ayumu?"

"Fafnir was with them, but we were separated when everything came down." Morgana's ears flattened, "Lady Lavenza felt this intense pain in her chest... I'm worried."

"No..." Joker faced Lemillion with no small hint of desperation, "You have to find them!"

"He's right! There are civilians in danger!" Miruko gave Lemillion a stern look, "With your quirk you have your work cut out for you, Lemillion! We'll take care of Overhole!"

Lemillion nodded, "I'll find them, I promise!"

The young hero dove into the wreckage without a second thought.

“... Are you okay to fight, Joker?” Todoroki asked as he stared at Joker in concern.

Joker rubbed his chest, it felt as if his insides were breaking apart.

“I will keep the pain at bay for as long as I am able, Trickster.”

Satanael's presence hovered over Joker's whole being, holding their soul together and taking the pain onto himself, *“But I don't know for how long. The Strength Arcana is gravely injured...”*

“I'll be fine,” The white lie didn't convince them as they stared obvious disbelief. He waved a hand as Morgana climbed his shoulder, “Let's focus on getting to the surface before Overhaul gets too far.”

The sound of destruction and Kohryu's furious battle cries echoed from the heavens.

“How are we going to get up there!?” Dark Shadow shouted as he curled around Tokoyami, his body shrunken by sunlight, “It's like a mile up!”

A familiar shadow descended into the bowels of the Shie Hassaikai complex.

Tokoyami inhaled sharply, “Hawks!!”

“*That's* how.” Joker smiled as Hawks hovered above them, “Care to give us a lift, Birdie?”

Hawks winked as several feathers shot out, “The Hawks Hero Express is now open!” He chirped as the feathers impaled themselves in various pieces of their clothing, “Please keep all hands and feet inside your compartments! This is gunna be a bumpy ride!”

Todoroki blinked at the feathers sticking out of his costume, “... What compartments?”

They ascended. Morgana yowled as he clung onto to Joker for dear life. Wind struck their faces as they were torn from the underground and into the bright sunlight high above the compound. Deep crevices and spikes consumed the former Shie Hassaikai manor, half of it now melded into its former master as he carelessly stomped around. That poor cherry blossom tree had been ripped up by its roots like a pesky weed, shedding leafy tears as dirt and wood intermingled with the tendrils along its back.

Ryukyu and Nejire flitted around the colossus' head like flies, shooting blasts of golden energy or streams of dragon fire. This high up, those heroes and police who were fleeing looked like ants.

Kohryu flew to them when he sensed the Trickster.

"Set us down on Kohryu's back!" Joker commanded as golden scales were beneath their feet.

Hawks sputtered, but complied.

Miruko gasped as she knelt down and rubbed her hands on radiant scales, her eyes sparkling like stars. The other students' legs wobbled as they clutched the ridge going down Kohryu's spine, their whirlwind of emotions lit up by golden flecks bouncing off Kohryu's scales.

There was a sudden crackle in Joker's ear as Kohryu shuttled them over the chaos.

"Joker!?"

"La Brava!?"

"Oh, thank goodness!" Gentle Criminal's voice came through next, *"We were so worried!"*

"You're not the only one, Gentle!" La Brava said, *"You were right there when that thing came out! Are you okay!?"*

“Y-yes, it was a close call, but my quirk rendered those spikes harmless. He hasn’t spotted me yet thanks to Ryukyu and her intern.”

“What’s the plan?” Tensei said with a practiced calm, “La Brava and I are guiding the first responders away, but we need to take that thing down before it can get to them!”

“Going down there without a plan would be suicide.” Hawks said with a scowl as Ryukyu barely avoiding being impaled.

“I admit that I won’t be much use in this grand battle,” Tokoyami said, “The light is too bright for Dark Shadow.”

Todoroki scowled, “Overhaul’s actively fusing other things to him. My ice would be a detriment and my fire isn’t powerful enough to hurt him.”

Baal swirled his goblet with a hum, *“Trickster, if we were to pool a great amount of magic into a single attack... it may be the only way to get a clear shot at Overhaul.”*

Ishtar blinked, *“What do you propose?”*

“Perhaps, with the Magician’s help, we could call down a great tornado to surround Overhaul’s abomination, then we can execute him when he’s weakened.” Baal said, *“In your memories, Titania and the Magician combined their magic to heal that hospital, correct?”*

Yatagarasu gasped, *“Kohryu, myself, Baal, the Magician and Mercurius, plus Concentrate... it would be very powerful indeed.”*

“It would take much energy,” Kohryu hummed, *“It would have to be the final attack before Overhaul takes the Quirk Bullet.”*

Hawks studied Joker, “You have a plan, don’t you?”

“Yes, but more people need to be away from the disaster zone.” Joker looked across the conflicted expressions, “Hawks, you and the

others can help evacuate people.”

“Joker, let me stay with you!”

Joker’s eyes widened at Midoriya.

Hawks shook his head, “Kid, this is too dangerous-”

Midoriya let go of Kohryu’s ridge and walked in front of Joker with his head held high, wind weaving through his hair, “I promised myself that I wouldn’t ever leave anyone behind again! I failed with Eri, and I’ve failed you too. I won’t let Overhaul get away with everything’s he’s done! Please, Akira.”

The other boy’s eyes seemed to glow. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Curious, Joker looked at Midoriya with Third Eye. Eight different colors encompassed Midoriya’s own, one color passing its strength to the next until it’s enormous power culminated within his soul.

It wasn’t like All For One’s trapped souls screaming in agony, these colors fluctuated in perfect harmony.

Joker’s pained heart lurched when the Chariot card slowly spun over Midoriya’s head, blazing in its own prismatic rainbow as it offered its flow of strength back to him. Joker could almost hear the Chariot crying out for the Strength, see that same resolve reflected within Midoriya’s eyes.

“He can do it.” Joker stated as Third Eye faded.

Midoriya’s expression lit up.

“What!? But-” Hawks sputtered.

“I’m going too!” Miruko pounded her chest with her fist, “There’s no way I’m missing out on this after what that bastard did! Besides, Hawks, you’d be the best choice to get people outta here! Don’t you

call yourself the fastest hero, or was that all just a bunch of bullshit blown up your ass!?”

Hawks clamped his mouth shut when Joker and Miruko pinned him with knowing grins. Hawks’ face turned red and he cursed under his breath, “Alright, but I’m not going to answer to Nighteye if something happens!”

Ryukyu roared below as she barrel rolled to avoid a half dozen tendrils, “*Nejire and I could use some help down here!!*”

“You all have your parts to play,” Joker said, “Now move!”

Hawks, still muttering under his breath, zoomed towards the fleeing police, dragging a pair of students with him.

Twice doesn’t know how he staggered through the underground labyrinth, nor could he feel the fresh air and sunlight on his body as he emerged outside the complex’s walls. Wetness dripped down his face as he fought against the turmoil, his skin felt too tight and ready to burst as angry voices howled in his mind.

“Please... *please stop*, ” He finally fell to his knees, hands gripping either side of his head as it threatened to split open, “I’m being torn apart... *It hurts*... Toga....”

“*Ther-ody her-!?*”

“*He-ou alr-?*”

“*Twice!?*”

Kind, familiar hands touched him. They tied soft fabric around the exposed half of his face. The voices calmed, turning from a raging hurricane to a small, still pool.

“Twice?”

He looked up, his mind finally clear, “Toga? Toga!!”

She smiled as he wrapped his arms around her, but she couldn’t hug back. He backed away with a shot of alarm as he saw the cuffs on her wrists.

“What is this!?” Twice threw Toga behind him, glaring at Gang Orca a few paces away, “Run, Toga! I’ll distract him! No, we’ll both run away screaming!”

Nobody moved.

Gang Orca wore a bemused expression and Toga chuckled behind him, “It’s okay, Twice.”

“Eh?”

Toga walked around him to Gang Orca, who also had his old crusty boss thrown over his shoulder, before she faced him with a soft smile.

“I’m going with him.” Her smile fell as her eyes filled with tears, “They can help me start over. I don’t want to be a villain anymore!”

“... start over?”

“Come with me, Twice.” She held out her cuffed hands, “We don’t have to be all alone. You don’t have to suffer anymore.”

“I...”

Fear jolted through them as the sun was blotted out by a blazing gold dragon charging towards the stone monstrosity as big as a building. The monster was distracted by whizzing shapes darting around its head to notice the dragon coming head on.

A great *crack* tore through the city when the two collided, the dragon’s massive horns tearing off a small chunk of the big

monster's body before it flew away, dancing around several arrow-shaped tendrils.

He froze when the shadow of a falling chunk of rock fell over him. Twice pushed Toga away and scrunched his eyes shut. He prepared for pain, but it never came.

"Watch out!!"

Twice opened his eyes to see a finely dressed gentleman standing before him, hands splayed to the sky as the chunk collided with a stretchy barrier. The gentlemen grunted and skid back when the two forces collided. Twice thought the stone would break through, but the momentum slowed and it rolled harmlessly off the barrier and onto the ground.

"... You saved us?" Twice whispered.

"Y-yes, I-" Gentle Criminal turned and did a double take, his brow hardening as he scanned the small group, "Gang Orca? You two... are with the League."

"Not anymore!!" Twice shouted, "Toga-chan and I quit! Nah, we were fired. They owe us severance pay!"

Gentle Criminal blinked, and stared at Gang Orca.

"It's true." Gang Orca said with a shrug, shuffling an unconscious Shigaraki Tomura on his shoulder, "Toga even took out their former leader."

"But how did you get out?" Gentle Criminal asked, eyes widening, "Hawks and I were checking the compound before that monster emerged."

"I used my quirk to make our own path out." Gang Orca pointed to one of the many holes behind them.

The dragon's next cry summoned a blanket of clouds, an unnatural cold front and the refreshing scent of rain sprouted goosebumps across their bodies.

"It's too dangerous to linger here." Gentle Criminal said when a harsh breeze hit them, "You have to leave before you get hurt!"

Twice puffed out his chest as he pulled out a length of his measuring tape, "No, let me help!"

"What are you doing!?" Gentle Criminal flinched back when Twice approached.

Twice jabbed a finger at the dueling behemoths, "You have a plan against that monster, right!? No you don't! We're all doomed!!"

"Um... y-yes?" Gentle Criminal and Twice ducked as the golden dragon flew over them again, its heavenly roar piercing the heavens, "It's my duty to prevent Overhaul from getting away from the compound, but erecting a large enough barrier to contain him is proving difficult."

Twice grinned under his new patchwork mask, "Wouldn't it be easier with multiple of you!? One is just fine, what am I talking about!?"

Gentle Criminal's eyes widened, "... Yes, that would work! Thank-"

"I'm not doing this for you!!" Twice snapped as he quickly took Gentle's measurements, "I'm doing this to protect my Toga! I'd go to the ends of the earth for her!"

Toga covered her mouth, eyes watering, "Twice..."

"Twice, does this mean...?" Gang Orca asked.

"Yeah! I'm going wherever my angel is!" Grey goop shot out from Twice's body, "But first, we're taking that asshole *down* !"

“Gabriel!”

Gabriel swung her sword through a few tendrils that got too close for comfort.

Joker grit his teeth as his head pounded, and the growing pain in his chest slowly eluded Satanael’s influence.

“Gentle, what’s happening!?” La Brava asked, *“Why am I getting so many readings!?”*

“Getting a little help from a former foe,” Gentle Criminal’s tone was tinged in amusement, *“I’ll explain later!”*

Joker grinned as he spotted the multiple Gentle Criminals jumping around and surrounding the compound in an iridescent wall.

“Trickster!” Kohryu said as raindrops plopped down from the cloudy sky, *“Cast Concentrate and get ready!”*

Joker chuckled as the others stared at him, “It’s almost Showtime!”

He grinned as Kohryu’s Concentrate briefly cast him in a blue silhouette. Morgana cackled while Midoriya and Miruko readied themselves.

“Ryukyu, Nejire, fall back!!” Joker ordered.

Ryukyu maneuvered into a mid-air twist. Her intern followed as they flew away towards the fleeing police now in the distance. Overhaul raised a few of his many arms to swipe at them, only to collide with Gentle’s barrier. His arms pounded against the stretchy air.

“No you don’t!” Gabriel cried as several swords appeared around Overhaul’s monstrous body.

The weapons shot down, stabbing into the stone around the base of the creature’s head. Joker gasped as he felt the visceral rush of a

Critical Hit. Overhaul's creation screeched and tumbled onto its back, crushing another part of the mansion underneath.

"Mona," Joker held up his hand, "Baton Pass!"

Morgana jumped off of Joker's shoulder with a flip, blue flame consuming him as he turned into his Metaverse form and slapped Joker's hand, his body bursting with bright blue energy. Kohryu dove closer to the ground as Mercurius appeared beside him.

Kohryu opened his jaws and roared as he flew tight circles above a vulnerable Overhaul, forming a golden ribbon from the ground to the sky.

"Now!!" Kohryu commanded.

Joker forced himself to bear the pain when Gabriel disappeared, and in her place, Baal and Yatagarasu materialized on either side of him, easily balancing on Kohryu.

Mona and Mercurius' wind struck first, Joker and his Personas' following the flow of magical power.

The spells were cast, entangling with one another like the instruments in an orchestra. Clouds overhead twisted and churned, their ears popping with the sudden pressure as a funnel stretched its tail downwards and into the space within Kohryu's circle. The roaring wind sounded like a speeding freight train.

To any onlookers, the massive tornado appeared as if out of nowhere. Hints of startling golden scales peeked out of the impassable wall of wind, flashes of lightning highlighting the dragon's shadow as it descended on a deformed monster.

They heard the deep *crack* of splintering rock through the twister, pieces of Overhaul's new body were being sucked up into the atmosphere.

“Wind is his weakness?” Mona gasped, “I can continue the Baton Pass, Joker!”

“Me next!” Miruko held up her hand, “Before Overhaul regains his balance!!”

Mona slapped Miruko’s hand, scarlet energy flaring around her body. She took off as Baal and Yatagrasu’s wind magic aided her descent. Miruko threw herself into mid-air cartwheels above Overhaul.

“*Luna Ring!!* ”

Her whirling attack sliced through the goliath’s throat, sand and dirt gushing from the wound as the lower jaw broke off. They all felt it through the string of Baton Passes. Another *Critical Hit*.

Miruko wasted no time throwing herself up in the air again, her quick leaps taking her around Kohryu’s body and back up to the group.

The hero held up her hand, “Deku, NOW!! Finish this!!”

Midoriya activated his quirk and jumped. The two passed each other mid-air as Midoriya hit her extended hand. Miruko was caught by Mercurius and set beside Joker.

Their jaws *dropped* as a flash blinked into existence.

Midoriya’s body crackled with a mix of bright white and green lightning, his hair standing up as static danced over everyone’s skin. Midoriya righted himself as he prepared a vertical kick. The strength of eight additional souls, the most powerful form of Baton Pass, and the Chariot Arcana plummeted with meteoric power.

The earth tore itself apart when these combined forces collided with the prone stone goliath.

They shielded their eyes as arcs of lightning shot up through the eye of the tornado and into the surrounding clouds, briefly lighting the whole city in a flash of striking green. Dust and small stones

exploded in all directions when the tornado's winds were eradicated by the sheer force, harmlessly bouncing off of Gentle Criminal's barriers and onto the ground below.

Green lightning still crackled through the thousands of suspended pieces. They couldn't see Midoriya or Overhaul from the clouds of debris, as a great swathe of the compound collapsed in on itself.

"They have to be down there!" Miruko shouted.

"Mona!" Joker reached for the modified pistol in his costume.

"Got it!"

Mercurius scooped Joker and Miruko up in either arm, and with Mona on his shoulder, he jumped down. The clouds overhead cleared and spears of sunlight broke through. They descended back into the bowels of the compound, into the desecrated arena where Kurono and Nemoto lost their lives to their leader's madness.

"There!" Mona pointed to the base of Overhaul's broken tower.

Two unmoving figures were there, several meters apart; Midoriya and Overhaul.

Overhaul, now mask-less, was disfigured by stone and flesh that wasn't his. His legs were completely gone, his lower torso covered in a layer of creeping stone. White and black fabric clung to him like mournful ghosts.

Midoriya was splayed out on the ground, all of his limbs in disjointed angles. He was still conscious, his face a mask of unbearable pain.

"Mona-"

"I know!" Mona said, "I'll take care of Midoriya! You get Overhaul!"

Mercurius dropped Joker and Miruko on the ground near Overhaul, while Mona and Mercurius rushed to Midoriya.

Joker ran to Overhaul, his shadow draping the broken man.

Overhaul slowly opened his eyes and stared into the barrel of the gun pointed at him. His own golden eyes met Joker's, his serene expression shifting to horror as he stared at the golden halo of sunlight silhouetting Joker.

A lone gust pulled at their clothes before a single gunshot pierced the underground.

The red bullet hit an open patch of flesh in Overhaul's neck.

Joker let the empty gun fall from his grasp. Overhaul stared at the fabric of his former subordinates clutched in his deformed hands, not moving as Joker rifled through the tattered remains his jacket, finding all of the pockets empty.

"You're finished, Chisaki Kai." Joker patronizingly smoothed out a wrinkle in Overhaul's jacket, "Don't think for a second that you deserve redemption or Eri's forgiveness. She would never heal you, even if you grovelled in front of her for the rest of your sorry life."

Joker stood, watching as the last of Chisaki Kai's willpower faded from his dull gold eyes.

The *Reverse Aeon's* quirk, and his ability to walk due to missing legs, was gone forever.

Joker turned away from Overhaul as that fact sunk in, the man's expression plummeting into despair. Joker went over to Midoriya as Mercurius healed his broken body with Salvation. Midoriya slowly sat up, eyes wide. For some reason, Midoriya gaped down at his gloves hands, his eyes wet with unshed tears.

"Are you alright?" Joker asked softly, extending a hand.

Midoriya blinked rapidly and took it, "Y-yeah."

"That was one hell of a final attack, Deku!!" Miruko shouted.

Mona wore a sly grin, "As if we'd do anything less than kick butt!" Mona's smile faltered as they stared at Overhaul, seemingly lost within his own mind as he stared at the two contrasting pieces of fabric, "What should we do with him?"

"Hmph, I almost feel sorry for that pathetic human... almost." Mercurius whispered before he returned to Mona.

"I got this." Miruko's face was unreadable as she clapped Overhaul's wrists in irons.

Joker put a hand to his ear, "La Brava, Tensei, the fight's over. Status report on everyone else?" He clicked his tongue when he received nothing but static... again.

"Guess we're too far down." Mona said, "We should-"

Joker clutched his head as his vision darkened, a deep ringing noise slicing through his skull.

It seems Satanael couldn't hold it back any longer.

"Hey, Joker!" Mona waved his arms, "What's wrong!?"

Kohryu, having returned to him along with the other Personas, rumbled with sadness, "*The Strength need you, Trickster. Now more than ever. Repair the Arcana before its too late!*"

Joker shook his head as Fafnir's unrestrained emotions hounded the mindscape like a speaker on full blast, "Risumi... Ayumu..."

"H-hey, wait-!!" Miruko's voice was lost to Joker as the three of them vaulted over the destruction.

They ran through the remnants of the underground complex as Joker focused on Fafnir's bond, dodging around mountains of debris and through broken tunnels. Joker threw himself around that final corner to be greeted by a grim scene.

Risumi was crying as Lemillion held her back, both of them covered in dirt and grime, seemingly oblivious to the unconscious and bloody Deidoro at their feet. The remainder of his team, plus Nighteye and Eraserhead, stood a little ways off beside Fafnir. They were all covered in dust, and while Nighteye's clothes were torn and bloody, they all seemed unharmed.

Almost every inch of the ground had been gouged out, as if something had been burrowing frantically through the rocks. A thick layer of dust caked Fafnir's claws.

"Trickster!" Fafnir whipped towards Joker, "The Strength...."

"It's Ayumu!" Risumi was hyperventilating as thick tears fell down her cheeks, "Wh-when the building collapsed, he... h-he...."

"Please, you have to calm down-" Lemillion tried.

"Don't tell me to calm down! Not when my husband is... is..."

Mr. Compress put a hand to Joker's shoulder, "This is... going to be difficult to look at."

"He's right," Eraserhead wore a deep frown, "It's not pretty."

Midoriya's hand went over his mouth in horror.

"Let him through." Lavenza said sternly, "The Strength's fate is in the hands of the Trickster now."

"Joker..." Mona put a tiny paw on Joker's leg, "Whatever you decide, we have your back."

Risumi finally broke way from Lemillion and sprinted to Fafnir. She froze before collapsing to her knees, her scream tearing at Joker's soul.

"Eraser," Joker's voice trembled as his throat tightened, "All of this happened because of me. I'm going to fix this."

Eraserhead looked to the scene behind him, then to Mona, and finally to Joker with a haunted gaze, "You have the same power that Mona used on you after Kamino?"

Joker nodded.

Eraserhead looked at Nighteye, who shook his head, but he moved aside regardless. Nighteye's eyebrows twitched as Joker walked past.

Risumi lay Ayumu out on her lap, clutching his body with heart breaking cries. Joker shuddered at Ayumu's injuries. He had been crushed, for the lack of a better term. All of his limbs had been pulverized, his clothes doused in coppery red. He wasn't breathing. His face lacked any color aside from the heavy bruises around his eyes.

Joker's eyes stung as he collapsed on his knees next to Risumi.

Risumi looked at him, a shaky hand resting on his cheek, "This... this isn't your fault."

Joker shook his head and blinked rapidly to hold back his own tears, "No, you're wrong."

"Akira-"

"Risumi, *please* ." He ducked his head, his hair shielding his eyes, "Please step back, Risumi. I can... I can still save him."

"Wh-what...? Sweetheart..." Her breath hitched.

Fafnir curled into himself, making himself as small as possible as he quietly disappeared, his shame curling through the mindscape. Ishtar appeared as his only active Persona. Thanks to Kohryu's Life Aid, they would have enough magic for a full Samarecarm.

The Persona looked at their captivated audience.

“Trickster, are you sure you want to openly reveal this power?” Ishtar asked. *“There’ll be no going back.”*

“Do it. Ayumu never deserved this.”

“As you wish.”

“Stand back, my dear.” Ishtar said with a reassuring smile, “Your husband will be back in your arms within the minute.”

Risumi’s eyes went wide as she settled Ayumu onto the floor. Ishtar helped Risumi stand before floating over Ayumu’s body like she did with Tensei so long ago.

Ishtar cupped Ayumu’s face and kissed him on the forehead. Glowing vines and flowers sprouted around Ayumu’s body, illuminating the underground space with soft tones. Calmer floral scents overtook the aroma of dust and sticky copper, the glowing vines wrapping around Ayumu’s injuries cast him in a transcendent glow. Joker heard muffled gasps as a crystal blue butterfly emerged from a blooming flower. It fluttered to Ayumu’s chest and disappeared into his skin.

Ayumu convulsed, eyes flying open with a strangled gasp.

His injuries faded, as did the glowing flora around him

“Ayumu!?” Tears streamed down Risumi’s face, her hands hovering around him in uncertainty.

“Risumi?” Ayumu sat up, staring down at his stained clothes, “What happened? I think... I think I just saw my parents?”

Ishtar vanished. Joker backed away to let them have a moment together after Risumi threw her arms around Ayumu’s neck and wailed. Nighteye looked at Joker as if he had single handedly shattered reality.

Lemillion was rooted to the spot, gaping and pale.

“W-wait.... that butterfly... those flowers...” Midoriya’s pupils shrunk into pinpricks, “*Hosu* .”

Joker ignored them as he stopped in front of Eraserhead, “Now it’s over. Can we... can we just leave? I don’t... feel so good...”

“Hey!” Eraserhead knelt in front of Joker as he collapsed on his knees.

The surrounding voices were muffled and Joker’s breath strained through his throat as his tears dropped onto the ground. His hands and legs felt numb. His Personas’ encouragements fizzled out from the blood rushing to his ears. The staggering pain in Joker’s heart disappeared when the Strength Arcana fully restored itself, replaced by a relief so powerful it made his vision swim.

He had trouble keeping his own Thief Outfit on as exhaustion pressed down on him.

Someone wrapped their arms around Joker, allowing his head to rest on their chest.

“It’s alright, Trickster,” Lavenza’s voice pierced through the disarming fog, “It’s over. We’ll handle the rest.”

Another person’s warmth was at Joker’s side.

Joker looked to the Hierophant’s steady gaze, “I promise you’ll be safe. You and *all* of your teammates.”

His Arcana bathed him in a sense of calm that slowed his pounding heart and tugged his mind towards sleep; Faith, Apostle, Magician, Hierophant, *two* forms of Strength, Reverse Fortune, and the Chariot. The High Priestess was a shining beacon nearby, drowning out the sourness of the Reverse Aeon.

His muddled mind sensed the Upright Death and Reverse Justice nearby, yet he couldn’t pinpoint their locations.

Joker let his costume fade with the rest of his energy. Lavenza tightened her hold when he closed his eyes and let darkness sweep him away.

Well that's obviously the perfect place to take a spontaneous nap. Remember when Kunikazu mentioned Joker making a tornado like 20 chapters ago? Good times.

So, the next two chapters are going to be a little more spaced out. It took nearly 3 months just to get these three Overhaul finale chapters done, and it was *a lot* to handle with cruddy health. Plus, my health still isn't up to par yet and I want to make sure that everything is as smooth possible as we enter the final stretch of the story. There's still not final chapter count or anything like that (in case chapters are too long and need to be split, or a plot thread needs a little more to flourish properly), but... we're getting there, folks.

(On a somewhat related note, I think it's funny how many comments I've gotten that were along the lines of 'Well it looks like this fic is ending soon...' ever since the Kamino chapters, despite several author notes and comments stating otherwise.)

Anywho, here's the current update schedule:

Freedom & Security: November 26

Ark: Dec 17

Freedom

Chapter 82: Freedom

Before he could get lost in thought, one of the forms laying on him shifted again. Ren looked down to see Eri's eyes fluttering open, going as wide as saucers when they locked gazes.

“Ren-nii!!”

So, to clear up any confusion for those that didn't read the updated note last chapter, this chapter needed to be split in half because life threw a speeding curve ball and I'll be suddenly and unexpectedly busy for most of December. The second half will be updated on December 10th!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The camera panned over broken buildings, streets deformed by deadly spikes, the worst of it concentrated within the former home of the Shie Hassaikai. The beautiful mansion was nothing more than a smoking ruin now.

“This is the battlefield where Overhaul was taken down just two hours ago.” The camera turned to Demizu Mika, countless police officers and heroes worked together to clean up the mess. Something flew overhead and landed just behind her, “Oh, Hawks! Do you have some time to answer questions!?”

Hawks looked tired and... haunted. He wiped that expression off his face with a blinding smile, and those who saw something more thought they must have imagined it.

“Just a few, as there’s a lot of work to do!”

“O-of course! Can we get a confirmation that Overhaul has been arrested?”

“Yep, he’s on his way to Tartarus!” Hawks winked at the camera, “I can also confirm that the former League Of Villain’s leader, Shigaraki Tomura, has also been placed in custody with other members of the League.”

“Goodness, that’s amazing news! Have there been any casualties on either side?”

Hawks’ smile turned strained, “Mostly a few minor injuries on our side, with one hero needing to be taken straight to the hospital. Don’t worry though! I’ve been told that, while there will be some scarring, they’ll make a speedy recovery! As for the villains, there’s been a few fatalities due to Overhaul using his quirk on them. There’s also evidence of infighting between the Shie Hassaikai and the League that lead to a few fatalities.”

“Last question, and no doubt what people across Japan are wondering: What’s the status of the Shinsou family? What’s happened to Joker!? There’s nothing on his Spotlight and fans are getting worried! People all over the city have spotted his gold dragon flying overhead earlier, there are pictures and videos going viral online! There’s also been reports of a spontaneous tornado!”

“Ah, well...” If it wasn’t for his visor, the cameras would’ve caught how many shades paler the hero turned, “Both Risumi and Ayumu Shinsou have been recovered in... good health. But as for Joker and his team...”

Demizu Mika held her breath and inched the microphone closer.

Hawks grinned, “You’ll find out soon. I’ve got to get back to work, ciao!”

“Hawks, wait-!”

Hawks soared away with a beat of his wings.

Demizu Mika sighed and faced the camera, hair tussled by the burst of wind, “Well, there you have it. Some questions are answered, but the bigger ones are being left as a mystery at the moment. We’ll give updates as they come. This is Demizu Mika, signing off!”

Yaoyorozu muted the television as it went to commercials.

The 1-A dorm was unusually quiet, the only sounds were Iida’s frantic pacing around the common room.

“No updates?” Yaoyorozu asked.

“None.” Iida pushed up his glasses.

“It can’t be *bad* news, right?” Ashido asked, “None of our friends were seriously hurt, right!?”

“I dunno, Midoriya and the others aren’t answering.” Sero said.

“I-I’m sure they’re okay!” Hagakure waved her arms, “Aizawa-sensei would tell us if something bad happened!”

Iida sighed and dug his phone from his pocket, “I believe he would inform us if that were the case. However, there’s also the wording of Nezu’s email that also concerns me.”

“Me too.” Yaoyorozu frowned as she ran a finger down Flit, who perched on her shoulder, “He sent it to every staff member and Class Representative in the school. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“That’s when you *know* something’s going down!” Kaminari shot to his feet, “I mean, every student is confined to the dorms for the *whole* day and he threatened instant expulsion for anyone found wandering outside? It’s crazy!”

“And each dorm is being watched by Ectoplasm clones.” Ojiro said as he sank into his chair.

“I heard one right outside earlier...” Shoji stated.

Jirou stuck one of her ear jacks into the wall by the window, “Yep, there are two clones circling our dorm, alongside some of the small annoying robots. I hear similar movement all over the place.”

“Maybe it has something to do with bird-brain being cagey about Joker.” Several shocked eyes went to Bakugo slouching on the armchair. He glared back with a rabid snarl, “What!? Why else would he suddenly take off after *one* question about Joker!? *Why else* would that rat put every dorm on lockdown!? Something’s going on and they’re keeping their traps shut about it!”

“Oh my gosh, you’re right! What if Joker accepted Nezu’s program behind the scenes!? What if Joker made some sort of deal with the heroes to fight Overhaul!?” Ashido threw up her arms and squealed, “What if Joker’s ALREADY HERE!?”

The front door opened. The tension skyrocketed as several footsteps trailed closer, until a group led by Aizawa walked into the common room.

Asui, Uraraka, and Tokoyami looked unbothered.

Kirishima was covered in light bandages, but otherwise looked fine, cheery even.

Todoroki looked distracted, his fingers hovering over the phone in his pocket.

And Midoriya...

He looked out of it. His eyes were locked onto the floor and his movements lagged behind the others, he nearly knocked shoulders with Todoroki before he caught himself.

Aizawa crossed his arms. A weary heaviness lingered in his eyes, “You’ll give them space if they ask for it. Am I understood? I won’t tolerate any badgering.”

Iida chopped his arm, “Of course, Sensei! We’ll respect their privacy!!”

“Aizawa-sensei...” Yaoyorozu stood from the couch, her hands clasped over her stomach while Flit rattled its wings in support, “We saw the news, and know it was a hard battle, but we’re all wondering why Nezu sent that e-mail early this morning. Is all of this...” She waved a hand at the returned students and the muted television, “Related, by chance?”

Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose as the students behind him flinched, Midoriya finally snapped out of his daze and looked up for the first time since entering the dorm.

“There will be an announcement during tomorrow’s homeroom. That’s all I can tell you right now.” His eyes flashed red and a myriad of different reactions were brutally silenced, “We’re on high alert, so don’t think you can sneak out to do anything stupid. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Aizawa-sensei!!” A chorus of voices yelled.

Aizawa’s phone pinged, and he briefly glanced at it before shoving it back in his pocket.

“I need to check on things. Iida, Yaoyorozu, I’m counting on you to keep everyone in line.”

“Understood!!” Iida shouted.

Aizawa turned. He paused beside Midoriya and put an encouraging hand on his shoulder before walking out.

Yaoyorozu smiled at them, “Is there anything you need? You all must be exhausted.”

“I am going to go meditate and do a tarot reading in private.”
Tokoyami stated with a bow of his feathered head, “The darkness calls to me.”

Tokoyami stalked up the stairs without another word.

“I... I’m going to go lay down.” Midoriya mumbled before he followed Tokoyami.

“I need to contact my siblings. I’ll be down later.”

Iida frowned in concern as he watched his friends go upstairs.

“Mina.” Yaoyorozu chastised when the other girl tried sneaking after them, the girl sagged and trudged back into the common room.

“Ochako, Tsuyu, Kirishima, why don’t you sit down and relax. I can make you some tea if you want?”

“I-I’m fine, really!” Uraraka said as she and Asui sat down on one of the open couches, “I’m more tired than anything.”

Sato moved to let Kirishima have an armchair.

“Did you fight the villains!?” Sero said as he scooted closer to Uraraka and Asui.

“Sero!” Iida chopped his arm, “Aizawa-sensei *just said -*”

“It’s fine, I don’t mind questions!” Kirishima beamed, “And yeah! Fat Gum and I got separated from the larger group, and we battled it out with some of the strongest Shie Hassaikai! It was so manly!!”

“Is that why you’re covered in bandages!?” Hagakure gasped, “It looks like it really hurts!”

“Y-yeah,” Kirishima bore a wistful smile as he rubbed the back of his neck, “I don’t regret pushing myself, and Fat Gum fought so hard too! I don’t remember much after the battle. My injuries were a *lot*

worse, but apparently Hawks and Gentle Criminal found us, and... Gentle Criminal healed the worst of my injuries.”

Wide-eyed looks were exchanged between classmates.

Asui blinked, “Uraraka and I weren’t actually part of the fighting. Ryukyu put us with the medics and we got to take care of the casualties Hawks and Gentle Criminal helped evacuate.”

“Oh, but we did see the final fight against Overhaul!” Uraraka paled, “And Joker’s gold dragon up close... and that tornado. They were all *huge* . It was... kinda terrifying....”

“So it’s true that Joker created a tornado!?” Sero asked.

“Yeah!” Ashido grinned and rubbed her hands together, “There’s no clear pictures of it, but they have it on the weather scans!”

“I think it was pretty irresponsible of Joker.” Ojiro said as he crossed his arms and scowled, “I mean, a tornado? *Really* ? While there were still heroes and police close by? Our *classmates* ? That’s no better than him creating a hurricane to save his own skin.”

“You weren’t there.” They stiffened as Asui’s voice turned grave. Uraraka squeezed her hand as Asui stared out the window, “That... *thing* Overhaul became was desperate. He was charging right for us, and if it wasn’t for bravery shown by both heroes and vigilantes then we probably would’ve been killed.”

“Yeah.” Uraraka’s smile turned watery, “Gentle Criminal put up barriers to protect us before the tornado hit.”

“I didn’t see him put up the barriers myself,” Kirishima said softly, “But from what I hear it was like him protecting us from the Nomu in the Summer Camp all over again.”

Asui nodded and stared Ojiro in the eye, “So even if they are vigilantes who went against the law, they seem to be good people.

We should give them a chance if they're really here."

Ojiro shifted before his eyes fell to the ground.

Silence permeated the dorm once more.

Yaoyorozu smiled as she reached for the remote, "Why don't we watch movies to get our mind off things?"

"Oh! I know what I want to watch!" Sero said as he made grabby hands for the remote.

"Dude, we're not watching your favorite movie *again* ." Jirou snapped. She extended an ear jack and snatched the remote, "We've seen it six times already! It's someone else's turn to pick something."

"I can bake a cake before the movie starts!" Sato offered.

"That would be sweet of you," Yaoyorozu said, "Do you need any help?"

"I wouldn't turn it down if someone wanted to!"

"Ooh, me!!" Kirishima shot up from the couch, "I'll help!"

They walked into the kitchen together with bright smiles. Bakugo rolled his eyes and got to his feet, stomping after them.

"Are you going to help too, Bakugo?" Iida asked.

Bakugo scoffed, "Shitty Hair doesn't know jack about baking."

Ashido snickered as Bakugo disappeared into the kitchen, "It's true! There was this one time in our middle school where we had to make stuff for a bake sale, and Kirishima burnt *everything* he made! I had to go to the store and buy cookies and pretend he made them so he didn't fail! OH! And there was this other time-

Uraraka and Asui exchanged glances, the familiar bickering of their classmates providing some comfort.

Aizawa neared the infirmary, but stopped in his tracks when he spotted Margaret leaning against the wall, staring at the doors across from her. One half of the infirmary was split into private rooms, the first door housed the Shinsou family. Hitoshi had been reunited with his parents and Aizawa could faintly hear voices coming from the other side.

The second door contained Joker's private room, and the last was the examination room where Recovery Girl treated any injured students, as well as being connected to her main office.

"Is he awake yet?" Aizawa asked.

Margaret smiled, her hand hovering over the huge tome on her hip, "No, he's still resting. He needs it after the vast amount of energy he spent this morning."

Aizawa nodded and leaned against the wall a small distance from her. A beat of silence passed. Aizawa refused to fidget as Margaret's golden eyes peered into him, as if she were judging the very weight of his mortal soul.

"Can I ask something?" Aizawa asked to still the awkwardness.

"If I can ask a question in return."

Aizawa nodded, "What are you to Joker? Obviously, you're protective, and still ready for action despite the fight being over."

Margaret chuckled, the sharpness in her eyes softening when she stared at Joker's door, "*Your* fight with Overhaul and the League of Villains may have reached their conclusion, but Joker's battle is far from over. As for what we are, we're simply here to aid in Joker's

journey. Lavenza is his original Attendant, but Joker's... unique situation brought us together. Now, my question for you."

Well that answers nothing.

Aizawa deflated, "Go ahead."

Margaret's eyes picked him apart again, "Theodore took you aside last night before you left the Velvet Room. Normally, I would respect my siblings' privacy, but it's unusual for him to be so straightforward whenever Elizabeth is around."

"Oh." Aizawa buried his face in his scarf as renewed terror crawled over his skin, "*That* ."

"Aizawa, may I speak with you?"

"... Sure."

Theodore escorted Aizawa out of the Challenge Room, the loneliness of the cells and the chains hanging from the ceiling made Aizawa shiver. The endless, mournful song made it much worse. This place had nothing but jail cells and guillotines, torture devices that a teenager should be kept safe from... and yet, Joker acted as if this place was good.

It made no sense to him.

They stopped at the end of the hall where another cell sat empty. Aizawa thought that Theodore was the most polite of the siblings, but that sentiment melted away when the man's expression turned as sharp as an apex predator. Something in his eyes made Aizawa's soul quake. The whole of the Velvet Room shifted and groaned, and the ethereal chain rattles grew louder as Theodore's glare pinned him to the spot.

Aizawa wasn't superstitious nor was he religious, but it felt as if he wasn't standing in front of a normal person.

Not quite a god, yet not quite... human.

Perhaps something in between?

"I'll only say this once." Theodore said, his tone calm as if he were having a pleasant conversation, "You would never leave this place alive if you weren't the Hierophant of this world."

A jolt struck Aizawa's chest, "Excuse me?"

"Joker has placed his trust in you as one of his Arcana, however your carelessness nearly cost him his life. I, for one, cannot accept that."

Aizawa's expression hardened, "I know. I... I didn't know how much pain he'd go through when my quirk erased his power. I promised never to use it on him again."

Theodore dangerously narrowed his eyes, "Hmm, we shall see."

"At least tell me why you and Elizabeth feel so strongly about this. I hurt Joker, and I'll never forgive myself for it, but there has to be more to the story. You wouldn't casually threaten to kill me otherwise."

Theodore chuckled, it was ice cold and the temperature around Aizawa turned frigid.

"Because..." Theodore tightened his hands into fists, his white gloves creaking, "Someone precious to us lost one of their friends when they tried to suppress the power of their own soul. I refuse to see it happen again." Theodore's eyes sent another dagger through Aizawa's heart, "You might prepare yourselves against Elizabeth's threats, as futile as it is. However, should you or any of your ilk harm Joker ever again..."

A shadow had fallen over Theodore's face, his eyes were twin blazing gold suns in the darkness.

"Then you'd never know what hit you until your spirit is staring down at your own lifeless corpse... if there was anything left of it."

"I see."

Margaret didn't express shock or try to apologize for Theodore or Elizabeth, not that he expected or *deserved* one. These siblings harbored mutual feelings for the kid and had the strength to back up their threats should Joker be harmed. If Margaret could summon *Satan*, then who knows what else could be up their sleeves. Or Joker's, seeing as how *new* ones popped up out of nowhere.

Lavenza hinted that Joker could've had Satan(Or Beelzebub, Lucifer, and others?) in his stock, and had previously *executed* Satan several times to give his allies armor. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Satan had called Margaret a 'Ruler Of Power', so they had multiple titles apart from Attendant. They also appeared as if out of thin air like Joker himself did at the USJ. They had to have come recently, since their inherent protective nature would've reared its head at the Musutafu Raid or Kamino Disaster. Perhaps they came when that flying scarlet serpent made its appearance?

*"You would never leave this place alive if you weren't the **Hierophant of this world** ."*

"Your fight with Overhaul and the League of Villains may have reached their conclusion, but Joker's battle is far from over..."

The Red Rain and Nezu's flippancy over any new information he held close to his chest.

All of these new puzzle pieces fell right into his lap, but Aizawa still couldn't form a clear picture. It's been around six months since the

USJ, and they *still* knew next to nothing about the enigma that was Joker.

Still, that phrase bothered him... *this world*...

This world. They spoke as if there were more than one.

But that's impossible.

... Isn't it?

No, it was illogical to even consider something like that, despite how cold talons of dread squeezed his heart at the thought of being separated from Joker again.

Margaret adopted her role as a silent vigil once more, leaving him stewing in a whirlwind of impossibilities and half-baked theories.

With no way to get solid answers, Aizawa leaned against the wall and waited.

Ren opened his eyes to a pale ceiling.

He was wrapped in a cocoon of warmth, familiar weights on his chest stilled the initial wave of panic. Ren looked down to Morgana, spread out like a starfish over his chest, and Eri, who huddled into his left side. Lavenza took the chair to the left of his bed, her small gloved hand clasped around his.

They snored softly.

But despite the softness and warmth, there was a ringing in his soul that made his blood run cold. A familiar and terrible sensation plucked at his deepest core, like a single sharp claw scratching against the glass of his soul.

His Personas brushed against his mind, erasing the last of his grogginess. A comforting reminder that they were there with him.

Always.

“... Ren?”

Ren looked to his right. Kaito put a book aside and sat on the edge of a comfortable chair, electric blue eyes looking at him in relief.

Ren squinted, “Did you seriously take your full last name and the first part of your given name to make ‘Kaito’?”

Kaito stiffened, then glared at him, “You’re fine if you can make a joke out of it.”

“So... do we still call you Kaito or would you rather be called by your real name?”

“Kaito.” A glazed look appeared in his eyes as he studied various medical instruments around the room, and *shivered*, “Let’s keep it a secret from the heroes and any *doctors*, okay?”

“Can I ask why?”

Kaito’s mouth twisted as if he sucked on a lemon, “I... I’m not ready to share that yet.”

Ren nodded solemnly, “Alright, I understand.”

Kaito released a huff, “Thanks.”

Ren stiffened when Eri shifted in her sleep, but fell back to a calm slumber as she huddled closer into his chest.

Ren stared back at Kaito, grinning, “I’m trapped.”

Kaito snorted, his apprehension melting away, “Eri and I almost lost it when they brought you in like this, you know. She hasn’t left your side since everyone got here.”

“Where are the others?”

Kaito pointed past the foot of Ren's bed. He lifted his head, careful not to wake his sleeping friends. Mr. Compress, Spinner and Lady Stubbs, Gentle Criminal and La Brava. Extra couches and comfortable chairs had been arranged around the room, and they all slept pleasantly as curtains of golden sunlight draped in from the window. Just outside, he could see buildings and acres of sprawling gardens and forests.

"Hitoshi, Risumi, and Ayumu are in the room next door." Ren startled, but Kaito held up his hand, "They're safe and resting."

The memories flooded back. The raid. Overhaul. The last desperate battle to take the mad villain down. Ren absorbed the horrible things Risumi and Ayumu went through, the shock of waking up in a sterile white room with no hand cuffs or drugs, and the incessant buzzing under his skin that spoke of the Metaverse. It put all of his Personas on edge.

"How long was I out?"

"A little while. It's late afternoon now." Kaito sighed as he leaned back in his chair, "That raid only lasted a little over an hour, but I can see how exhausted everyone is."

"An *hour*?" Ren's bones felt a little heavier, "It felt like we were down there for ages."

Kaito hummed, "From what Nezu told me, Overhaul and his Shie Hassaikai, as well as the League Of Villains, are all in custody. Footage of Kohryu went viral and reporters have been pestering the heroes for updates about you. It's any wonder they got you here without incident."

"We're.... we're really here, aren't we?" Ren whispered, "After all this time, we're finally at U.A."

"Yeah, we are."

Ren stared at the ceiling as he let his body sink into the surprisingly soft mattress.

They were here.

They were finally here!

Before he could get lost in thought, one of the forms laying on him shifted again. Ren looked down to see Eri's eyes fluttering open, going as wide as saucers when they locked gazes.

"Ren-nii!!"

Her shout startled the others awake as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged tight. Morgana shot up, hackles raised, but he grinned brightly and rubbed against his fluffy hair.

Lavenza sat up, blinking the sleep from her eyes as the rest got to their feet.

Eri sniffled as Ren hugged her and Morgana close, and with Kaito's help he managed to sit up in bed.

"Joker, you're awake!" Mr. Compress clapped his gloved hands together, "How are you feeling?"

"I..." Ren glanced at Eri and Morgana snuggled into his chest, "For once, I think I'm okay."

La Brava wiped unshed tears from her eyes, "They told us y-you were only exhausted, but still...."

Gentle Criminal beamed, "I'm happy everyone made it here, safe and sound."

"Yes," Mr. Compress tipped his hat, "The heroes haven't shared what happened with Ayumu to the public, and I think they're at least smart enough to make sure it stays a secret. They haven't even shared that we're at U.A. yet."

La Brava nodded, "Best Jeanist, Hawks, and Miruko are covering for us at the complex. Tensei is working with the Nighteye Agency to make sure nothing about us gets leaked."

"I'm surprised Nighteye would bother helping us out." Spinner ran a scaly hand through his pink hair, "You should have seen the look on his face as we went to the surface, Joker! He looked as if he were about to crap his pants."

Gentle Criminal chuckled, "Well, that is a rather inelegant way to describe it, but Spinner is correct."

La Brava scoffed and rolled her eyes, "Serves him right for being such a jerk though."

"What about Midoriya and the other students?"

"Aizawa took them back to their dorm." La Brava said, frowning at Ren's worried expression, "I'm sure Deku and Lemillion wouldn't spread it around?"

"I have faith the Chariot won't oust the Trickster." Lavenza said as she patted his hand, "If it comes down to it, you can always speak with him."

"That's the least of our problems." Morgana flicked his tail and stared at Ren with a hardened brow, "The Metaverse is everywhere. I'm sure you can feel it, too."

"Yeah. It's creeping me out." Ren grimaced, "Do you think it's a Palace?"

Morgana took a deep breath, "I... I don't know. I'm not being forced into my Metaverse form, and I still can't tap into it directly like I could back home. I'm definitely sensing Distortions and *something* like a Treasure, though it's hard to tell because U.A. is so big. This... this doesn't make any sense."

“Lavenza, what do you think?”

“Yes, I sense the Metaverse as well.” Lavenza tucked some stray hair behind her ear as the atmosphere shifted into a razor edge, “Perhaps we could investigate the source and figure out a way to stop it from leaking through the whole school.”

“The USJ.” Morgana nodded, “That’s where Ren and I appeared when Yaldabaoth banished us.”

“Yatagarasu confirmed that it was the center of something malicious.” Ren frowned, “We can only imagine how much worse it’s gotten since then.”

“Do you think Nezu would allow that?” Gentle Criminal asked, looking troubled.

Morgana scoffed, “Well, he won’t have much of a choice if Shadows start appearing around the school. It’s any wonder it hasn’t happened yet.”

Eri was conflicted, looking between all of them with confusion.

Kaito swiveled his head towards the door at a sudden noise in the hall, “We’re about to find out.”

The door opened and figures, both familiar and not, walked inside. Nezu, Recovery Girl, and a petite woman he didn’t know. She was dressed in lighter clothes with a doctor’s coat, her golden hair glowing like a halo around her head. She held a thick bundle of folders under her arm.

“Ah, it’s no wonder I heard all that ruckus from next door.” Recovery Girl smiled as she approached Ren’s bed. Eri stiffened and huddled into Ren, almost protectively. Morgana watched her every move with sharp eyes, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” He shifted Eri and Morgana so that he could throw off the covers and swing his legs over the side. He looked at the other doctor, “Who are you?”

The woman bowed, “My name is Kuramatsu Zoey, but you can just call me Zoey. I’m the head doctor of the hospital you went to after Kamino. I’m not surprised you don’t remember, given what happened.”

“Indeed. Recovery Girl and I trust her immensely, she won’t go spreading unnecessary rumors.” Nezu clasped his paws together and grinned at Ren.

“I’ve worked with them for many years. Recovery Girl is my mentor, and I would never do anything to betray that trust. In fact, it was by Nezu’s request that I deliver these to you.” Zoey looked down to the bulging folders, “There are many unexplained questions. Kurusu’s lack of a quirk factor, inconclusive results on that black substance after his seizures, among... others. But I can let all of that go as long as it ensures your safety, Kurusu.”

“Oh,” Ren’s eyes widened as she set the folders on his bedside table, “I... thank you.”

Zoey’s smile was like a ray of sunshine, “It’s no problem at all.”

He should probably just burn these files like he did with the mad doctor’s scans.

The doctor... he was still at large. The echoes of their conversation in the complex replayed in his mind, making his mouth go dry.

As if reading his mind, Mr. Compress locked a reassuring hand on Ren’s shoulder. Some of the tension drained away from Ren, and he gave an appreciative nod to Mr. Compress.

Mr. Compress trapped the files in a marble and handed it to Ren.

“Now, let’s get down to business.” Nezu said, “We do have one thing to discuss before we move on to our next steps.”

“What?” Ren narrowed his eyes.

Ren could feel Mr. Compress roll his eyes from behind his mask, *“Medical check-ups. Apparently Kaito and Eri were quarantined here until we arrived, and while Recovery Girl made sure we weren’t injured, they’ll be sorely disappointed if they think they can get anything more out of me.”*

The others gave Mr. Compress a bewildered stare. Nezu’s grin stretched from ear to ear as he gave Mr. Compress an appraising look.

Ren didn’t know why until Satanael chuckled and said, *“He spoke in French.”*

He nodded at Mr. Compress, and Nezu’s expression brightened more.

Recovery Girl cleared her throat, “I’d like to do physicals, specifically on Eri. We need to make sure she’s healthy before interacting with the larger student body. Both for her safety, and theirs. The rest of you may opt out if you wish.”

“And not *just* the physical side. I’m sure there’s a lot of mental trauma to account for.” Nezu said, appraisal falling into a deep understanding, “For example, we don’t know what exactly happened while you were in All For One’s clutches, or to what extent of the trauma you went through over these past few months.”

He didn’t want to talk about this. It must’ve been obvious in his expression, as Nezu held up a paw.

“We aren’t going to force you, Kurusu.” Nezu’s beady eyes scanned the rest of the group, “That goes for everyone else, too.”

“... Really?”

Nezu smiled at Ren, “Really. While it would help us in our efforts to understand certain events, I also understand that this sort of topic is... *delicate*, for many reasons beyond our own understanding.”

Nezu took a step forward when Ren put the marble in his pocket, “After we’ve finished up here, we’ll give you a basic tour of the main building and then we’ll meet up with the rest of the staff.”

“So,” Recovery Girl’s eyes roamed over the group, “Who’s going through with the check-ups?”

“Pass.” Mr. Compress muttered.

“Same,” Spinner shook his head, “Lady Stubbs isn’t getting one either!”

“Merp!”

“I’m in good health,” Morgana stuck his nose in the air, “I don’t need any doctor to tell me so!”

“I’m not good with doctors either,” Kaito crossed his arms and frowned, “I’ll pass, too.”

La Brava and Gentle Criminal exchanged glances.

“We’ll do it.” Gentle Criminal said with an easy smile, “What’s the harm in making sure nothings wrong?”

Ren squeezed Eri’s hand when she looked to him for an answer. He could refuse to do anything, as Nezu stated. But his own reluctance would harm Eri’s chances at healing. If he were to do his own check-up alongside her, show her that these people could be trusted... it could go a long way for her recovery.

“Okay, I’ll do it.” Ren looked at Eri, “You want to do a check-up with me, Eri?”

“I-I...” Her pupils were blown wide and she trembled, “They won’t hurt me, right?”

“No, they won’t.” He tightened his grip on her shaking hand, “I’ll be right here beside you.”

“Me too!” Morgana rubbed his face against her cheek.

Eri’s eyes flicked between Recovery Girl, Nezu, Morgana, and Ren.
“O-okay.”

“It would be faster if Recovery Girl and I split the group evenly,” Zoey said as she kindly eyed Gentle Criminal and La Brava, “If that’s alright? We’ll go to the empty student infirmary next door.”

The pair looked at Ren while he studied the doctor with an intense gaze, one she returned with nary a flinch or a squirm. This tiny woman, a complete stranger, had stuck her neck out for them, between taking care of him after Kamino and discreetly returning the medical files to his hands.

... Files that could have exposed him while her name would be cemented in history.

She was the complete stark opposite in looks to Tae Takemi, but the two of them shared the same deep level of care for their patients.

Ren gave Gentle Criminal and La Brava a firm nod.

Zoey’s smile brightened the room, “If you’ll just follow me next door.”

“We’ll go with...” Spinner and Lady Stubbs trailed after them, “Just in case!”

Zoey chuckled, “I’m not going to bite.”

Ren stared expectantly at Recovery Girl when the room was less crowded.

“Let’s get started, dearies.”

To Ren’s surprise, the first part of the check-up wasn’t so bad. Though Mr. Compress, Kaito, and Morgana watched her like a hawk as she took Ren and Eri’s height and weight, asked routine questions like if he took any medications or had other health concerns they should be aware of.

Lavenza, as usual, studied everything with calm interest.

Nezu stood by the door, analyzing every move made by either side. He seemed to find it funny that Ren didn’t *actually* need glasses, but he hadn’t worn any fake glasses since he let Giran kidnap him. He doubted they would help hide his identity at this point anyway.

Recovery girl dug through some cupboards and set butterfly needles and tubes on the bedside table, frowning as the two children froze like deer in the headlights. The others tensed. A dark look clouded Lavenza’s eyes and a palpable chill entered the room.

Recovery Girl sighed, “We can skip this part if you’re uncomfortable. However, I’d advise against it. I’ll only need a small amount to do some routine tests to make sure you’re free of diseases and certain parasites. We have your files from Kamino, Kurusu, but it never hurts to double check after what you went through.” She smiled sadly at them, “After that, we’ll be done. Your choice, dearies.”

Ren’s heart-rate picked up as he stared at the instruments. Satanael and the other Personas tried to soothed his worries, a few like Cerberus and Cu Chulainn promised absolute destruction upon the small needles.

Eri stared up at him, her doe-eyes filled with terror.

He could almost see Takemi rolling her eyes and chastising him for being afraid of something so small, especially in front of a little girl who had been so brave.

Ren cleared his throat, "It's fine." He rolled up his sleeve, still wearing the clothes Best Jeanist made him, and held out his arm, "It won't hurt that much, right?"

"I'll make it quick and painless." Recovery Girl said.

Still, Ren couldn't watch after she sanitized the area, put the tourniquet on his arm, and grabbed a needle. He focused on petting Morgana once the needle pierced his skin, unable to stop bouncing his foot or holding his breath. A strange burning and itching sensation spread through his body centered around the needle, something that started happening *after* he had escaped that interrogation room.

Takemi held an obvious sadness when she informed him it that it was most likely a psychological reaction due to what he had been through.

Finally, the needle was taken out and he could breathe again.

"That wasn't so bad." Ren forced a light tone as Recovery Girl bandaged his arm.

Recovery Girl set his tubes aside and turned to the Eri, "Ready, dear?"

Eri looked up at Ren again, her fear replaced by determination, and nodded. Still, her breath stuttered as the hero wrapped the tourniquet around her arm and reached for the needle.

"Hey, Eri." Eri focused on him, wincing as the needle went into her arm, but she didn't look away, "How about we have apple curry for dinner? Er..." Ren looked at Nezu, who studied Ren with sharp intensity, "If we could borrow a kitchen?"

Nezu's sharpness eased with a grin, "Of course! The teacher's dorms have a state of the art kitchen, and our ingredients are always

fresh with someone like Lunch Rush around! You'll have free reign of the facilities any time you need it."

"Wait," Mr. Compress tilted his head, "*Teacher's dorms* ?"

"Are we staying there?" Kaito asked with a raised brow, "... With the staff?"

Nezu nodded and tucked his paws behind his back, "Where else did you think you were staying?"

Mr. Compress shrugged, "A high security cell far away from the students, only to be let out at certain times? Is my complexion going to be ruined from a lack of sunlight?"

Nezu chuckled, "This isn't a prison! Despite being vigilantes, we'll treat everyone with respect... provided that you don't break our trust." Nezu flicked his beady eyes between Ren and the others, "It was no small matter getting my Vigilante Program approved without such barbaric things like ankle monitors and more heavily fortified sleeping quarters! I threw out the plans for Quirk Suppressants after certain..." Nezu stared at Ren, "Enlightening events."

Recovery girl shook her head as she finished Eri's blood draw, "If Kunikazu had his way, this program would never exist and you'd all be sent to Tartarus."

"Which will never happen now that he's out of the picture." Nezu chirped, "The Hero Commission would have no rights... not that they'll be a problem with Ryoto supporting us."

Lavenza chuckled, drawing Nezu's curious gaze.

"If such a place like Tartarus were to appear again," Lavenza was smiling, but it was the same smile Noir would give to Shadows moments before executing them with her axe, "Then we'd destroy it without mercy."

Nezu tilted his head, "'Appear'? My dear, it seems we aren't thinking of the same 'Tartarus'. *Our* Tartarus is a prison meant to hold the most ruthless villains in the country."

"Oh... I see." Lavenza said, though the ice in her voice remained strong, "Even so, such a place would never hold him for long."

Nezu's fur stood on end, "A threat I'm sure would be followed through to the letter."

Mr. Compress huffed, "And then some."

"All done." Recovery Girl finished wrapping gauze around Eri's arm. She held Eri's hand and placed a few gummy candies in the girl's palm, "You were so brave, Eri."

"Th-thank you..." Eri said as she popped them in her mouth, eyes sparkling as she chewed.

She offered Ren some, but he politely declined.

"Now all we need to do is wait for the others!" Nezu said.

"Actually," Ren scratched the back of his neck, "Can I see Risumi and Ayumu first?"

"Of course." Nezu said with a flick of his tail, "I'll come get you when Zoey finishes!"

Ren smiled at Eri, "Can you keep an eye on Kaito and the others while I'm gone?"

Eri puffed her cheeks and nodded.

He set her on the bed and walked towards the door. Morgana and Mr. Compress took to distracting her when he left.

"Is everything alright?" Margaret stepped up to him, her smile rigid, "I sensed Lavenza getting tense earlier."

“We’re fine.” Ren said as he tugged down his sleeve, “I’m just checking with Risumi and Ayumu before we get shown around.”

“Very well. If my presence is no longer required, then I should return to the Velvet Room.” She reached into her pocket and pressed the Velvet Key into his hands, “Don’t ever lose this key again or there will be consequences.” She ruffled his hair, “Am I understood, young man?”

“Y-yes ma’am.”

“Good.” She pulled back as the barred door appeared behind her, “Now, I better get back to Elizabeth and Theodore.” Margaret smiled at Aizawa, “After all, they promised to burn the school to the ground if I don’t return with a report before sunset.”

Both Ren and Aizawa shivered as she elegantly strolled into the Velvet Room, the door disappearing with a slam of iron bars.

“... Are they always so terrifying?”

Ren chuckled as he shoved the Key in his pocket with the orb, “Pretty much.”

Aizawa’s coffee colored eyes scanned Ren from head to toe, “The Shinsou’s are in that room. They’ve been asking for updates about you.”

“Thanks.”

He went to the room Aizawa pointed out and raised his fist to knock, but hesitated. Every time his knuckle got close to touching the door, something made him freeze up. He didn’t know how long he stood in front of the door like an idiot.

Ren glanced at Aizawa, who had leaned against the wall with his eyes closed. At least he was pretending not to notice Ren being a total coward.

The door suddenly swung open and lavender eyes rooted Ren to the spot. His heart stuttered as he and Hitoshi stared at one another for several seconds. Hitoshi had filled out with lithe muscle since the last time Ren saw him...

In front of the Raven's Nest, smiling and telling him not to worry before they left for the Summer Camp *months* ago.

Ren turned on his heel when a hand latched onto his wrist. He blinked in surprise and followed the hand up to Hitoshi's strangled expression of pain, relief, *afraid to let go again* .

"Where are you going?" Hitoshi asked.

"Uh, back to my room?" Ren said as he felt his face heat up, "I'm sure you just want to spend time with your parents and I'd be bothering you-"

"Nu uh. Stop it."

"Stop... what?"

Hitoshi flicked Ren on the forehead with his other hand. Ren squawked and rubbed the spot as Hitoshi put on a rather terrifying scowl.

"You, blaming yourself for the shit villains do all on their own. Well, guess what mister, what happened is *not* your fault and you don't need to act guilty for something none of us have any control over. That *includes* everything before my parents got kidnapped." He jabbed Ren in the chest several times, "Now shut up, get over yourself, and *get in here* ."

Ren could hardly react as he was yanked into the room, and before the door shut Ren swore he saw a proud smirk on Aizawa's smug face. Satanael, Kohryu, and the others were laughing at him within the mindscape too. Traitors. All of them.

“Akira!”

Ren was swept up in Risumi’s warm hug, a smile worming its way on his face as he hugged back.

She cupped his face as she looked him up and down, “They told us you just needed rest, but we were so worried. Are you okay? None of these heroes hurt you or anything? You’re not being sent off to a prison, are you!? I swear I’ll fight them tooth and nail if they think they can take you away from us!”

“Risumi, you’re smothering him.” The grin in Ayumu’s voice was obvious, “Let him breathe.”

She settled herself with a deep breath, then ruffled his hair and stepped back. They all looked at him expectantly.

“Y-yeah, I’m alright. I’m not being carted off to prison or anything like that.” He chuckled as a pleasant heat spread over his face and heart alike, “What about you? A-after everything that’s happened-”

“We’re fine.” Ayumu stood from the edge of his bed, “Practically in perfect health thanks to you.”

Ren blinked. Beside Ayumu’s bed was an empty IV bag, and the man himself was as pale as death warmed over. A soft breeze could knock him over. Ren looked between Hitoshi and his parents.

“... Does he know?”

“Oh...” Risumi put her hands over her stomach, “N-no.”

“Do I know what? Wait...” Hitoshi stared between them in horror, “Did something happen? Did those assholes hurt you guys!?”

Risumi winced, “You see, when your father-”

Ayumu suddenly cleared his throat and moved to hide the IV stand from Hitoshi’s view, “Hitoshi, son, you know when Recovery Girl and

that other nice doctor asked us to leave the room to examine your mother?"

Risumi and Ren furrowed their brow at the sudden change in subject.

"Uh... yeah?" Hitoshi said, worry radiating from his tense shoulders, "Is there something wrong? Is she sick?"

"No, nothing's wrong." A warm smile creased Ayumu's face when he threaded his hand into Risumi's, "You're going to be a big brother Hitoshi. We... we actually found out while we were with the villains. Recovery Girl just wanted to confirm it and make sure everything was okay."

Hitoshi blue screened.

Risumi frowned, "Hitoshi, are you okay?"

"I... I'm going to be a big brother?" He asked in a quiet, strangled voice, "Wh-when? *How*?"

Ayumu snickered, "You see, Hitoshi, when a mom and dad love each other *verrry* much-"

"No!" Hitoshi slapped his hands over his ears, "We already had the birds and bees talk and it was awkward as hell! Akira doesn't need to be put through that! Nope! Nu uh!"

Ren sputtered, and Risumi matched the sparkle in his eye with one of her own.

"It's still gonna be a while yet," Ayumu said with a nod, "And it's still too early to tell if its going to be a boy or a girl."

"I-I don't care which one it is." Hitoshi looked *elated*, vibrating with excitement, "I just can't believe it. I'm going to be a big brother!"

“We’re not counting you out either.” She grabbed Ren’s hand, “You and Hitoshi already act like brothers, I’m sure this one will be no different, Akira.”

And just like that, Ren’s heart was stabbed with an icy chill.

“O-Oh.” Ren let his hand fall out of Risumi’s.

“Hey, are you okay? You’re pretty pale all of a sudden.” Ayumu asked, eyes wide.

Ren traded a glance with Hitoshi, the excitement dying from their eyes. Hitoshi pursed his lips, his hands forming into fists. They both knew that Ren most likely wouldn’t be here to greet Hitoshi’s new sibling.

Ren shook his head as his throat tightened.

He wasn’t ready yet.

Hell, how was he going to tell *Eri*? To the other bonds he’d made in this world? Just casually mention that one day soon he’ll disappear and never see them again?

“Uh, it’s just...” Ren scratched his neck, scrambling for words, “My name isn’t Akira. That’s just an alias I made up before I worked at the Blue Lotus.”

Ayumu isn’t the only one who could switch truths on the spot.

Risumi blinked several times, Ayumu’s expression was wide in shock.

“Wait, *what* ?” Hitoshi whirled around to Ren, “This whole time you’ve been using an alias?”

“Y-yeah.” Ren stared at the floor, “I understand if you’re mad about it. But Morgana and I were all alone when we came here, we didn’t

know if we could trust anybody. I was *terrified* . Making a fake identity was what I did to help cope with our situation.”

Warm hands planted themselves on his shoulders, “We understand.” He looked up to Risumi smiling at him, “I would do the same if I were in your shoes.”

“Yeah,” Hitoshi crossed his arms, a certain realization dawning on him, “Besides, you had your *reasons* for not being able to trust people easily.”

Ayumu grinned, “Being an absolutely kickass vigilante is probably one of them.”

“Dad!”

“What? It’s true and you know it.”

Despite himself, Ren laughed, “Yeah, that was one reason. You guys aren’t mad?”

“Nah. A bit surprised, yes, but I don’t want to waste time being mad at you over something like that.” *With whatever time we have left*, went unsaid between them as Hitoshi held out his fist, “It doesn’t matter to me. I’d call you my brother no matter what.”

Ren’s eyes watered, but he smiled and fist-bumped Hitoshi.

Hitoshi frowned as he pulled his fist back, seemingly unsatisfied as he gave Ren a strange look, “Ah, screw it.”

He jumped forward and trapped Ren in in a bear hug. Risumi’s chuckle was watery as she held her boys in her arms.

“Welp, I’m not going to be left out of this.” Ayumu said as he joined in, wrapping his arms around all three of them and holding them close.

Ren smiled as he basked in the full power of the Moon and the Strength, the Arcanas shining the brightest they've ever been. He didn't know how long they all stayed like that, just holing each other, nor did he really care. *This* is what it was like to be treated as family. He'd probably miss this the most when the time came.

There was a knock on the door and Nezu popped his head in.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" He chirped as he fully stepped into the room.

"Of course not." Risumi said as they all pulled away, though her tightened tone revealed otherwise.

"Nope, you obvious didn't intrude on a private moment or anything." Ayumu said, wiping his eyes with the palms of his hands.

... Ren was honestly close to tears himself.

Hitoshi cleared his throat, his own eyes wet, "What did you want, Nezu?"

"Ah, I came to tell Kurusu that the rest of his team are waiting!"

Ren blinked, "Oh, I'm going to have to tell everyone, aren't I?"

"That's probably a good idea." Ayumu said, chuckling.

"Oho?" Nezu tilted his head, "Tell everyone *what*, exactly?"

"That Kurusu Akira is just an alias. My real name is Amamiya Ren."

"I see." Nezu beamed, "Well, I can email the teachers with this little update before we announce your arrival!"

"When are you going to announce it?" Hitoshi asked.

"During homeroom tomorrow!" Nezu waved away their flabbergasted gapes, "For now, I suggest Amamiya-san should follow me for the

tour! Oh,” He nodded at the Shinsou’s, “And Cementoss and Power Loader are working on your apartment, and will come escort you when it’s finished!”

“You’re staying at U.A.?” Ren asked.

Ayumu nodded, “Yep. Nezu was nice enough to let us stay here until we can figure out what to do about...” Ayumu cleared his throat, his voice falling, “The Blue Lotus.”

Ren’s spirits sank, “... Oh.”

“Hey,” Hitoshi glared, “What did I say?”

“I know, I know,” Ren held his hands up, “I shouldn’t be guilty about it.”

“Damn right, you shouldn’t.”

“Language, Ayumu!” Risumi elbowed her husband, “... But you’re right.”

Nezu grinned, “The new apartment is right beside the teacher’s dorms, so you’ll practically be neighbors! Of course, you’ll be able to see Amamiya whenever you wish... provided he completes certain duties first.”

“Wait, what?” Ren asked with a raised brow.

Nezu had already walked out the door, cackling.

With a sigh, Ren glanced in between the Shinsou family, “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, you *will* .” Ren froze when Hitoshi wrapped him in another tight hug, “Even if I have to hunt Nezu down myself to do so. I learned my skills from a master, you know.”

Ren hugged back, chuckling. He took one last look at the Strength and the Moon, bathed in the power they so lovingly gave him, before following Nezu out the door.

He caught up to the rat as the others waited at the end of the hall, “Nezu, what did you mean by ‘certain duties’?”

A cheshire grin spread on Nezu’s face, one Ren would come to regret every time it appeared, “Did you think I would simply throw you in a random class and leave you to the sharks?”

“Well... maybe? I’m technically not an adult.”

“No, but your unique situation calls for a higher station than just being a mere student.”

They reunited with the others before Ren could even ask what *that* meant. Nezu hopped on Eraserhead’s shoulder as easily and Morgana did with his.

He didn’t see Recovery Girl or Zoey, but heard faint movement within the student infirmary.

“Onwards with the tour!” Nezu said, cackling.

Aizawa glared, “I’m not your damn horse.”

Even so, Aizawa took the lead with Ren and Morgana at his side. Eri grabbed his hand, the other already latched onto Kaito. Mr. Compress and the others were at Ren’s back, absorbing every detail as they left the medical ward behind and into the school proper.

Lavenza stayed at the very back of the group, guarding against potential ambushes.

It reminded Ren of how the Phantom Thieves would infiltrate a Palace for the first time. Always alert, ready for any Shadows or traps or the intricate puzzle or two. He knew they were already

taking notes on camera locations and other possible security measures. As much as it hurt, Ren's heart swelled with pride.

All in all, the school was as he remembered from the Sports Festival; ridiculously ginormous hallways as big as a road, equally huge doors, and when you've seen one classroom you've seen them all. The garish cafeteria could hold hundreds of students at once, but the silence of a practically abandoned school put Ren on edge.

Aside from the emptiness, there was... something *else* .

That strange feeling lurking through the air that made Ren's teeth itch. Morgana and Lavenza felt it, by the way they craned their necks at any shadows.

Aizawa opened the last door and let them see the teacher's lounge.

"It hasn't changed." Ren stated.

"Right... because you broke into the teacher's lounge during the Sports Festival." Aizawa muttered, "I'm still surprised that you weren't caught by our security."

La Brava hid her smirk by scratching her nose.

"Well, Joker is a true master thief." Mr. Compress said with a confident nod, "No paltry security would catch him so easily!"

"Ah yes, security that has been *heavily* upgraded since then! If I may ask," Nezu glanced at Ren as they left the teacher's lounge behind, "What happened with the information you gathered?"

"La Brava put a virus on the drive." Kaito said as he kept his eyes forward, "We used that virus to destroy all evidence at the Raven's Nest after Kamino, and then everything on the drive deleted itself. You don't have to worry about that information getting out."

"... I see." Nezu said.

Ren remembered the blueprints La Brava gathered from their initial infiltration, showing several labs for Support Course students and even a gun range protected by Snipe and Power Loader. The gyms and various training grounds were on the list too, miles away from the main building.

Maybe Nezu didn't trust them enough yet, or perhaps there wasn't enough time in one day.

"Are you getting tired, Eri?" Kaito asked when the girl let go of his hand to rub at her eyes.

Eri blinked rapidly, "... No?"

"Nezu, we've all had a long day." Aizawa grumbled, "Let's call it quits for now."

"Yes... I suppose they'll get used to the school soon enough. Let's get to the dorms!"

They exited the massive 'H' shaped building and walked through the grounds, swathes of forest and gardens stretched over the horizon, cut through with elegant cobblestone sidewalks. Autumn's early sunset painted the whole grounds in a curtain of gold. If this eerie feeling wasn't rattling Ren's bones, then he would even call it beautiful.

"The Metaverse is definitely here." Yatagarasu whispered.

"Let's hope these heroes won't get in the way of our investigation." Satanael said with a deep frown, *"Such hesitation could put countless humans in mortal danger."*

"The Devil possesses unusual cunning and seems to know where our true home lies." Cu Chulainn muttered, *"But that also means he won't be fooled easily."*

*“So you’ve all noticed it as well...” Ishtar hummed, “The Devil’s talk of **trust** and **increased security** weren’t said just for the sake of it. It is both a hidden threat and a boon.”*

“We’ll have to tread carefully.” Shiva said, “To balance the hidden plans to secure our allies’ future freedom while maintaining an innocent facade will be difficult in the coming days.”

“On top of everything else we need to do.” Satanael sighed.

Ren’s shoulders sagged with renewed exhaustion.

“Are you alright?”

Nezu’s question snapped Ren out of his daze. They were standing in front of a gate to a beautiful brick building, with a sprawling yard and large porch. He could see a figure hovering at the tall windows by the front door.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Ren said.

“He kinda does that a lot.” Spinner said as he fidgeted with Lady Stubbs’ fur.

Aizawa furrowed his brow, “Is it something we should be concerned about? It’s not healthy spacing off for long periods of time like that.”

Morgana blinked and flicked his tail over Ren’s back.

“Offering a shred of truth will deepen their trust.” Satanael suggested.

“I’m fine, really.” Ren rubbed the back of his head and studied the brick building to avoid their eyes. Several other buildings like it were scattered in the distance, half covered by trees, “Sometimes my Personas just talk a lot and it takes most of my concentration.”

“Personas?” Nezu’s eyes sparkled as he leaned closer to Ren, “Is that the official name for your ‘summons’?”

Morgana looked at Ren and sighed when his partner nodded, “Yes. They are a direct manifestation of our personality, our ‘Will of Rebellion’.”

“Do you have multiple of these Personas, Morgana?” Nezu asked.

“Nope, most people only get one.” Morgana beamed proudly at Ren, “Our leader is special in being able to hold over a dozen at one time.”

“Amazing! It must take a lot of mental capability to maintain and manifest so many!” Nezu said, “And they can all speak with you at any time, whether they are summoned or not?”

“Pretty much.” Ren smiled as Satanael and the others lovingly brushed against his mind, “They *are* me as much as I am them. That’s our vow to each other; I am thou, thou art I.” Ren scratched his cheek, “Although, my vow changed to we instead of I when I reawakened my powers.”

Aizawa’s eye twitched, “I’m going to need gallons of coffee to understand any of this.”

Morgana smirked, “This isn’t even the bare basics! It gets a lot more complicated than this, you know!”

“Get used to the headache, Aizawa.” Nezu patted Aizawa on the head like he would a small child, “For now, let’s get into the dorms before the other staff explode from anticipation!”

See you on December 10th.

Also yes, I added the cake bit in the first part for you, Stella.

Next time on 'Dost Thou Even Steal Hearts?' - The teacher's 'act natural' when Ren and co arrive and there may or may not be

discussion over the USJ with a certain Devil. Maybe some coffee and Dadzawa moments as well....

Security

Chapter 83: Security

Present Mic gasped and whirled around, his arms flapping like a flightless bird, “They’re coming through the yard!! EVERYONE. ACT. NATURAL!!”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Aizawa sent the message, they’re on their way.” Thirteen stated as they set their phone on the coffee table.

“Okay everyone!” Midnight clapped her hands together, “Remember the game plan!”

“Wait, what game plan!?” Present Mic shrieked, “When was there ever a game plan!?”

“Since *yesterday* when Nezu dropped the bomb on us out of the blue.” Hound Dog growled, “But I guess you weren’t here with your radio show and all.”

“The game plan is making them feel welcome!” Midnight placed her hands on her hips as she scanned the teachers, “Mic, wait at the door and let us know when they arrive!”

“Yes, ma’am!” He saluted and scrambled for the door, where he stuck his face on the glass like a child watching the year’s first snow.

“Lunch Rush, is the pantry stocked!? We won’t stand for anyone going hungry!!”

Lunch Rush gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up.

“Ectoplasm, Vlad, have you double checked the rooms to make sure they’re ready!?”

“Yes,” Ectoplasm said, “They’re pretty bare, but they’ll be able to decorate them as they choose.”

Vlad King nodded at the row of doors facing the common room, “Nezu was smart enough to include extra rooms when the dorms were first built. Aizawa doesn’t mind being next to them.”

Each door had a name tag. From left to right they read; Aizawa Shouta - Eri - Joker&Mona - Kaito - Mr. Compress - Spinner&Lady Stubbbs - Gentle Criminal - La Brava. An additional slab was below their vigilante names in case they wanted to put their real names there. Eri’s room, per Nezu’s request, was connected to both Joker and Aizawa’s rooms in case of an emergency.

“Snipe!” She turned to Snipe, who had his face smooshed into a pillow as he lay face down on a couch, “What are you doing? We have no time to mope around!”

Snipe groaned into the pillow, “I don’t have a clue how to act around Joker... or how to apologize about what happened at the USJ. What if the kid hates me?”

“RAAAUGH!” Snipe yelped as Hound Dog lifted him up by the back of his cape and throttled him, “You had several months to come up with something and you draw blank when he’s coming here *right now* !?”

“I-I’m sorry!” Snipe floundered uselessly, “You know I’m a ‘shoot first ask questions later’ type of hero!”

“Wrong choice of words, idiot.” Vlad remarked.

Hound Dog snarled, spittle flying, “That’s exactly what put you in this situation to begin with!!”

Yagi sighed, "I feel the same way."

"What do you mean?" Thirteen asked.

"Well, I *did* punch him at the USJ because I thought he was one of the villains, and I tried to take him down in the Musutafu Raid, too. And everything else that happened with Kamino..." Yagi put a hand on his side, where his scar used to be, "Plus, *look* at me now. My quirk is gone, but I actually look like a normal, healthy person thanks to Joker. I can eat *real* food without getting sick. I can enjoy life again." A ghost of a frown came over him, "He suffered greatly at the hands of my arch nemesis and ended a centuries long war. I owe the boy a lot."

"... Don't we all?" Ectoplasm said as he shuffled his cloak, "He protected our students and rescued many people. Half of Japan owes much to this boy and his team. The least we can do is make them comfortable and safe here."

"But we'll have to keep a close eye on them regardless. They're *still* vigilantes." Vlad King muttered, "We can only guess how the students are going to react, it probably won't be calm or pretty after the announcement tomorrow. My class will probably do something stupid to get Joker's attention."

"You can leave that to me." Ectoplasm said, "My clones will be on constant patrol and Nezu upped the number of robots on campus too. We won't let anybody harass them."

"Yeah, but you shouldn't spread yourself too thin. Let us know when you need our help." Midnight's determined expression met each of her coworkers', "We're a *team*. That's never changed despite everything that's happened this year. We'll have this in the bag as long as we work together!"

A round of cheers (and Snipe's half-hearted groan) went around the room.

Present Mic gasped and whirled around, his arms flapping like a flightless bird, “They’re coming through the yard!! EVERYONE. ACT. NATURAL!!”

The teachers scrambled.

Hound Dog unceremoniously dropped Snipe face first onto the couch and sat on top of him, Vlad King and Thirteen joining in. Snipe’s muffled grunts and feeble attempts to escape were futile.

Midnight sat on the arm of the couch and struck a pose, Vlad King grumbling as her hair slapped him in the face.

Present Mic dove behind a chair.

Yagi broke out in a sweat as he rushed towards one of the open chairs, only to trip over his own feet and face plant on the ground.

Lunch Rush held two proud thumbs up high into the air.

Ectoplasm stayed where he was, facepalming.

They froze when the door swung open and the vigilante group walked in with Aizawa and Nezu.

Midnight’s heart sank when she spotted Joker with Mona on his shoulder, holding hands with a girl no older than 6. People could forget just how young he was when he was constantly blown up in the news, especially with how much power he held. Whether he liked it or not, people expected him to hold the World on his shoulders.

The others in his team were so close together that they touched shoulders, eyes alert, though confusion broke through at the scene before them.

Aizawa slowly blinked at the teachers, “What are you idiots doing?”

“N-Nothing!” Present Mic popped up from behind the chair, “Absolutely nothing whatsoever!”

“So you *didn't* swan dive behind the chair in a blind panic?” Vlad King asked nonchalantly.

“At least I didn't trip like Yagi!”

“Hey!” Yagi stood up and dusted himself off, “Give this old man a break.”

“Grrr, you're not even *that* old! What would Gran Torino do if he ever heard you say that!?” Hound Dog snapped.

Yagi flinched, “Every time he calls me a ‘zygote’ I get flashbacks of him kicking me in the face during high school. Let's not tell him.”

Thirteen pleasantly chuckled, the tense atmosphere lightening like the first flower blooming in spring.

The mysterious groans coming from beneath the three teachers were ignored.

Midnight saw her chance when the uneasiness fell away from Joker as he listened to the teachers' banter, a tiny hint of a smile on his lips. She hopped off the couch arm and sauntered over to them, keeping her movements slow and deliberate. His eyes scanned her from head to toe, but his gaze was not in the lecherous way she was used to due to her R-18 theme.

He was looking for threats. Picking apart possible weaknesses, lingering on where her hands were, her general posture, and what items were on her belt. She thanked her lucky stars that she didn't have her whip with her. All the teachers, including Snipe, left their weapons elsewhere for tonight.

“Welcome to U.A.!” She plastered on her best motherly smile as she extended her hand towards Joker, “We may not have the best history together, but I hope we can have a fresh start?”

The kid looked at her extended hand, then up to her eyes. Charm practically oozed out of him when his smile bloomed into a radiant grin and he shook her hand with a firm grip.

“Of course. We look forward to working with you.”

Any lingering tension vanished like fog in morning light. Several smiles broke out on the hero side, while the vigilantes’ relaxed under their leader’s unbreakable confidence.

“Hey Listener!” Present Mic beamed at Joker, “Your call last night really spooked me!”

Joker sheepishly rubbed his neck, “Sorry. I didn’t get you in trouble, did I?”

“No! In fact, people are still buzzing over it and my radio show got hundreds of new listeners thanks to you!!”

“He hasn’t stopped talking about it all day.” Midnight said with a smirk, then she looked down at Eri, then to La Brava and Lavenza, “Oh, aren’t you three as cute as buttons? We’re going to have so many girls’ nights-”

“*Midnight* .” Aizawa warned with a stern glare, “They don’t need your coddling.”

“I’m an adult, you know.” La Brava said as she put her hands on her hips.

Spinner chuckled and La Brava punched him in the shin for it.

“I may look it, but I am no child either.” Lavenza said coolly.

“Excuse me.” Thirteen did a headcount with their fingers, “But I think we got the number of rooms wrong? There’s an extra person....”

“Oh no!!” Present Mic screamed, “What are we gonna do!? This doesn’t make us look like bad hosts, does it!?”

Joker looked to Nezu, who shrugged from Aizawa's shoulder.

Midnight noticed how the golden flecks in Joker's eyes simmered as he studied the heroes, the doors with their names on them, and then to the tiny girl dressed in blue. He nodded, as if coming to a decision.

"Lavenza, you can go back now."

Lavenza blinked, "Are you sure, Trickster? I am hesitant to leave you like this."

"I'm sure." Joker smiled softly at her, "I'll summon you and the others if something happens."

"Very well."

The mysterious girl scanned the teachers before she walked towards the blank wall. Midnight held out her hand just as she was about to bump face first into it, only for a bright velvety flash and the sound of chains to whisk her away into the unknown.

Shock rippled through the other teachers.

"Uh, what the heck was that!?" Present Mic threw his hands up in the air, "She was there and then POOF!!"

Aizawa pinched the bridge of his nose, "A long, *long* story."

"A story which will have to wait for the time being!" Nezu stated, silencing the questions bursting from the teacher's minds, "For now, let's allow them to get comfortable and-"

A loud growling noise rumbled through the room.

All eyes fell to Joker as his face turned scarlet. How adorable! Midnight wished she could pinch his cheeks right then and there.

"Sorry. I haven't eaten since early this morning."

“Lunch Rush!” Hound Dog snarled, “How about some grub!?”

“Wait a moment!” Nezu leaned against Aizawa’s head, his black eyes glittering as he looked at the kid, “You wanted to borrow the kitchen to make curry, right?”

“Nezu,” Hound Dog’s eyes lit up with concern as he stood from the couch, Snipe’s grumble of pain forgotten, “They’re already so tired...”

“It’s fine.” Joker ran a hand through his hair and turned his charm on full blast. Color Midnight *impressed*, “What better way to forge bonds than to share food?”

“I can help with tea and other beverages!” Gentle Criminal offered with a warm smile of his own.

Lunch Rush radiated with happiness as he whisked the vigilante group into the kitchen. Curious heroes snuck in to watch and make idle chatter.

Snipe stayed where he was, groaning and smooshed into the couch cushions.

Midnight, Aizawa, and Nezu stood in the kitchen doorway, listening to the calm conversation and the sound of multiple dishes and cookware being taken out.

Joker matched Lunch Rush’s eagerness as ingredients were prepared and Gentle Criminal warmed several kettles. Thirteen eagerly waved their hands about as they talked to Spinner and Lady Stubbs about everything and nothing, while Yagi, Hound Dog, and Vlad sat across the table from La Brava, Mona, and Eri.

The only ones not actively talking were Kaito and Mr. Compress.

The pair leaned against the wall closest to Joker and Lunch Rush, watching as Ectoplasm stood close to Joker and asked him about his

favorite dishes.

All in all, nobody died or seemed insulted. She'd call it a win.

"... The kid's really grown up." Midnight whispered.

Aizawa crossed his arms, "Maybe a little bit too grown up. He's still a kid."

"Even so," The tip of Nezu's tail bobbed back and forth, "He and the others will need a lot of support in these coming days. It won't be an easy journey for any of us."

"Don't worry." Midnight whispered with a smile, "We'll have their back, no matter what."

A weird twinkle entered Nezu's eyes as he peered into her, like a knife twisting into her back, "I'll hold you to that, Midnight. I expect you to uphold your words when the time comes."

She and Aizawa blinked at the odd tone, as if she had just made a promise that went into a far deeper hole than they thought.

"I hope you don't mind me being straight forward, but can I pet Mona?" They overheard Yagi say.

"Hey!!" Mona arched his back and yowled, "Don't think you can treat me like any other feline!"

"So he really *does* talk." Vlad King muttered.

Yagi looked as if they kicked a puppy right in front of him, "But you're letting young Eri pet you?"

The girl slowly blinked, staring Yagi in the eye as she ran her hands down Mona's back.

"Come on, Mona." Joker smirked as he finished slicing dicing carrots and grabbed an apple next, "Don't you want them to know how soft

your fur is?”

“No way!”

“Perhaps Mona and I can exchange tips for taking care of our fur!” Nezu grinned as he hopped off Aizawa’s shoulder and skittered to their table, “It takes a lot of work to keep up this healthy lustre!”

Mona blinked at Nezu, “E-Exactly! At least somebody understands!”

“Merp!”

“Don’t discount Lady Stubbs!” Spinner called across the room as his own cat... thing puffed out its fluffy chest, “She works hard too!”

“Ah yes,” Gentle Criminal tapped his chin, “*None* of us can match Lady Stubbs’ grueling beauty routine.”

“Is that sarcasm I hear!?” Spinner yelled.

A round of laughter trickled through the dorm.

Midnight smiled as delectable scents made her mouth water, she had never seen Lunch Rush so excited and overjoyed to cook with someone before.

“What’s that look for?” Aizawa asked with a raised brow.

Midnight shook her head, “Nothing. It’s just...” Small ripples of uncertainty bubbled between hero and vigilante, but both Nezu and Joker’s willingness to interact with the opposite side was already working its magic, “I’m glad they’re finally here.”

Aizawa smiled as he looked at Joker, “... Me too.”

“Softie.”

“Shut it.”

His dorm room.

His first *real* bedroom in... almost two years.

Not a holding cell the night of his arrest, or the lumpy old couch his parents forced him to sleep on when he ‘couldn’t be trusted’ with his own privacy afterwards. Not an attic with a stiff mattress laid over cartons, or futons set out in an internet cafe or while hiding over a bar.

It even had a private bathroom stocked with toiletries, a decently sized work desk, a full closet, and a *window* over his bed. Glass balcony doors shed tears of moonlight through the room, leading out to an enclosed garden only the staff had access to. The walls were a soft blue. His room lacked the pizzazz the Leader of the Phantom Thieves should have, but after dinner they filled out forms for things like clothing sizes and preferences for decorations that would be picked up sometime tomorrow.

Ren had requested fairy lights and adhesive stars for his ceiling. Maybe a Phantom Thief banner to hang over his desk, which gained an unimpressed look from Aizawa.

Oh, and to test the security he used Cerberus’ fire to turn those files into the pile of ash in his bathroom waste basket, testing if the heroes would burst through the door and punish him for using his powers. Nobody did. Ren wouldn’t push it by making it obvious.

The heroes weren’t stupid though, Nezu gave them a few restrictions.

La Brava’s couldn’t have access to any device without supervision, for example.

He wondered if he’d be prohibited donning his Thief outfit or summoning his Personas during school hours, not that it would matter in case of a Metaverse emergency. They couldn’t stop him

from going to the Velvet Room or accessing the hidden cashe they set up there, either.

But despite all of this planning, any obvious breach of trust would have consequences.

They'd walk on eggshells until some sense of a normal schedule set in. They'd learn which rules to absolutely follow to the letter, which ones could bend to their favor, and which they'd have to sneak around like shadows over water.

"Such restrictions will be meaningless in the end," Satanael said to soothe Ren's tangled worry, "Phantom Thieves always triumph over unfavorable situations. Use our original Star's sharp wit, and the Sun's shining charisma, and all shall go well."

"... We can hope." Ishtar said, "Even the best laid plans can go wrong in the blink of an eye. We've learned this the hard way before."

"Third Eye revealed no cameras or listening devices in the Trickster's room, and they didn't react when those files were burned. We have a small window of opportunity here." Byakko growled, "They at least trust him that much."

"The leash may be slack, but it is still a leash nonetheless." Vasuki warned.

"Ren, are you awake?" Morgana asked.

He sighed, "Yeah, can't sleep."

"Same here." Morgana sat up on Ren's chest and wrapped his tail around his legs, his blue eyes glinting off the pale moonlight, "I can't stop thinking about tomorrow. I'm... actually kinda nervous."

Ren followed Nezu when he and Yagi left the kitchen while plates of curry were passed around, respectfully waiting a small distance

away as Nezu whispered something to Yagi. Whatever Nezu told him, the retired hero looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Nezu saw him standing awkwardly in the hall, and nodded at Yagi, "I called in a few favors. With any luck, you'll be able to see him as soon as you get there."

"Th-thank you, sir."

Yagi fled the dorm after, and Ren was finally able to ask the burning question that held the fate of multiple worlds at stake.

Nezu faced Ren with that knowing smirk on his face, "Something on your mind, Amamiya-kun?"

"When can we go to the USJ?" Ren kept an easy posture, but his eyes were as sharp as knives.

"Hmm, I was wondering when you were going to ask! I did want to wait a few days for you to rest and get acclimated here..." Nezu frowned when Ren grimaced, "But that's not agreeable to you. Why is that?"

"We don't know when something bad will happen. I want to be prepared and have a plan in place to protect the students if it comes down to a fight."

"A fight? And not 'if', but 'when'." Nezu's ears perked forward, "So my fears were correct in believing enemy forces could invade the school?"

Ren scoffed, forcing every iota of sarcasm into his voice, "Does a power-hungry god and his army of angels and demons sound friendly to you? I'm surprised U.A. hasn't been overrun by now."

He'd properly explain the term 'Shadow' later. For now, he had gotten his point across when Nezu's void black eyes sparkled with something akin to interest, shock, and a healthy dose of fear.

"I understand." Nezu clasped his paws together, "If that's the case, then we can begin our initial investigation first thing tomorrow morning."

Tension drained from Ren's body, "... Thank you. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Nezu chuckled, "Yes, I agree now that you've put this situation into perspective. We'll need as much information as possible if we are to combat this mystery together. With any luck, we'll get some answers we've been seeking for half a year!"

"Don't worry, Morgana." Ren said as he scratched behind Morgana's ears, "We'll figure this out. We always do."

"I hope so."

"Don't tell me you're having doubts now."

"O-O course not!"

"... Then?"

"I-it's stupid." Morgana's ears wilted, "I'm afraid we'll be stuck here forever. That everything we've done in this world has been for nothing. That... that we'll never see the others or find a way to get home. I doubt Yaldabaoth's been sitting around and twiddling his thumbs while we've been here, either."

Ren sighed, "I know, Morgana, I'm scared too. But we're not alone, we have a whole team here. The Attendants came here from our world, so there *has* to be a way back somehow. They'll be with us at the USJ tomorrow."

"... Yeah." Morgana's voice brightened slightly, "I told you it was stupid."

Ren smirked, "It's not stupid at all, Morgana."

They froze when a door opened. Ren activated Third Eye as he sat up and looked around the room. He spotted a glowing blue silhouette with a card floating over her head, of an angel with long flowing hair.

"Eri?" He whispered when he saw her peek from their connected doors, letting Third Eye fade, "Are you okay?"

Eri shook her head as she walked in, wearing a set of cat themed pajamas Mr. Compress got for her.

"... Can't sleep, Ren-nii." She said as she crawled on the bed and tucked herself into his open arms, "It's too lonely in my room, a-and I have a scary-bad feeling. I... I don't like it here."

Ren and Morgana exchanged glances.

The Metaverse had been crawling nonstop over their skin like chittering insects. They could only imagine what the others felt.

"Don't worry, Eri!" Morgana beamed, "Ren and I will work on taking the scary-bad feeling away!"

Eri's eyes widened, "Really?"

"We promise. Let us know if you see anything strange or scary. You just leave the scary-bad things to us, okay?" Ren said as he booped her on the nose. "You can stay in here if you can't sleep. How about we reread your favorite chapter of Arsene Lupin?"

Her eyes brightened, "O-okay!"

Ren stood, scooping up Eri as he opened the small duffel bag on his desk that he had been too tired to unpack yet. His spare clothes and whatever other keepsakes he dared keep out of the Velvet Room were in there. The book lay on top of the pile.

“You know, I wonder if the others are having trouble sleeping, too.” Morgana said, “After all, we slept in close quarters for a long time.”

Ren grinned as he held up the book, “I have an idea.”

Midnight lightly dozed on one of the many couches in the common room.

She’d never eaten so much curry in one sitting before, and multiple meals like that could potentially ruin her figure. She wondered if Joker just trained a lot or if it was just his age. Young people and their darned high metabolism.

“You alright, Midnight?”

She cracked her eyes open to Cementoss and Power Loader returning to the dorms at last.

“Just a food coma, no biggie.” She said, “How’d moving the Shinsou family go?”

“Well enough...” Power Loader said, “They thanked us for our hard work and everything, but you could tell they were sad.”

“Aww, poor things.” Midnight righted herself on the couch, “Joker’s crew aren’t the only ones we have to feel welcome.”

Cementoss and Power Loader exchanged uneasy glances.

“... And how did that go?” Cementoss asked.

“I feel bad for missing out on the introductions.” Power Loader muttered.

Midnight opened her mouth, when there was a creak nearby. Oh, right. She thought she heard some doors opening and closing while she was dozing, but she never expected-

Spinner, with arms so full of blankets and pillows he could barely see where he was going, shuffling towards Joker and Mona's room. The lizard wore bright yellow sleeping clothes that clashed with his green scales. He elbowed Joker's door open and slipped inside.

Following a few paces behind was Lady Stubbs, proudly dragging her own plush blanket toward her Leader's room. She froze mid-stride, fluffy paw outstretched, and swiveled her head like an owl at them.

The cat creature's large, ghoulish eyes narrowed, before she huffed and marched into Joker's room. Her claws scratched the door as she used her back leg to kick it shut, but not all the way.

Midnight smirked and rubbed her hands together.

"Oi, what are you doing!?" Power Loader whisper yelled.

Midnight batted at them, "Shush! I want to see what they're doing!"

Cementoss sighed, but his curiosity got the better of him too.

Lady Stubbs left the door open a crack, and Midnight held back an excited squeal when she peeked through.

The Phantom Thieves were scattered around Joker's floor in a semi-circle, all covered in their own pile of pillows and blankets. Eri was there too, wrapped up in a cocoon while Mona cuddled with her. Mr. Compress was still in costume, mask and all.

In the center, highlighted by a flashlight, was Joker. He held a black book in his hands, the golden writing on the cover glinting from the light.

The Thieves didn't notice their audience, too enamoured by Joker's fervent reading.

"Arsene Lupin, the eccentric gentleman who operates only in the chateaux and salons, and who, one night, entered the residence of

Baron Schormann, but emerged empty-handed, leaving, however, his card on which he had scribbled these words:" Joker turned the page, grinning from ear to ear as he deepened his voice, "Arsene Lupin, gentleman-burglar, will return when the furniture is genuine."

Cementoss pulled back first.

Midnight, wanting to hear more but getting caught by Lady Stubbs' scathing eyes, backed away from the door.

Power Loader shook his head, fully closing the door as quietly as he could, "Should we tell Nezu, or...?"

"Nah, leave them be." Midnight said as she stretched, "It's their first night, I think they should be allowed to have a sleepover. It's cute!"

"If you say so." Power Loader turned away and walked down the hall, "I'm turning in."

"I should too, its getting late and we have an eventful day tomorrow!" Midnight winked at Cementoss, "Night!"

Cementoss, however, was rooted to the spot, his hand on his chin as he was lost in thought.

He wondered how Joker managed to get a first edition of such an old and beloved book. The cover was new, but the pages spoke of it's age and the great care it needed to last this long.

And if it was a genuine original in its home language, then Joker translating between languages so fluently deeply impressed him.

Toshinori's new stomach churned as a guard led him through the oppressing atmosphere of Tartarus, utterly silent as they passed rows of cells housing the worst criminals Japan has to offer. He caught the quick flash of the Hero Killer's gaze in one of the cells. He was surprised any prisoners were awake, granted it was 3 in the

morning... the guards didn't look too thrilled when he showed up this late in a tizzy though.

That, or the constant bright lighting made it impossible to tell what time it was.

"Toshinori!" Tsukauchi was like a ray of sunlight as he waited in front of an elevator.

Toshinori rushed to his friend and locked both hands on his shoulders, "Is he here?"

"Yes." Tsukauchi sobered, "Shigaraki Tomura was transported here as soon as Gang Orca turned him over. He's... they've put him in *that* cell, Toshinori."

Toshinori blanched.

That cell. The one originally meant for Joker.

"Gentlemen, we're on a tight schedule." The guard droned like a robot.

"Lead the way." Tsukauchi said.

Tsukauchi and Toshinori went into the elevator. The guard turned a key into one of the panels, opened it, and pressed a button. They rode down in a long, dreadful silence. Toshinori counted over two dozen of his frantic heart beats, eventually losing track as they continued to go down. Finally, after what felt like an eternity descending into the bowels of hell, the elevator stopped and its doors opened. Several guards lined the long hallway, watching them as they approached the only door at the end.

"We can't permit you to stay long, All Might." The guard by the door said, "A few minutes at most."

"... I understand."

“Are you sure you want to go in by yourself?” Tsukauchi asked, his expression lined with worry.

“Yes. I... I need to see him alone.”

“I’ll wait here, then.”

The guards let Toshinori through.

The space was split in half by a thick glass wall. Toshinori stood in the one half connected to the door, while the other contained a form huddled over the stiff cot shoved in the corner, hands gripping pale hair. But before Toshinori could approach the cell, *he saw it* .

Sitting outside the cell was a special Iron Maiden. A wicked creation of the coldest, cruelest steel and leather straps meant to restrain someone in the most painful way imaginable. Right next to it...

Toshinori pushed down another wave of horror, his hands balling into fists.

An IV stand with a sickly green fluid-filled bag hanging from it. The translucence made it glow ominously in the soulless lighting Tartarus offered its prisoners, a testament to the vile poison that eroded someone’s whole being into nothing more than a living vegetable.

The final punishment originally meant for a *terrified teenager*.

Ryoto promised it would be destroyed, but it seems they hadn’t the time to before Shigaraki’s unexpected residence.

.... Or the guards kept it there on purpose to torment Shigaraki. Maybe they even lied and said it had been destroyed. He’d find out.

A harsh, strangled breath snapped him out of his thoughts, “*You* .”

Shigaraki stood from the creaky cot and staggered towards the glass wall. It was obvious that something within Shigaraki had died, leaving a haggard and depraved husk behind, “Come to laugh at me

like every guard did on the way down? Are you going to marvel at how the *quirkless* Shigaraki Tomura is locked down here? To throw away the key in front of me!?”

“I-”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT!?”

Toshinori didn't jump as Shigaraki beat his fist against the glass wall, his expression twisted in rage and sorrow and *pain* .

“I needed to see my master's grandchild, and offer what comfort I could.”

Shigaraki's eyes widened, “*What* did you just say?”

Toshinori approached the glass wall and put his hand on it, over Shigaraki's fist. Shigaraki lurched away as if it burned.

“You're my master's grandson.” Toshinori said, his expression set in determination as Shigaraki stared at him with a slack-jawed expression, “Nana *always* regretted leaving her son behind, and what happened to you, my boy... what All For One did to you should *never* have happened.”

“You're lying.”

“I'm not-”

“You're LYING!” Shigaraki paced a frantic circle, “I knew my grandmother was a hero, but my father *hated* her. He... she can't be the same one that trained you...”

“That's why All For One took you in the first place. It was all a ruse to get to me.”

“You're *lying* . Sensei cared about me!”

“My boy-”

“I’M NOT YOURS!” Shigaraki whirled around to him, balled fists shaking. “Leave me alone!”

"Please, Tenko-"

“LEAVE!!”

The steel door opened behind Toshinori, and the guards waited with blank, soulless expressions.

“Times up, All Might.”

Hollow sadness clawed at Toshinori's heart as his hand dropped from the glass, “I’ll come back, young Tenko. I promise.”

Toshinori turned to look before the heavy steel door shut, witnessing his master’s grandson collapse onto the floor, arms wrapped tight around himself as tears fell.

Tsukauchi was a silent anchor of support as they made their way back up to the surface. This elevator ride up didn’t seem as long, and before Toshinori knew it, he was passing by the first floor cells beside Tsukauchi.

“Who else is here?” Toshinori asked, his voice empty.

“Gigantomachia is in another specialized cell,” Tsukauchi said as he rubbed his eyes, “As is Kurogiri, Overhaul, and the surviving Eight Bullets. The rest of the Shie Hassaikai have been split between other facilities.”

“I see...” Toshinori looked at his friend, frowning, “Tsukauchi, have you slept at all since the raid?”

Tsukauchi’s expression lightened in a wry smile, “No, there’s too much work to be done. I haven’t even gotten Joker’s side of the story, let alone everything *e/se* he went through since the USJ. That’s a whole other ballgame by itself.”

“Yes, Nezu is being especially protective about the boy and his friends.” Toshinori frowned as he recalled All For One’s words about the boy being ‘not from this world’ and then Nezu’s subtle deductions afterwards. He pushed those thoughts back with a shiver, “Joker may not be ready to share everything, either.”

“I know. Maybe it’s for the best to wait for him to be ready.” Tsukauchi said as he rubbed his bloodshot eyes again, “I’m too flooded with work as it is right now and Aizawa asked for an important favor with Kurogiri-”

Toshinori stopped as they encountered another unlikely visitor.

Endeavor.

He leaned against the wall next to a certain cell, and through the window Toshinori saw Dabi; heavily restrained in a metal chair, but slumped forward and unconscious. Black marks slightly warped the chair and the faint smell of smoke trickled into the hallway.

Tartarus didn’t use Quirk Suppressants. Instead, they taunted their prisoners with their own powers, and severely punished them for using their Quirks.

Endeavor’s visible eye was cast in a thousand yard stare that passed through everyone. Bandages covered the left half of his body, mostly hidden by his hero costume. He didn’t have the energy to manifest the flames. *How* the man was even standing was a miracle, he should still be in the hospital in Toshinori’s opinion.

At the same time, Toshinori sympathized, as he was here for a similar reason.

The state of Endeavor’s first born son would remain a state secret, and Toshinori was only informed in private due to his previous status as Number One Hero. But just because it was hidden from the public didn’t mean it wouldn’t affect Endeavor or the rest of his family for a long time to come.

Tsukauchi gently grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

The oppressing air of Tartarus lightened as they left the prison wing behind, got checked through security, and into the heavily guarded entry.

“Are you kidding me!?” A familiar voice snarled by the front desk, “We’ve already had his transfer approved by the Commission! We’ve sent all the paperwork through official channels *multiple* times! How could you lose everything more than once!?”

“Ma’am, please,” The guard’s tone was as indifferent and monotone as the rest of the security in this place, “Just be patient and we’ll find your paperwork.”

“Be patient!? We’re talking about a *14 year-old boy!* How many times do Gang Orca and I have to send in the paperwork only for you to ‘lose’ it!?”

“Ryukyu?” Tsukauchi asked, eyes wide.

Ryukyu turned to them, anger softening, “Tsukauchi. All Might. What are you doing here?”

Tsukauchi gestured for her to come away from the desk. She sent a scathing glare at the guard, who yawned as she turned away and followed them out of ear-shot.

“I came to visit Shigaraki Tomura. What are you doing here, Ryukyu?” Toshinori asked.

Ryukyu crossed her arms, “I *was* trying to transfer Mustard into my care, but whenever we try to get him-” She whipped around and glared at the guard, “These assholes ‘lose the paperwork’ in order to continue tormenting a *child* !”

Toshinori swallowed. He promised he’d never let her know what was in the cell intended for Joker, lest she go down there in dragon form

and tear it apart somehow.

“We’re going as fast as we can, ma’am.” He said, yawning again while making direct eye contact.

“Why you-!” Her eyes flashed a reptilian gold, “I’ve been waiting here for *hours* and you haven’t even moved!”

Tsukauchi grabbed her arm, holding his hands up in surrender when her molten gaze turned to him.

Ryukyu deflated as she pinched the bridge of her nose, “Sorry for losing my temper.”

“It’s okay. It’s pretty late... or rather early.” Tsukauchi said with a reassuring smile, “It seems I’m not the only one who hasn’t gotten any sleep since before the raid. How are your new charges settling?”

“They’re fine.” A soft smile broke the last of Ryukyu’s anger, “They decorated the dining area of the facility last night, and after supper Gang Orca stayed up and shared stories with them as he helped them arrange their respective rooms. They’re.... actually kind of sweet, despite their past. They’ll start therapy in a few days.”

“... Would you be willing to accept other villains?” Toshinori asked hesitantly.

“Of course.” Ryukyu said without missing a beat, “Who?”

“Shigaraki.” He grimaced as she winced, “I know, I know. It may take a while, but I’m not giving up on him. I feel like it’s my duty to show him that there are other ways, that he *deserves* help. That... that he’s worthy of love. He’s my master’s grandson, after all. I can’t just leave him here to rot.”

“I see.” Ryukyu sighed, “It’ll be a long road for him, but Gang Orca and I won’t abandon him if he ever accepts our program. Take as long as you need and let me know of his progress.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded, then glanced between Tsukauchi and Toshinori, “And how’s our kid? Is he settling alright? Nobody’s been mean to him, right? I’m sorry that none of us have visited, we’ve all been so busy handling the fallout.”

“He’s fine, so are the rest of his team.” Toshinori, despite the sour hopelessness of Tartarus, smiled brightly, “He actually made curry for all the teacher’s last night, and we all ate together.” He leaned in and whispered, “The boy is already Lunch Rush’s favorite person.”

Tsukauchi playfully pouted, “Lucky.”

“I’m not surprised.” Ryukyu chuckled, before her smile crumbled and she looked Toshinori in the eye, “Tell him that we’re all thinking of him and Mona, okay? I don’t want him thinking we abandoned him or something.”

“I’ll let him know. I’m sure he’ll understand.” Toshinori said.

“Thank you.”

“Miss Ryukyu, we finally located your paperwork.” The bored guard called, “Turns out one of the new interns found them in the back of the wrong filing cabinet. Accidents like these happen all the time here.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was an ‘accident’.” Ryukyu nodded at them before she walked to the front desk.

Tsukauchi sighed, “I guess this is where we part ways. I still have work to do here.” He patted his best friend on the shoulder, “Take care of the kid for me, okay?”

“I will. Try to go home and sleep once in a while.”

Tsukauchi waved him off.

Toshinori left the dreary prison behind, determined to save his master's grandson no matter how long it takes.

Ren was the first to awake from a light sleep.

Maybe it was the strangeness of sleeping in a new place, or perhaps the Metaverse's constant ringing in his soul that kept from a deeper rest. Still, at least he was wrapped up in cozy warmth despite the hard wooden floor. He slowly sat up and worked the crick out of his neck. Pale twilight streamed in from the balcony doors, highlighting the forms of all of his sleeping teammates around his room.

Ren was still getting used to that.

His bedroom .

'Dorm' technically, but he wasn't too picky about terms.

He untangled himself from the blankets and various limbs strewn about, careful not to step on Shuichi's leg or Manami's arm. He caught Kaito's eye when he was at the door, gesturing whether or not he wanted to follow.

Kaito shook his head and stared at Eri, who was huddling her face in Morgana's soft fur. Not that Morgana minded, he was smiling in his sleep.

Ren nodded and stepped out. He shut the door silently and looked around the common area now without the noise of excited Pros. The walls bore a pleasing green shade, with floor to ceiling windows letting in the twilight. Several couches and armchairs were scattered around coffee tables and desks, providing space for teachers to work comfortably. Peaceful scenery, but tainted by the ominous presence of the Metaverse still weighing down on him.

He hesitated when he spotted the bright yellow caterpillar with Aizawa's face laying a few feet away.

“Were you there the whole night?” Ren asked with a raised brow.

“... Only a few hours. Cementoss notified me of your sleepover, and I wanted to make sure nobody bothered you or nothing went wrong on your first night.”

Kohryu happily purred in the mindscape.

Aizawa shrugged himself out of the sleeping bag and stood up, folding it neatly and throwing it on the closest couch. He blinked when Ren smirked at him, “What?”

“I’ve always wondered if you’d emerge as a beautiful butterfly some day, but it turns out you’re still the same... just with more pink.”

“Very funny.” Aizawa deadpanned, rolling his eyes as Ren chuckled at Aizawa’s hot pink sweatpants.

Ren, still grinning, turned towards the kitchen, “Coffee?”

“Always.”

Ren wondered if Sojiro would be jealous of this kitchen. These teachers had, not one, but *two* ginormous fridges stocked full of goodies, and a stove with *six* heating elements. There was enough counter space for a whole team of chefs to work, alongside an extra island with a second stove and additional seating.

He opened one of the cupboards, having memorized where everything was after Lunch Rush’s enthusiastic tour last night. A whole treasure trove of specialized appliances and various types of coffee, both expensive and cheap, filled it to the brim.

“Nezu really likes you.” Aizawa said as he sat at one of the stools on the island, “You know we never had any of that stuff before you arrived here? We always had the cheapest instant crap, but now there’s *whole beans* and coffee instruments I have no idea what to do with.”

“My condolences.” Ren said sincerely, “Do you have a preference?”

“Not really,” Aizawa squinted at the bags lining the cupboard,
“Anything you make will always be better than what I can manage.”

Ren smirked, “I’ll have to teach you how to brew a real cup sometime. Maybe one day you’ll make coffee as good as mine... maybe. After a lot of training and hard work.”

“You sound like me when I talk to my own students.” Aizawa huffed,
“But yeah, maybe.”

“Want me to show you how to use a siphon?”

Aizawa raised a brow when Ren set the siphon on the table, an odd contraption with a pair of glass containers and its own heating element that looked at home in a mad scientist’s lab. Aizawa must have noticed Ren’s excitement. He hasn’t used one in ages!

“Go for it.”

Ren grinned. He dug around and found a bag of Kona coffee - one of his favorites.

Light, sweet, and incredibly smooth with hints of fruits, nuts, or chocolate depending on how long the beans were roasted.

Ren fell into a familiar rhythm of grinding the beans, pouring the hot water into the siphon’s rounded base. He flicked on the heating element and, once the water started boiling, attached the other glass container to the top of the first one. A small string of beads from the top container floated around in the boiling water.

It would be a lie if Ren said he wasn’t amused at Aizawa’s subtle amazement as the top container slowly filled up with water, then went back down to the bottom again after the coffee was added and allowed to brew.

When it was done, Ren detached the bottom filled with coffee and poured Aizawa a mug.

“Ta da.” Ren said as he put the mug in front of Aizawa, “I remembered you like your coffee black.”

“Thanks.” Aizawa picked up the mug in both hands, inhaled deeply, and then took a sip. He sighed contently, “As good as ever, Amamiya.”

Ren blinked, “I guess Nezu sent that e-mail already.”

“He did last night. You don’t mind me calling you Amamiya? Or would you rather be called Joker?”

Ren shrugged, “Ren is fine. I suppose you’ll have to call me Joker or Amamiya around the students though, right?”

Aizawa nodded, “We can’t show favoritism, regardless of the situation.”

As Ren prepared a second cup of coffee for himself, Aizawa slowly put his mug on the counter and studied Ren with unusual intensity. It was all too familiar to one of Sojiro’s stares. A sharp pang of homesickness smothered his insides.

“What is it, Eraser?” Ren kept his smile despite the knot in his stomach.

“I want to know if you’re alright.” Aizawa’s gaze hardened when Ren opened his mouth, “And no, don’t say that you’re fine or I’ll call you out on your bullshit. Yesterday, with Ayumu. Even if he’s alive now, seeing somebody in that state takes a toll on you... more so if it’s a person you care deeply for.”

The words died on Ren’s tongue, so he focused on pouring his coffee instead. The silence weighed on Ren as he took a sip to wet his dry mouth. Kohryu encouraged him with a soft rumble.

“... It’s not the only time I brought someone back.”

Aizawa stilled, “What?”

“Native was the first. In Hosu.” Ren kept his gaze down, running a finger around the rim of his cup, “Native passed away because Stain caused a lot of internal bleeding. At that time, Mona and I didn’t even know it would work.”

“Ren-”

“And then there was that little girl I saved from the Musutafu fires. It had gotten way too hot for her to handle, and she was all curled up in that closet...” Ren’s chuckle was mirthless, “My Personas keep me from having nightmares, Eraser, but sometimes I still see them whenever I close my eyes before sleep comes. I can’t even imagine how terrible it was for Mona when he saw me in the Kamino morgue.”

“... Do your other teammates know?” Aizawa asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Mona told them about it before they revived me.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Aizawa’s voice softened further, “Do they know it still bothers you like this?”

Ren shrugged, “They have enough on their plates as it is.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“They upended their *whole lives* to help Mona and I.” Ren avoided Aizawa’s eyes, “The least I can do is make it easier for them.”

Aizawa sighed, “If you need to talk about *anything*, you can come to me or Hound Dog, or any other teacher. That’s what we’re here for.”

Ren cracked a smile, “You know you’re not the first person to tell me this, right?”

“Big surprise.” Aizawa deadpanned, “I probably won’t be the last either.”

“I know.” Ren finally looked Aizawa in the eyes, “It’s not easy for me to trust adults, but I’ll... try to work on it.”

Aizawa nodded and left it at that. They fell into easy silence as they nursed their coffee, until the next person dragged themselves into the kitchen like a zombie.

“Shouuuuuuta.” Midnight, dressed in fuzzy purple pajamas and with her hair tied in a messy bun, shambled towards Aizawa. Crooked red glasses balanced on her nose. It was a much more modest look compared to her hero getup, “I smell coffeeeeee.”

Aizawa glared when she attacked him from behind with a hug, hands feeling around for his mug.

“This is *mine* . Get your own, Kayama.”

“But Shouuuuuuta, you know I’m too clumsy in the morning! That’s why I always steal yours!”

“Clumsy, or *lazy* ?”

Ren chuckled, “Sit down, Miss Midnight. I’ll make you a cup.”

Her eyes popped open and she looked at Ren from over Aizawa’s head, “Oh, you’re such a sweetheart! Much better than this grumpy sourpuss.” She plopped down beside Aizawa, who still gave her the stink eye as he huddled protectively over his mug, “You don’t have to call me Midnight while we’re here and out of costume. You can just call me Nemuri!”

“Call me Ren.”

Her eyes sparkled as she watched him use the siphon and set a hot cup in front of her.

“Please taste it *before* you add several pounds of cream and sugar.” Aizawa grumbled.

“Ugh, fine.” She said as she warmed her hands with the mug, “I don’t get how you can drink it just straight black!”

She took a sip, Aizawa and Ren shared mutual smirks as her eyes nearly bugged out of her head.

“Oh. *Oh* .” She looked at Ren, gaping, “Where in the world did you learn to make coffee like this!? I heard rumors about the coffee from the Blue Lotus, but this is *divine* .”

Ren smiled, “I learned from a master.”

“I’m so jealous! Can you teach me?”

“Get in line.” Aizawa stated after he downed the rest of his mug, “I call first dibs.”

“Cheater!”

“It’s not cheating if he offered it to me first.”

They devolved into friendly bickering as more people trickled into the kitchen, both hero and vigilante drawn by the scent of fresh coffee. Morgana was hugged to Eri’s chest as she sleepily walked in with Kaito, Mr. Compress still wearing his full vigilante costume, and Shuichi with Lady Stubbs on his shoulder. Ectoplasm and Cementoss came in next, already in full hero gear as light chatter permeated the atmosphere.

“GOOOOOOOOOOOD MOOOOOOOOORNING LISTENERS!!!!”

Present Mic burst into the kitchen with the energy of a jack rabbit injected with caffeine, sporting finger guns and an ear to ear grin.

Aizawa groaned, turned in his seat, and wrapped Present Mic’s mouth shut with his capture weapon, “It’s too early in the morning to

be *this* loud, Mic.”

Present Mic frantically waved his arms and looked at Nemuri in desperation, but she winked at him and turned away to finish her coffee. He put his hand over his heart in mock betrayal, flopping to the ground as Aizawa rolled his eyes. Eri and the vigilantes exchanged glances, while the other teachers just laughed and continued their morning.

Must be a regular occurrence, then.

It suddenly dawned on him how... normal these heroes were. They got up early and readied themselves for work like everyone else, made jokes and messed around to make each other laugh.

That thought finally cemented itself in his mind when a stranger walked into the kitchen. Someone with short lighter colored hair with bangs forming a spiral, their eyes were like looking into the event horizon of a black hole swirling with trapped starlight.

They retrieved a carton of eggs and a gallon of milk from the fridge, only noticing his staring after they set them out on the counter. Surprisingly, a well of pure compassion and warmth radiated from their smile.

“Good morning! Did you sleep well, Amamiya-san?”

“Uh... good morning?”

Something must’ve dawned on them as their ethereal eyes widened, “Oh, you probably don’t recognize me out of costume. I’m Kurose Anan, my Hero name is Thirteen!”

“Oh. And yeah, I did. Thank you.”

“I’m glad! It’s important for someone your age to get plenty of sleep.” Kurose said, beaming. In the corner of his eye, Ren swore he saw Morgana grinning at Kurose. “Would you like an omelet?”

“It wouldn’t be too much trouble, would it?”

“Of course not! I love cooking for other people.”

Kurose went off with a bounce to their step, humming happily as they raced off for more ingredients.

Ren was stunned.

“The heroes are actually being nice? It wasn’t just a one-off act?” Ishtar said, *“This is rather... strange. And unexpected.”*

“Kurose was nothing but genuine.” Gabriel stated with a tilt to her head, *“In fact, I’ve sensed no malice at all within these heroes. Their hearts are pure.”*

“I noticed that the Hierophant didn’t use his power on Present Mic, either.” Shiva said.

Kohryu snorted, *“He knows not to use it whenever the Trickster is near, lest he accidentally harm us again.”*

“How thoughtful.” Alice remarked dryly.

“Are you alright, Alice?” Ishtar asked, *“You’ve been really quiet lately.”*

“Fine.” Alice crossed her arms and pouted, *“I’m just fine.”*

Fafnir cackled, *“She’s just mad that Upright Death is Endeavor.”*

“Shut up, you stupid wyrm!”

“I’m glad you’re getting a balanced breakfast, Amamiya! Be sure to thank Thirteen later!”

Ren jumped out of his skin and stared at Nezu. When did he hop up on the closest stool to stare at Ren? Did he do it when talking with Kurose, or when listening to his Personas? The rat bear thing was

grinning strangely again, maybe he figured out when Ren was distracted by his Personas.

"Are we going?" Ren whispered.

Nezu chuckled, "We'll get on a bus as soon as you finish breakfast, but its imperative we begin our investigation before the students start class. I suggest the rest of your team eat a hearty meal as well. After all, we don't know what today has in store!"

"A normal bus!? How lame!" Pixie complained, *"The Magician should be insulted!"*

"Wouldn't flying be faster?" Kohryu asked with a flick of his whiskers.

"Maybe next time." Ren said, *"You'd terrify the students."*

"But we aren't scary!" Cerberus whined.

"Tell that to your claws and fangs, Guardian Hound of Hell." Gabriel whispered.

Ren nodded at Nezu, who was grinning in *that* certain way again, and got to work on Eri's breakfast.

He naturally gravitated towards Kurose with a handful of apples, listening to their easy conversation as the sizzle of eggs hit a hot pan.

Eri said nothing about the apple swans looking less than perfect. He crouched next to her chair, and she looked at him in concern when he smiled at her. It wasn't a happy smile.

"The others and I are going to be gone for a little bit. Can you stay here with Kaito until we get back?"

Her breath hitched, "Y-You're not going to get hurt again, are you?"

A more genuine smile crossed his lips, “No, we won’t even be leaving U.A.”

Morgana, still in her lap, gently headbutted her chin, “We’ll be back before you know it!”

“O-okay. I’ll be good, I promise.”

“That’s my girl.” Ren gave her a head pat before he stood up.

His hands trembled in anticipation when he returned to the counter. Kurose must’ve noticed. They pushed a plate with a freshly made omelet into his hands, hiding their worry as they nudged him to go sit down with his teammates.

At long last, the sun rose over the throes of twilight and the first rays of warmth filtered through the windows. The sky gained a warm crimson glow. To anybody else, it would be a sight of beauty, the start of a fresh new day.

To Ren, he simply hoped the red morning sky wasn’t an ill omen for things to come.

Hooooooo boooooooy we finally revisit the USJ next chapter! I wonder what will happen...

The original Freedom&Security chapter had all of last chapter to the part with Midnight seeing the Thieves' little sleep over, I added the next few parts from Ark to make this one a little longer. Next chapter is allll about the USJ.

Next updates:

Ark - December 24th

Erosion - Jan 21st

Updates may be a little further apart for the time being as my health continues to go downwards. BUT!! More time between chapters means higher quality chapters in the long run, and I really want to do this last stretch of the story the best as I can. We'll wrap up all remaining plot threads while time whittles down to the ultimate showdown. I especially can't wait for the chapter when the whole truth is finally revealed. It's going to be funnnn :D

Ark

Chapter 84: Ark

Elizabeth raised her foot to punt Nezu down the long flight of stairs, but Margaret tactfully stepped in front of her and urged Nezu on with a pointed look.

Merry Christmas, ya filthy animal

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"I told you he would do something like this!"

"There has to be an explanation." Fuyumi said, but Shoto heard the doubt in her voice, *"H-he came so far! Shoto, have you heard anything?"*

"Nothing." Shoto frowned, "I haven't seen or heard from him since we got separated at the start of the raid. I even got an email from Burnin' this morning saying Nezu has canceled the work studies for the rest of the term. She never replied when I asked about Endeavor."

"That's not right!" Natsuo griped.

"I wanted to learn more about my fire but... I guess it has to wait."

"I'm sorry, Shoto." Fuyumi whispered, *"This isn't fair to you. Or any of us."*

"I'm not holding my breath on whether the bastard will ever grace us with his presence again. Don't bother letting me know when he

remembers he has children."

"Natsuo-"

*"No, Fuyumi. I'm **done** ."*

Natsuo hung up, leaving a sour silence.

"... I should get ready for class."

"Alright." Fuyumi sighed, *"I'll let you know if I hear anything, okay?"*

"I'll do the same. Thanks, sis."

"Anytime, Shoto."

He hung up and threw his phone in his bag. Shoto finished his morning routine, put on his school uniform, and left his room with his bag slung over his shoulder. He went downstairs and into the commons area.

Iida's voice boomed from the kitchen, "As heroes-in-training, you *need* a balanced diet! You can't just eat sugar every single morning!"

"Lame!!" Ashido shouted, "Just tell me where you hid the donuts, Class Rep!"

Shoto sighed, stopping in his tracks when he saw Midoriya sitting on the couch, staring off into space. He looked around, but Midoriya was the only one in here.

"Are you okay?" Shoto asked as he sat beside his friend.

Midoriya snapped back into reality with a jolt, "Y-yeah! Why wouldn't I be?"

"You've been acting weird since yesterday." Shoto double checked their surroundings again, "Just what happened down there after Overhaul was defeated?"

“Nothing?”

“Midoriya. If somethings bothering you, I want to help for a change.” Shoto deadpanned more than his normal, “You’ve helped me with my problems so many times.”

Midoriya swallowed. His eyes focused on the opposite corner of the room, “I... I figured out what Joker *really* did for Native in Hosu.”

Shoto frowned, “Oh.”

Midoriya turned so fast that Shoto was surprised he didn’t get a neck cramp, “Wait, did you *know* ?”

“... I did. I was close enough to tell that Native didn’t make it.”

“A-and you didn’t say anything?”

“I thought about telling Tsuragamae what Joker did when they debriefed us in the hospital, but that power shouldn’t be widely known.”

Midoriya bit his lip as he contemplated, allowing Shoto to continue.

“If Endeavor pursued my mother to the extent that he did *just* for her quirk, what do you think people would do if they knew the full truth of Joker’s abilities? He’s beyond powerful for sure, but bringing back the dead? That’s unheard of even for quirks.”

“... Do you think people pursued him like that in the past?”

Shoto shrugged, “We can only speculate at this point, though I think the Musutafu Raid is proof enough.”

“Yeah. I suppose you’re right.” Midoriya clasped his hands together and sighed, “I understand that some things *need* to be kept secret.”

“Are you afraid of Joker because of it?”

“I-I’ts not that I’m scared of him or anything like that!” Midoriya put his hands up in surrender, “I think I just need some time to accept it?”

“That’s fair.” Shoto looked down, frowning, “It took a few days for the shock to wear off, too.”

“To be able to do... *that*... on top of everything else he can do already. And now he’s even *more* powerful because he can have multiple summons out at once. He couldn’t do that before Kamino, a-and his costume is different! I wonder if his costume correlates to the amount of power he can use?”

“Midoriya”

“H-he can summon it at will too, so is it just another aspect of his power? Where does it go when he’s not wearing it? Just what else *can* he do? What are his new limits? How did he create *new* summons we haven’t seen before, like Fafnir and Baal?”

“Midoriya.”

“They really do have their own trains of thought, considering they all worked together against Overhaul. Not to mention how each has different and incredibly powerful defences and a whole range of powers. How does Joker decide which one gets what abilities? How does he-”

“*Midoriya* .” Todoroki snorted when Midoriya clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Was I muttering again?”

“You were.”

“Sorry.” Midoriya’s hand dropped and he glanced at Shoto with uncertainty, “Listen, I know you and Iida had a talk about Kamino, and what Joker went through after.”

Todoroki winced, “How?”

“After Kacchan and I got in trouble, he asked Nezu questions and said he overheard you two talking about it. I don’t blame you for not telling me! That’s just as hard of a topic as seeing that part of Joker’s power in person.” Midoriya grimaced as he lowered his voice, even though the common room was empty, “But Nezu confirmed that Mona used the same power on Joker and mentioned a morgue... I just can’t even imagine...”

Shoto’s heart twisted, “Kamino took a massive toll on him. More than people will ever realize.”

“Y-yeah.”

They sat in silence, absorbing the information shared between one another.

“Who did he use that power on?” Shoto asked after a few more seconds, “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Shinsou’s dad. There’s something else, too.”

“What?”

Midoriya held up his hands, “My scars are gone.”

Shoto’s eyes widened, “All of them?”

He nodded, flexing his hands several times, “I have full range of motion again, like before I started at U.A.! The joint pain is all gone, a-and my other scars, like the one I got from the battle with Muscular, are all healed too.”

“Does Aizawa know?”

“N-not yet! I was going to go to Recovery Girl later so she can confirm that everything’s okay.”

Todoroki hummed, “He healed all of us when he healed Miruko, right?”

“Right.”

Shoto ran his fingers over his own scar, “Then I wonder why I still have this, when Miruko’s arm was healed and your scars are gone?”

“It confirms a theory I had for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are different degrees of healing.” Midoriya held up three fingers, “The first degree: Weaving lights forming a heart shape that healed our immediate injuries. The second degree, the one Mona healed me with after we defeated Overhaul: A concentrated whirlwind of energy that healed all of my injuries *and* my past scars. I bet this is the one Joker used to heal Iida’s brother, too. The third degree: Revive. We... we know how that one works.”

“That makes sense... wait...” Shoto sat ramrod straight, “I just realized something.”

“Huh?”

Shoto looked at Midoriya with the utmost seriousness, “If your injuries from the Sports Festival are healed, then I’m not the Hand Crusher anymore.”

Midoriya blinked twice, and then burst out laughing, “N-Not that Hand Crusher thing again!!”

“My hands are finally clean,” Shoto looked down at his palms as he sagged in relief, “I promise to never crush someone’s hands ever again.”

Midoriya laughed harder, wheezing for breath as he collapsed against the couch arm.

Iida swooped in from the kitchen, chopping an arm at Midoriya, “What’s with all this racket!? We don’t want to be too loud and disrupt other peoples’ morning routines!!”

“I-Iida! Todoroki... he’s...” Midoriya’s face turned bright red as he fell into another laughing fit.

Ashido popped her head in, “Wow, Todoroki! What did you do to Mido!?”

Todoroki turned to them, his expression gravely serious, “Nothing. I simply told him that I’ve been absolved from being the Hand Crusher.”

A beat of silence. Then, to Ashido’s startled surprise, Iida burst out laughing too. The both of them didn’t calm down until a majority of their classmates came down for breakfast, watching the chaos from the sidelines in utter confusion.

Ren’s heart pounded as he stared up at the USJ.

They were but tiny specks in front of the enormous doors, faint memories of sirens and being dragged by police skirted his memories, paired by burning pain from a bullet ripping through his shoulder. A flash of green eyes had tried to reach out, but the finality of slamming cruiser doors cut off any attempt to save him.

Ren took a deep breath to steel his nerves, though it came out shaky.

“Are you okay, Amamiya-san?” Thirteen, despite being in full costume now, kept their warmth and compassion from this morning.

“I’m fine.” Ren stated with a shake of his head, “Just... processing things.”

“R-right.” Thirteen cleared their throat, “Can I ask why we’re here, Nezu? This trip was so sudden.”

“I am also confused.” The Ectoplasm clone said as he smoothed a wrinkle in his cloak, “I figured the bad memories would be too much for them to handle.”

Mr. Compress scoffed, “Don’t underestimate our leader, hero.”

The Ectoplasm clone bowed his head, “I didn’t mean to offend. I’m only concerned for everyone’s health and well-being.”

“I said I’m fine.” Ren said gently, “I can do this.”

Nezu sighed airily, “Very well, Amamiya. Ectoplasm, Thirteen, I promise to give you answers in time, but I’m afraid that the Phantom Thieves and I will be entering the USJ alone.”

“Alone? But...” Thirteen hesitated when Nezu gave them an encouraging grin, “Well... alright. The various zones have been deactivated, so you can take as long as you need to. Come get us if there are any complications.”

The Ectoplasm clone sighed, “We’ll wait on the bus.”

Nezu waved them off. Thirteen’s gaze lingered on Ren a few seconds more before they followed Ectoplasm.

Morgana shared his leader’s anticipation, along with excitement and palpable impatience. It was like standing in front of a new Palace for the very first time, stocked full of unforeseen challenges. They hoped there weren’t any enemies waiting in the shadows. Quite literally.

Ren took another deep breath as his Personas brushed against his mind, “Okay, let’s go.”

The others followed his lead as the massive door opened on its own. The entryway sprawled out before them, wide enough to hold

several dozen people, and Ren spotted the arch above the long staircase leading down to the plaza.

Ren stepped into the threshold.

Satanael gasped at the sudden surge of Metaverse energy,
"Trickster-"

A blinding flash of blue erupted around Ren and Morgana. Shrieks and startled gasps came from behind as the pyre withered away into ash. Joker looked down at his costume. Mona's Metaverse form clung to his shoulder.

They stared at one another with impossibly wide eyes.

"A little warning next time, Buddy!" Spinner yelled as he put a hand over heart.

Thirteen and the Ectoplasm clone rushed out of the bus from the commotion, but was stopped by Nezu holding up a paw, staring at Joker and Mona as they were as still as statues.

"... Joker?" La Brava asked, hands clasped together.

Joker closed his gloved hands, then looked over his shoulder to see everyone standing right outside the threshold. Their Thief Outfits manifested by themselves, but it doesn't look as if they were teleported to a different dimension. Joker locked eyes with his partner once more.

"Joker... This is... how can-"

"I don't know." Joker grimaced, "Can you sense anything?"

Mona hopped off Joker's shoulder and pranced forward, vibrant colors rippled from his footsteps.

"It's here. I feel it." Mona whirled around to Joker, eyes glowing with determination, "It... it feels almost like-"

“The heart of Mementos. Yaldabaoth.”

“... Yeah.” Mona closed his eyes, took a breath, and concentrated. After a few moments he scowled, “Damn it, I still can’t directly tap into the Metaverse. What the hell is going on here?”

Behind them, Nezu gestured for Thirteen and the clone to go back in the bus.

“Care to explain what this ‘Metaverse’ is?” Nezu clasped his paws together and walked into the USJ, staggering a step as his fur stood on end, “Oh my.”

“It feels like...” Spinner rubbed his arms and shivered when he and the rest of the team stepped inside, “Like...”

“Like someone just walked over my grave.” Mr. Compress said solemnly as he massaged his temples, “And with a sudden headache from hell to boot.”

“What is this hopeless atmosphere?” Gentle Criminal’s eyes widened as he turned to Joker and Mona, “Why did your costumes appear so suddenly?”

“Our Thief Outfits would only appear if we’re considered hostile.” Mona said as he crossed his arms, “And since our costumes just appeared without us summoning them ourselves....”

“Then *something* considers you hostile.” Mr. Compress said.

Gentle Criminal clutched his chin in thought, “Ah, so that’s why the two of you wanted to come out of costume, while you told the rest of us to be properly armed?”

“With the special gear you gave us.” La Brava added.

“That’s right.” Mona said, “With any luck, they’ll be able to protect you just in case any Shadows show up.”

Joker looked at Nezu as he tilted his head in a silent question. With a curt nod to Mona, they explained the bare basics of what the Metaverse was, what Shadows were, and how they would access the Metaverse in the past.

“Hmmm, but something must be sorely wrong, then.” Nezu said, “Without this ‘MetaNav’ and with Mona’s innate ability not working...”

“Yeah,” Mona frowned, “Something’s definitely not right here.”

“Let’s bring in the Attendants and get started with our investigation.” Joker reached up to his neck, where the Velvet Key was tied with a silver chain.

Joker summoned the Velvet Room door and tucked the Key back into his costume, where it hung right over his heart. The soft light of the Velvet Room provided some comfort as all four Attendants joined them.

Lavenza’s expression hardened, “The Metaverse is much stronger here.”

“Where is that stupid false god?” Elizabeth cracked her knuckles with a dark smirk.

“Elizabeth...” Theodore sighed.

“Have patience.” Margaret said serenely, “Joker and Mona deserve the first shots, at least.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, “Fine.”

Joker ignored them and walked to the edge of the staircase.

His breath caught as he had forgotten just how *huge* this place was. The central plaza fountain sparkled in the artificial light, and the surrounding forest was cut through with stone pathways leading to the various zones. *Each* zone was as large as a city. Hell, some of

them *were* cities, like the downpour and conflagration zones containing natural disasters within domes of their own.

There was a lake with a yacht floating in it.

A whole Mountain and a Landslide zone stretched the left side of the USJ, with the last zone being nothing more than a ruin, a broken pile of rubble that could have been a bustling city. The pure destruction reminded Joker of the horrors from Kamino.

“Just how much money does it take to maintain this place?” La Brava asked, expression slack with shock.

Nezu grinned, “We’re lucky to have many generous sponsors from hero agencies and other anonymous individuals!”

“That doesn’t answer the question!” Spinner cried.

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs joined in.

“Stick together,” Joker’s order cut through the banter, “Lavenza, Mona, we’ll take point. Elizabeth, Theodore, Margaret, protect the others.”

“We’re not helpless.” Mr. Compress said cordially.

“I know you’re not helpless.” Joker faced them, his deep frown and sharp amber eyes leaving no room for argument, “But Shadows cannot be hurt by any normal means. We don’t know if your quirks will even work against them, either. I ordered you to bring gear made from my Personas because it could be your *only* line of defense if you encounter a Shadow by yourself.”

“We’re taking this so seriously because we don’t want anybody to get hurt.” Mona said as he bounced in place, “Joker and I can’t afford to screw this up.”

“We understand.” Gentle Criminal said, his eyes softening.

“Yeah!” Spinner put his hand on his belt, where one of Mona's old scimitars hung, “We’ll be careful, but just say the word and we’ll have your back!!”

“Merp!!”

Joker smiled as he looked at Mr. Compress, who deflated with a sigh and a firm nodded.

Joker took the first step past the blue arch over the stairs, Mona and Lavenza shadowing him.

Theodore walked behind the rest of the Phantom Thieves as they followed behind, while Margaret and Elizabeth exchanged glances when Nezu rubbed his paws together.

“Did he say that their equipment was made from his Personas?” Stars appeared in Nezu’s black eyes, “But how is that even possible? Does it have something to do with the Velvet Room, I wonder?”

Elizabeth raised her foot to punt Nezu down the long flight of stairs, but Margaret tactfully stepped in front of her and urged Nezu on with a pointed look.

Ten...

Thirty....

Sixty...

Joker lost track of how many stairs they climbed down before they reached the bottom.

“Should we spread out to cover more ground, Trickster?” Ishtar asked as a few others shifted uneasily around the mindscape.

“Go ahead, but be careful. Come back if you see anything dangerous.”

Azure sparks fluttered around Joker as Ishtar, Yatagarasu, Pixie, and Alice seamlessly entered reality. Joker was taken aback. It hadn't been *that* simple before. There was always a certain amount of concentration he needed to anchor them, but right now it was as easy as breathing or blinking.

The Personas went separate directions; Yatagarasu took off towards the lake, Pixie to the mountain region, Ishtar to the decimated city, and Alice trotted happily towards the Conflagration Zone and disappeared into the foliage.

"Are you okay?" Mona asked as they crept closer to the central fountain, "That was *four* of them at once. You could only safely summon three before."

Joker checked over himself, "I feel fine. I don't even have a headache."

"Several of your bonds have strengthened considerably in the last few days. That, paired with defeating the Reverse Aeon, has granted you an immense boon of strength." Lavenza said with an elegant nod, "But even so, it would be wise to continue your training and deepen your remaining bonds to grow stronger still."

Joker snorted derisively, "Let's get through today first."

They spread out around the plaza, postures tense and alert. Mona suddenly gasped, stopping in his tracks.

Joker stopped in front of the fountain, frowning, "What's wrong?"

"That Treasure-like feeling I keep getting..." Mona walked full circle around the fountain, craning his neck to and fro, "It's the strongest I've ever felt it *right here*, but it's still fuzzy, like its being protected by something. I don't see anything, either. Not even a formless cloud before a regular Treasure would manifest."

Joker suddenly remembered Skull's idea of a Palace being protected by a barrier, back when they first tried to get into Shido's Palace. He hoped it wasn't the case here. That just wouldn't be fair at this point.

"Could this 'Treasure' be the fountain?" Nezu asked as the rest cautiously approached.

Mona hopped onto the bottom tier and peered into the water, "I don't think so. I'm not sensing anything special about the fountain itself."

Joker spread his senses to the scattered Persona, "*Anything suspicious?*"

"This city is empty. I sense no Shadow activity." Ishtar said as she perched on the corner of a ruined building.

Yatagarasu landed on the rim of the yacht's bow, "*I do not see anything within the lake, either.*"

"Nothing over here but lame rocks!" Pixie stated.

"How boring," Alice whined, "*This place isn't even on fire...*"

"There must be something here. The air feels... wrong. Shifting in a way I cannot explain." Satanael said, "*Perhaps our sixth sense will uncover what cannot be seen.*"

Joker touched the center of his mask as he activated Third Eye-

Joker inhaled sharply.

His whole world was painted blue, but the edges of his vision undulated with kaleidoscopic patterns shimmering with blues and greens, a harmless phenomena common within the Metaverse. Then, something *moved* above the fountain, creeping like a shadowy tendril in the corner of his vision.

He slowly looked up, not comprehending what he was seeing.

It was as if someone took a knife to fabric, ripping a single thin line that floated mid-air. It was pitch black in the way of a black hole, devouring any light that dared to touch it, with hints of purple around the edges reminiscent to Kurogiri's portals. The bottom tail floated serenely over the top of the fountain, while the top end reached all the way to the USJ's ceiling.

The longer he stared at it, the stronger the chill that overcame his body. It was like peering into a bottomless pit of hopelessness. Something that his mind could barely comprehend.

"Joker, what is it!?" Mona asked when Joker went white as a sheet, "What's wrong!?"

"I... I don't know..."

His other personas returned to him the instant his emotions flared.

Satanael stepped into reality, wings fluttering as he rose into the air. He hovered in front of the thickest part of the anomaly, no wider than the width of Satanael's hand.

"The very fabric of reality has been torn here, hidden from mortal eyes." Satanael slowly reached out to it. Icy pins and needles sprouted on Joker and Satanael's hand when the Persona touched it. Satanael closed his eyes to concentrate, "The Metaverse's presence is leeching through here... but I can't sense its origin through the strange void separating it from us. It's oozing Distortion into this facility like a diseased wound."

"Perhaps it was inflicted when Yaldabaoth first banished the Trickster and the Magician here." Margaret said with a delicate frown, "And has been leaking Distortion into this world since the start of Joker's new journey."

"Hmmm," Nezu rubbed his paws together, "That would coincide with the strange energy readings I've been getting since the USJ attack."

Theodore's eyes narrowed at the place where Satanael touched, "It likely started small, but grew over time as the boundaries between worlds gradually weakened to such an extent."

"Wait!" Satanael's eyes snapped open, and Joker, through his true other self, felt the same strange tangles of energy flitting through the void within. Three bright strings of golden starlight leading deeper into the blackness, vanishing as fast as they had appeared, "I thought... I sensed something else, but whatever it was eludes me now."

Nezu clutched his chin as the gears turned in his mind, while the other Phantom Thieves exchanged glances.

"Satanael, can we do anything from our end?" Elizabeth asked, "Perhaps we can open it and look within?"

Satanael looked at Joker, who nodded.

The Persona forced his hand into the tear, wings tensing as he pushed through. The strange sensation travelled up Joker's arm, fire and ice dancing on his nerves. Nothing happened. Satanael shifted so that he gripped the edges of the black void with both hands, clawed fingers dipping into the darkness. With a strained grunt, he tried pulling it apart.

The sound of breaking glass burst throughout the USJ, white cracks spreading through the air around where Satanael gripped. The USJ shifted. The kaleidoscopic colors of Third Eye changed from blues and greens to a sickly yellow.

The hair on Joker's neck stood on end, and as he looked around, the shadows around the treeline stirred. Lazy and slow as a slumbering dragon.

"Satanael, stop!!" Joker shouted.

Satanael lurched backwards with a flap of his wings, staring at his hands as trails of smoke swirled around his palms before sinking back into the tear. Yellow turned back to blue, the shadows went still, as if falling back into a deep sleep. The white cracks slowly disappeared as the invisible wound sealed itself back together.

“This gate is firmly closed.” Satanael whispered as he lowered himself, his boots hovering inches above the ground beside Joker, “Perhaps, if I were to return to my true size, I could open it by force and see what lies within.”

“Wait, you can do that?” Spinner asked.

Satanael nodded with a small smirk, “Yes. I’ve only adopted this current size as to not hinder the Trickster.”

“That would be unwise.” Lavenza said as she crossed her arms, “Messing with it seems to draw unwanted attention. Forcing it open right now may lead to an attack by Shadows.”

“Or worse yet,” Joker grimaced, “Yaldabaoth himself.”

“Yaldabaoth.” Mona startled, “I wonder...”

“Wonder what?” Joker asked.

“I’ve always sensed a Treasure-like thing that’s being ‘protected’ by something, and that feeling has grown stronger and stronger every time I came to U.A. I don’t think the Treasure is in this world yet.” Mona’s eyes hardened as he stared at Joker, “This is just my gut feeling, but I think I’m sensing *Yaldabaoth* himself from the other side. What if this sensation’s only grown stronger because *he’s* grown stronger?”

“The Holy Grail.” Lavenza’s eyes widened, “The Distortion born from the will of the masses... he himself is a Treasure and the Ruler of Mementos.”

“That bastard.” Joker growled under his breath, “He’s been playing with us this whole time, knowing we can’t do anything about it.”

“Would you be ready to fight Yaldabaoth at this moment in time?” Nezu asked, his tone light, but there was an edge to it that Joker didn’t like.

“No.” Joker glared up at the tear, “Not without knowing what would happen if we forced it open. Satanael barely touched it and it almost summoned Shadows. We’re underprepared and...” He turned to Mona, frowning, “We don’t know what would happen to the other worlds if we forced our way. I won’t risk putting them all in danger until we get more information.”

“*Multiple* worlds.” Nezu whispered to himself, grinning from ear to ear. “How exciting!”

“So what, we’re sitting ducks until Yaldabaoth gets off his arse to do something?” Mr. Compress asked.

“Not necessarily.” They all stared at Nezu as he hopped up onto the fountain next to Mona, “Instead of brute forcing our way through, how about we... coax it? Slowly draw it open without calling Yaldabaoth and his army of Shadows down on us all at once?” Nezu looked at Joker’s chest, where the Velvet Key lay hidden, “... Perhaps it would be easier if we had our own key?”

“You mean the Meta-Nav?” Mona said, ears drooping, “Maybe it would work if we had the keywords, but we’re sunk without them. And the phone broke *because* the Meta-Nav overloaded it. What would happen if we fixed it and turned it on, and then it drew Yaldabaoth here?”

“We could quarantine it in the Velvet Room.” Margaret suggested. “It would be safest there.”

“That could work. If we open this thing on *our* terms, attract a lone Shadow or two in the process and not a whole army...” Joker’s eyes

widened, "Then we could interrogate it and get information that way. Information about what's happening at home, information about our friends and the other worlds..."

Nezu's beady eyes gained an uncomfortable glint, "And we'll need such evidence to convince the other teachers of your origins. Sharing the truth with them would be easier with undeniable proof."

"... And we *do* need to tell them." Joker said as guilt swam around his heart, "Especially if we drag hostile forces here and try to access other worlds. We'll need all the help we can get."

"It may be as difficult for them as it was for us." Gentle Criminal sighed, "The more evidence we have, the better."

Spinner scowled, "As long as they don't throw us in a loony bin first."

"But where should we even start?" La Brava asked, "It didn't need the Meta-Nav to act up before, right?"

"I believe it has opened once already." Nezu stated.

"When?" Joker asked.

"Why, during the Red Rain!" Nezu beamed as the others gaped at him, "With this newest information, I believe that the Red Rain was Yaldabaoth finally gaining full access to the other worlds. Perhaps he only had a fraction of this power when he first banished Joker and Mona here."

"Why didn't he attack then?" La Brava asked as she looked at Joker and Mona with a taste of fear, "You've said that he had a whole army of these Shadows."

Joker sobered, "Maybe the first Red Rain was just a test."

Mona's eyes widened, "A test?"

Joker's heart sank as he glowered up at the giant wound, "To see if he could exert the full power of Mementos through this thing. Maybe he's just using this time to muster up his army. If that happens, then we've already lost."

"I don't think all hope is lost." Nezu said, "In fact, this could be an opportunity!"

"Spit it out then." Elizabeth said, glaring at the rat, "What do you intend to do?"

Nezu's grin returned with a vengeance, "How about we beat Yaldabaoth at his own game?"

"How in the world would we do that?" Mona asked, "We can't even touch this thing without drawing attention. We can't take the chance of the whole school being overrun by Shadows by not thinking this through!"

"Quite." Nezu nodded, "In truth, the readings from the Distortions reached their highest peak right before the Red Rain occurred... after a certain event where two students displayed an incredible amount of heightened emotions."

"Nezu, who were they?" Joker asked, "We should keep an eye on them, just in case."

"Bakugo Katsuki and Midoriya Izuku."

"The Tower and the Chariot." Joker muttered, "Two powerful Arcanas."

Nezu's ears flicked, "Indeed. I believe the main cause of their altercation was what happened at Kamino." Joker paled as Nezu's gaze intensified, "Bakugo had been bottling up everything since the disaster, thus leading to such an intense outburst."

Joker cursed under his breath.

“Heightened emotions... Cognition... Distortions...” Mona crossed his arms, brow knotted, “It’s all connected.”

Theodore’s expression grew more concerned, “Powerful emotions can grow into Distortions themselves, if left unchecked.”

“Distortions which then blossom into Palaces.” Lavenza said.

Joker whirled to Mona, but the not-cat shook his head, “I don’t sense any separate Palaces in U.A., and I doubt there are any outside the school if it’s all concentrated here.”

“The Magician is right.” Lavenza said as she put a hand on Joker’s arm, “Palaces shouldn’t form as long as Yaldabaoth doesn’t gain complete control of this world.”

At that, Joker relaxed.

“As for how we’ll begin opening the gate-” Nezu looked at the watch on his wrist, “We’ll be getting a baseline about how emotions of the student body will affect it as a whole.”

“And why’s that?” Joker asked.

Nezu looked up with that signature grin, “Homeroom will start soon, and the teachers are announcing your arrival here. Perfect timing, wouldn’t you say?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, “Joker, keep an eye on the gate and let us know if anything changes.”

Joker nodded, and carefully watched.

Hitoshi was used to the whispers and stares at this point.

Here he was, after having said goodbye to his parents in their own little apartment within U.A. walls, walking with his head held high as every single student in the whole school watched him. Hitoshi grit his

teeth as the whispers slid over his skin like silk and countless eyes dogged his every footstep.

It was pretty annoying.

But still, his good mood would not be ruined today. Reuniting with his *best friend*, who totally kicked villain ass and rescued his parents *again*, was probably the best thing that ever happened to him. Well, second only to finding out he was going to be a big brother.

Rumors and questions spread like wildfire the closer he got to his classroom.

"Where do you think Joker went after the raid?"

"I don't know, maybe the heroes arrested him and threw him in Tartarus."

"Nu uh! I thought Nezu's program prevented Joker from being thrown in jail!"

"Are Shinsou's parents okay? The villains were probably nasty towards them..."

"I heard a rumor that Joker is at U.A."

"What!? If that's true, then why hasn't he shown his face yet!? Or made an announcement on Spotlight!? People are going nuts!"

"The teachers have been acting weird since Friday..."

"Yeah, I mean who locks every student in their dorm for an entire day!? That's so messed up! I was sooooo bored."

"You should totally go ask Shinsou about it! I bet he knows!"

"NO WAY! I-I'm not going to pester Joker's protege! You do it!"

And on and on and on .

He spotted Monoma, along with a few of his 1-B cohorts, following him. They thought they were being sneaky by holding themselves back in the crowd, but their whispers and blatant stares gave them away. Hitoshi stopped dead in the hallway and stared them down. Monoma flinched, sweat visible on his forehead as Hitoshi glared, *challenging* them.

One of the 1-B boys Hitoshi didn't know the name of whispered something to Monoma, who hesitantly nodded and turned away. Good thing too, because Nejire lurked close by, scaring students away with a too-wide smile and obnoxious questions.

His radiant confidence made the other students scamper out of his path as he bee-lined to his classroom. Hitoshi's classmates went dead silent as he opened the door and went inside, all staring as he went to his desk and sat down.

He leaned back in his chair, stilted conversation returning after a few seconds. He stayed like that until the bell rang and all students rushed to their seats.

The door opened and Cementoss walked in carrying a clipboard. Class 1-C sat on the edge of their seats as he stood at the podium. Cementoss made eye contact with him.

Hitoshi braced himself as Cementoss sighed.

"There are a lot of announcements to be made this morning," Cementoss said, "Please remain calm until I'm finished with everything. You can ask questions afterward."

Hitoshi couldn't help but wonder what his best friend was doing as Cementoss began reading from the clipboard.

Aizawa threw open the door to Class 1-A.

“Alright everyone, get to your-” He blinked when every student was seated, eyes forward and alert, “Good. You’ve finally learned not to waste time.”

His eyes roamed over the students who risked life and limb in the raid just yesterday. He wouldn’t blame them if they needed another day or two to recover, but he was proud that they pushed themselves to attend class today.

Aizawa walked to the podium and dumped his clipboard on it, “Alright, listen up. There’s a lot to go through. First off, the Cultural Festival is coming up.” Excited whispers broke out, but a flash of Aizawa’s quirk silenced them, “The Sports Festival was your time to shine as heroes-in-training, but the Cultural Festival gives other classes the chance to get some of the limelight. Iida, Yaoyorozu-” The pair straightened, “Discuss with the rest of the class and let me know what 1-A will be doing by the end of the week.”

“Yes, sir!” Iida said, chopping his arm.

“Of course, Aizawa-sensei.”

“Any questions so far?”

Kaminari’s arm shot up, “So we can do anything for this festival!?”

“Pretty much, as long as Nezu approves of it.” Aizawa droned.

Asui raised her hand, “When is the festival, kero?”

“Once you know what your class will be doing, you’ll spend the next couple of weeks setting it up while balancing classes and hero training. The Cultural Festival will be at the end of the month, so don’t slack off. It’ll also be open invitation, so any family members, friends, and heroes from across Japan are welcome to come.”

More excited whispers broke out, some randomly throwing out ideas or who they would invite. All settled down when Aizawa cleared his

throat, turning to the next page of announcements. Aizawa stared down at it, frowning.

Dead silence spread through the classroom as Aizawa read and re-read the next announcement to himself.

“Aizawa-sensei?” Yaoyorozu frowned, “Is everything alright?”

“Of course.” His clipped tone stated otherwise.

Midoriya sank in his seat, and the others from the raid exchanged knowing glances. Bakugo’s eyes were narrowed as he pinned Aizawa with a glare. Most others kept their mouths shut but wore similar expression of concern.

“What I’m about to announce is being told to each and every class. There will be strict rules to follow on *both* sides. There will be no exceptions.” The tension skyrocketed as the students put on serious faces, some leaning forward. Aizawa decided to bite the bullet and get it over with, “Yesterday, after the raid you no doubt saw plastered all over the news, Joker and his team surrendered. In other words, they turned themselves in to U.A. They’re here on campus right now.”

“I CALLED IT!” Ashido screeched as the other students exploded with various reactions.

Kaminari jumped out of his seat, “HE’S REALLY HERE!?”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!” Hagakure said, waving her arms wildly.

“I wonder if I can get an autograph!?”

“Are we gonna see his creatures!?”

“I want to fight one!!”

“Sero has a death wish...”

Midoriya sank further in his seat as he exchanged a glance with Todoroki.

Bakugo's eyes went wide and he was surprisingly silent, gripping the edge of his desk with white knuckles.

"Quiet." Aizawa's quirk flared to life, his hair floating around him. Once everyone was seated again, he continued, "As I said, there are rules. First rule, and probably the most important; No student will be allowed to harass Joker or his teammates. *Especially* since one of them was a past member of the League. They came here with a clean slate, and will be treated as such unless they do something to warrant mistrust or punishment."

Uraraka raised her hand, "Um... which class is Joker being placed in? What will the the other vigilantes do since they're adults?"

"D-don't forget the two cats!" Koji said.

Kirishima beamed, "Aniki is totally ours! Right, sensei!?"

"... I'll get to that." Aizawa grumbled.

He wondered how Nezu was going to tell them about their roles here. Aizawa himself was surprised at first and almost objected, but the rat had a few good reasons and was as stubborn as a mule about it.

"Alright, second rule-"

"-Second rule; Joker's summons will be allowed on school grounds granted he has permission from Nezu. If you see any of his summons out and believe he may be going against this rule, then please ask a staff member. The same goes for the other vigilantes' quirks-"

Amajiki looked at Hado as she eagerly danced in her seat. Stars burst through her eyes while his other classmates were too slack-jawed to react.

“Third rule is similar to the first!!” Present Mic shouted with a blinding grin, “The Phantom Thieves will stay with the rest of the staff at the teacher’s dorms!! I don’t want to see any of you Little Listeners hanging in front of the staff dorm without a good reason, you dig!? Like the first rule, we won’t allow any harassment, but same goes for the other way around too! If any of the former vigilantes try to hurt you in any way, then go to a teacher and we’ll take care of it!”

Present Mic doubted the vigilantes would willingly threaten the students in any way, shape, or form, but it was clear a few kiddos were worried as their tense shoulders relaxed.

Midnight licked her lips as she absorbed the shock, awe, excitement, and slight hints of terror across her homeroom.

“Fourth rule!” She cracked her whip, “Whenever you see one of the vigilantes working alongside a teacher, then you will give them the same respect as you would that teacher. They came here *willingly* to change their outlook on life, and that takes a lot more guts than most people realize! Discrimination will not be allowed just because of what they might have done in the past!”

Monoma slammed his hands on his desk, “Vlad-Sensei, all I’m asking is that we get first dibs for once! More so because my hero name *is Phantom Thief* !! I *obviously* have a special connection with Joker that those losers in 1-A don’t have-”

Vlad King pinched the bridge of his nose as Kendo chopped Monoma’s head.

“Last thing.” Aizawa stated, “Yesterday, Joker revealed that his real name is Amamiya Ren, as ‘Kurusu Akira’ was just an alias he created. Depending on the situation, you will refer to him as either Joker or Amamiya unless he says otherwise. The same goes for the other vigilantes; don’t bother them about their real names unless they’re willing to share them with you first.”

Aizawa took a breath, and looked up to see many pale faces.

“Damn, dude...” Kaminari muttered, “That takes some real good acting skills to use an alias for so long!”

“Language, Kaminari.” Aizawa droned.

“An alias...” Midoriya looked down at his desk, “I wonder why he created one?”

“Think of it this way,” Aizawa said, drawing many eyes to him, “Undercover pros use aliases all the time to protect themselves, as well as their friends and family members. It would be too dangerous to walk into a villain’s den and flaunt your *real* name.”

“To protect himself and others, huh?” Kirishima bit his lip, “Man, he must’ve been so scared if he had to use an alias up until now!”

“Or brave!” Ashido said, “I can’t even imagine what he must’ve been through to even come up with a fake identity like that.”

Yaoyorozu frowned, “His first appearance was at the USJ. If he never worked with the League of Villains, then I wonder what circumstances landed him there in the first place? Was he... escaping from something?”

The whole class paused at the horrible thought, and looked at Aizawa for an answer.

Aizawa sighed, “I don’t know his full story yet, and you won’t either until Joker is ready to share his past.”

The room stewed in another short bout of silence.

“Aizawa-sensei,” Asui raised her hand, “I understand these rules and why he chose to use an alias, but you still haven’t said what Joker and the other vigilantes will be doing here, kero. I’m assuming Joker will be put in a hero class, since he’s younger?”

“I agree with Monsieur Kirishima!” Aoyama said as he struck a pose with radiant sparkles, “Joker will shine best with someone like Moi!”

“But our class is already full!” Iida shouted as he chopped both arms, “And besides, I believe he is a year or so older than us!”

“Yes, he is older than most first years.” Aizawa shuffled his papers as hope died on a few of his students’ faces, “However, he’ll still be included in a classroom setting. Joker and his team will be-”

“Any changes?” Nezu asked after several minutes in silence.

The gate rippled, and Joker felt the oppressive forces grow stronger for a split second, but everything went back to normal. As normal as a giant gateway splitting reality could get, anyway.

“Not really.” Joker frowned as he let Third Eye fade, letting the horrifying thing disappear from view, “It wasn’t enough to make any significant difference.”

“I see.” Nezu hummed.

“Is it the quality or quantity of emotions that matter most, I wonder?” Gentle Criminal mused, “There are hundreds of students at the school and that didn’t affect it in the slightest.”

“The key to first Red Rain could have been extreme quality,” Nezu flicked his tail back and forth, smiling at Joker, “But my plan will utilize vast quantity!”

Joker raised a brow, “How? If hundreds of students didn’t make it budge, then...?”

“U.A.’s Cultural Festival is coming up! Think of this; All students in high spirits as they perform with their classmates, and of the hundreds, no *thousands*, of people who would come for the festivities!” Nezu looked up and down at Joker, “*Especialy* if a star vigilante and his Personas put on a spectacular performance of their own!”

“You want him to WHAT!?” Mona looked as if he was a hair’s breadth from shoving Nezu into the fountain.

“We are *not* show animals to be paraded around!” Satanael’s wings trembled, “Nor should we risk so many innocent lives on a mere whim!”

Joker opened and closed his mouth as a tide of uncertainty washed over the mindscape, fueled by Satanael’s ire.

“Think of it this way,” Nezu continued, “If we were to use this vast quantity of emotional energy as a cover, we may be able to interact more directly with this anomaly. Perhaps we could use the Meta-Nav to open it. Silently crack it open just a hair, rather than kick it down with force.”

Joker looked between the Attendants, “Would that work?”

“... You’re not seriously considering this?” La Brava asked, eyes widened.

“Yeah!” Spinner threw his arms in the air, “That’s a *lot* of people we’d be putting in danger!”

“Not to mention trying to manipulate thousands of people doesn’t sit well with me...” Gentle Criminal murmured.

“Security would be greatly improved, and I plan on inviting Miruko, Hawks, and dozens of agencies into the mix to help out.” Nezu peered into Joker’s eyes, “And it is a known fact that Personas like Kohryu can change the weather. If another ‘Red Rain’ does occur, then we can disguise it as one of his abilities.”

“It would put Joker in the spotlight,” Mr. Compress ran a finger under his hat, “And if his performance is half as inspirational as he is normally day to day, then it could stir up an immense amount of emotional energy. It’s just what we need for a cover.”

Joker felt his face heat up as the Attendants traded glances.

“We may not have any other choice.” Margaret said after a moment of thought, “If there’s a slim chance that this may work, then we must take it.”

Theodore nodded, “It was a one way trip from our world to here. If we use this prime opportunity... It could go far in reaching our ultimate goal.”

Lavenza stared up at the invisible gateway, “If we study how Yaldabaoth controls the fabric of these realities without drawing notice - perhaps, even learn to *wield* it ourselves...” She faced Joker, eyes set in determination, “Then we may be able to reach out to the other worlds in which your teammates are trapped, Trickster.”

“Without tipping Yaldabaoth off. He doesn’t seem to know that we’re here, otherwise he would’ve done something already.” Elizabeth added with a sharp smirk, “And after we can plan our counter attack on the dumb rust bucket. He’ll be in for a Last Surprise.”

Joker and Mona exchanged wide-eyed glances, similar wells of hope rising in their hearts.

“Assuming, of course, that this all works in our favor.” Gentle Criminal whispered, “Our plans have not always gone accordingly.”

Joker glanced at Nezu.

“The way I see it, we have three options.” Nezu held up his paw, lifting one finger at a time, “One; Sit around and do nothing until Yaldabaoth attacks in full force, ultimately leading to our end and Yaldabaoth’s victory. Two; Brute force our way through the gate *now*, and risk the same thing. Three; Manipulate the masses on U.A. grounds as cover, use the Meta-Nav to crack it open, possibly trigger another Red Rain and attracting a few Shadows to interrogate. I believe we all know which one to choose.”

Mona crossed his arms and looked at Joker, “He has a point, you know. We need a plan of action first, time to prepare and lay down the trap.”

Joker shrugged, “We don’t really have a choice. Let’s do it.”

“Then its settled. We have around three weeks to prepare.” Nezu clapped his paws together, “I suggest we return to my office and hammer out a solid plan from here on out. We’ll also have to discuss your new positions at the school as wards of my Vigilante Program!”

“Then... I guess we’re done here for now.” Mona said halfheartedly.

Joker pursed his lips. Satanael said nothing as he returned to the mindscape, stewing in a sour cocktail of emotions.

“There’s actually one more thing I want to do.” Joker shoved his hands in his pockets as Nezu raised a brow at him, “Retrace our footsteps of the USJ attack, starting with the Squall Zone. Mona and Lavenza will come with me.”

“... Very well.” Nezu said, “Shall the rest of us wait here, then?”

He nodded. They separated as Joker turned to the blue dome painted with rain clouds, Mona and Lavenza trailing behind him. The giant door, the one he remembers wrenching open in their initial escape, had been rebuilt, and was already open.

True to Thirteen's word, the dome was inactive, though the 'sky' was dark and broody and there were puddles of water scattered over the damp pavement. No fresh scent of rain graced them, rather it was stale and musty. Thick humidity pressed down on them, accompanied by the *drip drip* of raindrops on concrete.

Mona shivered as they walked through the empty streets, "This place sure brings back memories."

"Several fake cities specifically made to train children..." Lavenza's said as they passed the empty buildings and into a small maze of alleys, "This world continues to boggle the mind in ways I never imagined."

Joker snorted, "And there are still whole gyms and other facilities like this all across the school grounds. Can you even imagine trying to infiltrate a Palace *this* big? I thought a space station or a super sized yacht was too much."

Mona groaned, "It was bad enough that one school was turned into a perverted castle. I don't want to do another Palace at a school this large."

"What do you think U.A. would be? An amusement park, maybe?" Joker said, "That's what I thought this place was when we first arrived. Otherwise I don't have a clue on what any Keywords would be for the Nav."

"... Let's not jinx it." Mona said as they came to a stop in an uncannily familiar alley. Mona crossed his arms as Joker knelt and ran a gloved hand on the pavement, "This was where I woke up in my other form and saw you laying there, Joker. I was so terrified and confused. I couldn't even hear Mercurius and I was pretty much powerless until after we got captured."

Lavenza looked downtrodden.

Mona shivered, “Mercurius says he feels bad for not being there at the start.”

“It’s not his fault. Being thrown into a new Sea Of Souls weakened your Personas greatly, for a time.” Lavenza put an arm around Joker’s shoulder, the other around Mona, “Despite the unfair trials you were put through, you did exceptionally well. You found new strength to fuel you, bringing you higher than ever before. I’m so proud of you both.”

Joker’s eyes watered as his face warmed with a genuine smile, “Thanks, Lavenza.”

Mona sputtered, but didn’t resist. Joker slowly raised his arms and hugged back, holding Lavenza and Mona close to him. The three of them spent several seconds within each other’s arms, hesitant to let go even within the solitude of a damp alley.

Lavenza gave one last squeeze before they separated. She cleared her throat and turned her head away, masking the action of wiping watery eyes by fixing her butterfly headband.

“Why did you want to come here, Joker?” Mona asked softly, though his eyes were wet as if he held back tears.

“To see how far we’ve come.” He shrugged, “I wanted to revisit where we started in this world. Maybe we’ll end our journey here at the USJ, too. So much has happened between now and when we first woke up here.”

“Yeah,” Mona looked up and down the alley, “It’s funny, so much time has passed and yet it feels like just yesterday.”

Joker rubbed his neck, “... Let’s get back before we worry the others.”

Joker walked the same path they took at the very start of their second journey, imagining Dark Shadow and Tokoyami chasing them

across the rooftops, of his wild desperation as he tried to open the door. Satanael grimaced when Joker tread over the spot where his previous self defended against Dark Shadow with the last of his strength.

The others watched them as they emerged into the plaza, where Joker suddenly stopped in his tracks. He looked around the facility.

He first summoned Seth here, healed Aizawa, got sucker punched by All Might. Met Midoriya, Asui, and Mineta for the very first time. Cerberus shivered with phantom pains from when Todoroki unknowingly exploited Cerberus' fatal weakness to ice. Joker looked down at his feet, then to the entrance all the way at the top of the staircase.

He had stood *right here* when Snipe's bullet went through his shoulder. His blood had long been cleaned from these stones, but the first splatter of bloodshed would always be an invisible stain. Everything afterward was a hazy blur until he pulled himself together in that interrogation room.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Joker turned fully towards the stairs, "Let's go."

The group solemnly followed with Joker's change in mood, climbing up the steps in silence. When Joker was about to leave, however, Margaret stopped him by grabbing his shoulder.

"We Attendants need a quick word with Joker and the Magician." She said as she looked over the others, "The rest of you please wait outside."

Nezu blinked, the gears cranking away in his mind as he wanted to ask *why*, but Mr. Compress pushed everyone on.

"We'll be waiting on the bus." Mr. Compress said, wagging a finger.

They visibly relaxed when they stepped out of the USJ, and Joker and Mona watched them board the bus as the Attendants stood behind them.

“What is it, Margaret?” Joker asked when they were alone.

“We can permanently anchor a Velvet Room door here.” Margaret said.

“We’ll keep watch over this place from here onwards.” Theodore said with a nod, “Just in case.”

Lavenza smiled, “You’ll be able to come through this specific Velvet Room door, even from another in a different location.”

“Wait,” Joker’s eyes went wide, “We could *teleport* between the doors this whole time!?”

“No, you dork,” Elizabeth playfully poked Joker on the forehead, “Not back in our world, as the rules of reality there were a lot more solid. But here...” She waved her hands around the USJ, “They are lax because the boundaries are so weak. I rather enjoy being able to cheat for once.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Each Attendant can anchor a single permanent gate,” Margaret said as the door appeared behind her, just out of view of the main entrance, “It may be wise to place the other three in strategic locations, such as your dorm room or within the main school building.”

“And don’t worry,” Theodore smiled as if sensing Joker’s sudden concern, “We won’t allow the door to appear for students or any teachers. Not just anybody will be able to waltz into the Velvet Room unchecked.”

“We should return before your teammates get impatient,” Lavenza said as the door opened, “See you soon, Trickster.”

Theodore went in first, followed by Lavenza and Margaret.

Elizabeth snickered, “Oh, and we’ll be working you *extra* hard now that our goal is in sight! I’ll kick your ass if you think you can slack off from your training!”

Elizabeth pranced into the Velvet Room as Joker winced. The door firmly shut, half fading into a ghostly apparition of itself, but it was still there.

“... They’re gonna kill me, aren’t they.”

Mona sighed, “Let’s just go.”

“Hey, that’s not an answer!”

Joker sulked, but followed Mona outside. As expected, their Thief Outfits disappeared the moment they stepped out of the USJ, dull cinders floating to the ground around their feet.

Morgana jumped onto his shoulder as the others watched from the bus window.

“Is everything alright?” Nezu asked when they boarded, sitting cross legged in one of the front seats, “The others...?”

“Everything’s fine. They went back for now.”

The Ectoplasm clone and Thirteen exchanged obvious looks of confusion as Ren plopped down between Spinner and Thirteen.

With a wave of Nezu’s paw, the Ectoplasm clone started the bus and they began the trip back to the main school building.

Ren leaned against the window, watching as the USJ faded into the distance.

'You've been Christmas Caroled, bitch!' is my new favorite line from a holiday movie.

So yeah, we do have a little set-up to do before they act on their plan, but there will be plenty of character interactions in between, from warm and fuzzy to very intense and just about everything in between. Shite's about to get real now that we're down to the wire in term of story. It's going to be fun :)

Erosion - January 21st

Talk - February 4th

Erosion

Chapter 85: Erosion

Morgana apparently had enough tomfoolery, and opened his mouth to berate the rat-

When Nezu threw up his arms, the tea flying into the air only to land back into the cup with a small splash. Not a drop was spilled... somehow.

I find it funny that most everyone thought that Akiren is doing some sort of song and dance routine for the Cultural Festival. Considering that's literally exactly what Class 1-A is doing(with really no incentive to change it on top of me pretending that the Persona dancing games never existed) I'm not going to go down that route with Joker.

No, I have something very different in mind :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!!

[DANESHIRO NOOO](#)

"I can't believe he's still here." Ren said as he held Admiral Feesh in front of him, smiling at his bow tie.

"Why, of course!" Nezu beamed from his desk, "I consider it a gift, after all!"

Mr. Compress made himself comfortable on one of the couches, studying Nezu's office with a keen eye, "That event is practically cemented in history. Heroes, completely fooled by the *genius* red herring of a new rising star of vigilantism."

"Totally!" Spinner cackled as he plopped himself down next to Mr. Compress, "That red herring is what inspired me to start saving people on my own! If it wasn't for that.... I would've chosen Stain's ideology over Joker's, probably would've joined the League too. I'm so glad I didn't!"

"Merp!"

"Oh, yeah! I wouldn't have found Lady Stubbs either!!" Spinner nuzzled her as she purred in his arms.

"Spinner..." Morgana whispered from Ren's shoulder, the lizard man smiled at the awe in Morgana's voice.

"It was surprisingly simple to throw off the signal." La Brava raised her chin in pride, "Seeing heroes covered in glitter was totally worth it."

Nezu chuckled, "Don't mention glitter around Tsukauchi or Aizawa. They still have nightmares about it!"

"No regrets." La Brava deadpanned.

"Indeed! Now, before we get down to business, would anyone like a cup of tea?"

Ren set Admiral Feesh in the chair in front of Nezu's desk, then sat down in the other one next to it. Morgana naturally climbed down from Ren's shoulder and settled in his lap.

"Which tea do you prefer, Nezu?" Gentle Criminal said with a bright gleam to his eyes.

“Usually Oolong or Ginseng, but I do have a wide variety stored for any occasion!”

“Would you happen to have Golden Tips Imperial, by any chance?”

“Oho! I do, but I’ve never had the pleasure of brewing any for myself.”

Gentle Criminal gestured to the tea set on the table against the wall, “May I?”

“But of course! I’ll always oblige a fellow tea enthusiast! I store the extra tea in the cupboard next to the table.”

Ren exchanged an amused glance between the rest of his team. Nezu cleared his throat while the delicate *clinks* of porcelain and the familiar soft aromas graced Nezu’s office.

“I suppose we should get the easiest thing out of the way.” Nezu said as he reached into one of his desk drawers and pulled out a box, which he set out on his desk.

Ren raised a brow when Nezu opened it, leaning forward to get a glimpse inside, “Phones?”

“How else would we keep in touch? U.A. is rather large, after all.” Nezu nodded as he plucked one out and held it up, “Each of you will get one.”

La Brava tilted her head, “I thought I couldn’t request any tech of my own?”

“Without *supervision* .” Nezu clarified as he waved it back and forth, “These phones are programmed by yours truly, with the latest apps and every convenience of modern technology! I’ve already added the contacts of each staff member, as well as each of your new numbers between one another. You can add new contacts at your discretion!”

“What about my original phone with the MetaNav?” Ren asked.

Nezu frowned, “The way I see it, that phone is an important tool to our predicament, not one for pleasure. I’ll email Power Loader about repairs for it, but I trust you to be *responsible* for keeping it quarantined in the Velvet Room until its needed. As you said, there are multiple worlds at stake and we can’t afford to be careless. Are these terms suitable for you, Amamiya?”

Ren firmly nodded.

“Uh, these phones look nice and all, but why are you giving them to us so easily?” Spinner said.

“Yes,” Mr. Compress clutched his masked chin, “That’s a lot of freedom for vigilantes fresh into this program. Surely there’s a catch.”

“They’ll be heavily monitored by myself and other staff members. We’ll be immediately notified of any illegal tampering.” Nezu’s beady eyes peered into Ren’s silver and gold, “I *am* showing a lot of trust because I’m expecting it in return. Remember this privilege can just as easily be taken away.”

“The leash is slack, but it is still a leash nonetheless....” Vasuki reiterated.

Ren met Nezu’s grim seriousness with a determined mask of his own, “I promise we won’t abuse them.” He stated before turning to look at his teammates, “Isn’t that right, everyone?”

A sudden realization flickered between the others. If they broke this promise cemented by their Leader, then *he* would probably get the blame, or possibly punishment before the phones would be taken from them.

La Brava nodded, “Alright, already. You don’t have to be so serious.”

“Well, I for one, can agree that these amenities are a lot better than what we would get in prison.” Mr. Compress said jovially.

“Yeah!” Spinner grinned at Lady Stubbs, “I hope you don’t mind if I fill mine up with pictures of Lady Stubbs!”

“Merp!”

Ren gave Morgana a similar look, the not-cat accepting his fate by rolling his eyes.

Nezu handed the first phone to Ren, with one extra to give to Kaito later. The others came around to the desk to get theirs, before retreating to their various seats around the office to check them out. Ren immediately made a chatroom and sent a cat emoji, grinning when multiple *pings* rang out.

“Really, Ren?” Mr. Compress said in exasperation, “You might as well have just thrown Mona right at us.”

“Hey!”

At that moment, Gentle Criminal served the Golden Tips Imperial tea.

Nezu took a sip of the golden liquid, his tail waving, “Hmm! I can see why you enjoy this tea! Subtle, yet complex and delicate at the same time. It’s a shame I’ve never tried it until now.”

“Thank you.” Gentle Criminal beamed as he joined La Brava on the couch opposite to Spinner and Mr. Compress, “It’s always a pleasure to watch others enjoy your hard work.”

Mr. Compress looked into his cup, refusing to take off his mask to enjoy it while the others nursed theirs.

Nezu gently swirled his teacup, “Well, I suppose we can’t doddle on the next topic: Your roles here at U.A.!”

Ren's hand tightened around his cup. The others, sans Mr. Compress, stopped drinking to stare at him. Morgana sharply flicked his tail as Nezu remained silent for several moments more, a grin breaking through his facade. The tension in the room could be sliced and served on a platter as an additional refreshment with Gentle Criminal's tea.

Morgana apparently had enough tomfoolery, and opened his mouth to berate the rat-

When Nezu threw up his arms, the tea flying into the air only to land back into the cup with a small splash. Not a drop was spilled... somehow.

"Teacher's Assistants!!"

Mr. Compress facepalmed as Ren's eyes widened.

"Teacher's Assistants?" La Brava raised a brow, "Not what I was expecting."

"What the heck are we supposed to do?" Spinner said, his jaw slack, "I don't have any experience as a teacher!"

"I am *not* going to teach a bunch of hero brats." Mr. Compress growled.

Nezu beamed, "Well, of course not. That's why you'll simply be *assistants*, and be properly trained to fit the role. Of course, since you're in my Vigilante Program, there will be additional lessons with hero laws, morals, and other such things humans hold in high regard!"

Gentle Criminal cleared his throat, "So, are we all assigned to certain teachers, or is it random?"

"Certain teachers, though there will be no problems switching things up when needed. I was originally going to do aptitude tests for each

of you, but I've gotten a good grasp on your personalities already." Nezu nodded to Gentle Criminal, "With your inherent kindness and ability to brew calming teas, you'll be assigned to Hound Dog to help with students who seek his counseling. Spinner will switch between Power Loader and Snipe because of his fondness for weapons and his technical ability. Mr. Compress, with your vast knowledge of linguistics, will aid Cementoss and Present Mic in their respective classes!"

Ren could *feel* Mr. Compress scowl under his mask, his teacup groaning dangerously in his grasp. Gentle Criminal and Spinner exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"La Brava will aid Midnight, Ectoplasm, or Thirteen."

Ren straightened when Nezu's eyes landed on him last. They entered a long staring contest, the curiosity of his Personas bubbling within his mind. Morgana squinted after another bout of silence.

"You, however, are a special case, Amamiya."

"How so?" Ren asked.

"You are the Leader of the Phantom Thieves, the infamous vigilante who stole the heart of the whole country, a 'Jack of All Trades' in terms of abilities. But it cannot be overlooked that you are also a minor." Nezu set his teacup down and laced his paws together, "With that in mind, while being an assistant to the Hero Course, or trading off with other teachers when needed, you will also be my personal student!"

Ren's jaw dropped as the others held similar expressions.

Nezu's smile turned genuine, "Despite your unusual circumstances, I wish to continue your education as much as possible. Have you studied at all since you arrived in this world?"

“I... well...” Ren scratched the back of his neck, “Mona and I looked up the basics of what happened at the dawn of Quirks, but nothing else.”

Morgana scoffed, “Continuing school wasn’t in our agenda considering we got thrown across space and time.”

“Of course.” Nezu relented, “I’m not blaming you for your unusual circumstances.”

“I forged some graduation certificates for homeschooling.” La Brava said, “Just so nobody would come after him while he searched for a job.”

Nezu hummed, “Ah, but forged certificates will do you no good once you return home, yes?”

Ren and Morgana winced.

“I... guess he has a point?” Morgana said.

“What do you have in mind?” Ren asked.

“Simple!” Nezu grinned that same terrifying grin, “I’ll have you do tests over the next few days to get a grasp of where you are academically, and make my own personalized curriculum for you from there. After the Cultural Festival is over with and we enter the next stage of our plan, you’ll spend your mornings with me, have an hour and a half for free time and lunch, then your afternoons will be scheduled for your Teacher’s Assistant duties until the end of the school day! After that, you may do as you please around campus or at the USJ if needed, given that proper permissions have been granted.”

“Tests. Great.” Ren muttered, “It’ll take a bit to get back into the swing of schoolwork.”

“What about Kaito?” Spinner asked. He shoved his hands under Lady Stubbs forearms and held her in the air, “And Lady Stubbs and Morgana! They cant help teach a class!”

“Merp!”

“Hey, I’m fine with teaching people thank you very much!” Morgana griped, “Who do you think taught Joker about the Metaverse in the first place!?”

“We discussed it before the Shie Hassaikai raid.” Nezu smiled softly, “He offered to be Eri’s main caretaker along with the other staff members. She’ll also get a personalized curriculum to begin her education and have sessions with Aizawa to help control her quirk. Mona and Lady Stubbs will have to be with a teacher or one of you during school hours. As for the rest of you, we’ll begin your TA training first thing tomorrow.”

“So early?” Gentle Criminal traced his facial hair with a gloved hand, “That’s not too soon, is it?”

“The earlier we start, the easier it will be for the students to get used to your presence here. The last thing I want, especially for Amamiya and Mona, is to be mobbed by curious students due to surprise appearances. I want this to be as easy as can be for everyone.” Nezu pleasantly smiled, “Also know that I spread you evenly among the teachers because I want mutual trust gained on all sides.”

“And the Attendants?” Ren asked, “I don’t think Elizabeth would enjoy being around the students... without scarring them too much.”

Mr. Compress chuckled, “That would be entertaining to watch.”

“I’ll leave them to your discretion, Amamiya. The teachers were rather vocal in emails demanding an explanation about Lavenza’s ‘disappearance’ last night.” Nezu stared at Ren, his head tilting, “Though I suppose they’ll guard the USJ?”

“Yeah, in case Yaldabaoth tries something before we’re ready.” Ren frowned, “But with that said... I’m wondering why *you* haven’t asked for our full story yet, Nezu. You somehow put the pieces together about us being from a different world, saw the Velvet Room for yourself, along with everything that happened on our visit to the USJ.”

“I was honestly expecting you to interrogate us.” Morgana said, wrinkling his nose.

“Yes, I’ve had ample time to come to terms with it since the Kamino incident.” Nezu rested his chin on his still laced paws as flickers of surprise went through the iconic pair, “But I’d rather hear your full story at the same time as the rest of the heroes who’ll be in the know. Only explaining it once will be easier for all parties.”

“I suppose your plan for Joker during the Cultural Festival will lead up to that?” Mr. Compress asked with a wave of his gloved hand.

“Indeed!” Nezu looked around the room, eyes landing on each of the Phantom Thieves before locking onto Ren once more, “You’ve been to a Cultural Festival before, correct?”

Ren nodded, “We’ve had one at my school a few months before Yaldabaoth banished us here.”

“Excellent! Do you think you could come up with some sort of act, separate from the rest of the classes?”

Ren turned his thoughts inward.

“I still don’t like the idea.” Satanael glowered.

“Oh come on, sour puss!” Pixie cackled, *“It could be fun!!”*

“I’ll have to be present, in case we trigger another Red Rain by accident.” Kohryu hummed, *“Which means no normal building could contain us. Unless its of gargantuan size.”*

Alice sourly fidgeted with the hem of her dress, *"I'm sure the rat Devil will do anything to make it happen."*

"And U.A. has more than enough space and resources to go around," Gabriel said cordially, *"I believe we can pull off something spectacular no matter the venue. We just need to come up with a plan and practice accordingly."*

Satanael scowled.

Byakko huffed chilled air towards Satanael, *"Come now, Demon Dad Of Doom, it would be in the spirit of the Phantom Thieves and your past self to blow mere mortals away with a jaw dropping performance. Combining our skills into such a show will be child's play."*

Cu Chulainn smirked, *"And we could use it as a sort of training, utilizing all of our skills at once to come up with any number of combo attacks for Shadows."*

"How-hee exciting-ho!" Black Frost cackled.

Satanael sighed, long and drawn out, *"Fine. Trickster, simply request ample space somewhere and we'll... figure something out."*

Ren stated as such to Nezu.

"Consider it done!"

"But what would we do when Joker is performing?" Mr. Compress said, "Surely you don't expect us to sit on the sidelines?"

Ren frowned, "Maybe La Brava and Gentle Criminal could do a live-stream showing off the festival." He looked at Spinner and Mr. Compress, "You two could back up the Attendants at the USJ."

"I'll station teachers and trusted heroes like Hawks and Miruko there as well. It'll add more vital witnesses for our case." Nezu hummed when Ren frowned, "That is, of course, if you have the spare

armaments? You stated before that quirks may not be viable against Shadows, but weapons and armor made of your Personas are.”

Ren leaned back in his chair, mentally going over the list of meager supplies.

“I wouldn’t have enough as is.” Ren looked at Mr. Compress. The man crossed his legs and tilted his head, as if knowing where the boy was going as he turned back to Nezu, “Making weapons and armor would be costly. I can summon my Personas back from the Compendium Lavenza carries, but they’re not free. We’re talking hundreds of thousands of yen to make sure the everyone’s properly armed and ready. There’s the possibility of me getting stronger Personas, too. I’d rather have a full stock and have everyone protected from Shadows in one go.”

Unknown to the rest of them, Mr. Compress held a devious smirk under his mask. Extorting the top hero school for free gear and Persona Fusion, while saving themselves money for their eventual escape? He couldn’t help the swell of pride in his heart.

“I see.” Nezu’s eyes flicked to his computer, “I can allocate resources for our war fund. After all, if there’s any possibility that we have to face Yaldabaoth and his army of Shadows in the future, I would rather be as prepared as possible.”

“Sounds like a done deal.” Ren said with a grin.

“I agree. With this, it seems we have the makings of a plan for the USJ.” Nezu said, nodding, “Also there’s something else you may have neglected to account for.”

Ren stiffened, “What?”

Nezu shook his head, “Like I said before, you’ve practically stolen the hearts of countless individuals in this country. What do you think will happen when you and Mona suddenly disappear without a trace?”

The pair winced.

Gentle Criminal hummed, "It's not like we can come out and say 'Joker and Mona are from a different world!' Not many people would believe something so outlandish unless they see it for themselves. Announcing that there's a giant wormhole in the USJ would simply result in madness, too."

"And since Ren is the only one who *can* see it, his sanity would be thrown into question." Mr. Compress said.

Ren sulked.

"True." Nezu stated, "Allowing the masses to casually go to the USJ is not feasible even without these unusual circumstances."

"Then what do you suggest?" La Brava asked as she frowned at Morgana and Ren, "We'll be lucky if the rest of the teachers even believe us, let alone all of Japan!"

"Maybe we could do something with Cognition." Morgana said.

"Oh?" Nezu's ears perked forward, "How would Cognition play a part in all this?"

Ren and Morgana nodded to one another before Ren spoke first, "My Personas have continuously grown stronger whenever they appeared in the news. Think of it as them gaining strength over the time they've spent in the public's collective unconscious, it's why I could summon Satanael and every other Persona during Kamino. We tested it with Morgana's bus form to confirm that theory."

"I couldn't turn into a bus before Ren said something with cats and buses on Spotlight, and then after that post I could do it again as if we were back in the Metaverse." Morgana snickered as Nezu's eyes sparkled, "Maybe we could say Ren and I will just... retire and go home after a while at U.A. Not tell the masses the full truth, but put the idea out there that we won't be around forever."

“Oh! We could do another live interview.” La Brava suggested.

Nezu’s chair creaked as he sat back, grinning, “There’s one person with whom you’ve befriended in the news that would like an update on your current status. He could help us in that regard.”

Ren blinked before a cold pang of regret spread through his chest.

“*Taneo* .” He facepalmed, “I forgot about him when hearing about the Metaverse appearing here. Then everything with Risumi and Ayumu being taken and the raid...”

It hadn’t been that long since the call with Taneo, but so much has happened it had felt like a lifetime.

“I’m sure he’d love to hear from you again.” Nezu chuckled, “As for this Cognition idea, we could set something up with Taneo and Present Mic sometime after the Cultural Festival. But before any of that, we need to announce your arrival here to the wider public! Perhaps,” Nezu glanced at Ren’s new phone, “A photo for Spotlight will suffice? I’ll make the official statement afterwards.”

“Can Mona and I be in costume for it?”

Nezu smirked, “By all means! Perhaps a few of your Personas can join in as well!”

“Maybe we should summon Lavenza too.” Morgana said, “It could be a good opportunity to test whether or not Cognition *outside* U.A. will have any affect on the USJ. We need to gauge how different this situation is compared to Kamino.”

Ren nodded in agreement.

“I can correlate with her from readings on my computer.” Nezu said, grinning.

The excitement was palpable as the others got to their feet, and Joker and Mona donned their Thief Outfits in swirling blue fire.

Nighteye had been swamped in work since the Yakuza Raid.

Being specialized in networking and intelligence gathering, his team was tasked with making sure nobody accidentally let something slip to the ravenous media. Prime examples being; Shinsou Ayumu being brought back from the dead, Dabi being Endeavor's first born son, and the true leader of the Yakuza being discovered in a heavily fortified room at the deepest part of the complex.

The *real* leader was in a coma and currently undergoing testing in an undisclosed hospital. Despite this, many people in the know had the same idea. They never stated it outright, but Nighteye could see the subtle requests in reports and off handed comments.

They wanted Joker to heal him.

Personally, Nighteye didn't see a point. Being the leader of a Yakuza group would land the older man in prison for the rest of his life. The other side of the coin was that Joker was at U.A. now, and should not be a part of this anymore than he already has been. To be stuck in a coma or spend the rest of his life in prison...

Either side of the argument was just too horrible to be placed on the shoulders of a teenager.

Nezu agreed, stating over email that it would be best for Joker to stay within U.A.'s walls for the time being.

Joker...

The ultimate Anomaly: An obscenely powerful vigilante that beat a two centuries old villain, one who could summon typhoons and tornadoes at will, generate his own meteor shower as a Demon Lord descended from the heavens. Yet he had the kindness to heal the injured and stand up for the abused. Someone who fought to the bitter end. One who stood strong in the face of Fate, smiling as he ripped out the foundations of reality and rewrote them. But at the

heart of it all was a scarred teenager, one who ultimately broke down and passed out in Lavenza's arms after the fight was over.

This Anomaly confused him, yes, but...

His heart had softened after the raid. Perhaps he had misjudged the vigilante just by his attitude or the shock of his own quirk malfunctioning whenever Joker was involved with something.

Nighteye leaned back in his chair, lifting his glasses to rub his eyes as a migraine threatened to form. He internally groaned when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Bubble Girl entered his office, holding a platter with tea and snacks. She approached and set them on his desk, eyeing him carefully.

"You should take a break, Sir."

"I will when the work is done."

"Nu uh, you've been working nonstop for days!" Bubble Girl threw up her hands, "Take a break. *Eat something* . Or I will sic Centipeder on you! If *that* doesn't work, then I'll summon Lemillion's puppy dog eyes for the ultimate attack!"

Nighteye snorted, but a smile broke through his exhaustion, "And here I thought you were the sidekick."

She brightened when he pushed his keyboard away and reached for the cup of tea. That was, until his phone rang. She puffed up her cheeks and was about to protest when he reached for it.

"It's Mirio."

Bubble Girl shamelessly leaned closer to listen in.

"Shouldn't you be in class?" Nighteye said in lieu of a greeting.

"There's a few minutes before the next class, Sir! I just thought I'd call you quick to tell you something."

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes! At least... I think so?" After a short pause, Mirio sighed, *"The teachers announced that Joker and his crew are at U.A. during homeroom."*

"How did that go?"

"The reactions so far have been pretty crazy. It's like the whole school is buzzing over the news! People are talking about it nonstop and the teachers look like they're on high alert. But that's not all! Apparently Joker himself won't be placed in the hero course or anything, he'll actually be a Teacher's Assistant!"

"He *what* ?" Nighteye gaped, "That's... an interesting development. I wonder what Nezu is thinking, making a teenage vigilante a TA."

"I don't know, but the rest of his team will be Teacher's Assistants too."

"... I see. Have you been able to see them?"

"Nope! Nobody has yet, but I bet it's only a matter of time before they-"

A simultaneous *ping* came from not only Nighteye's computer, but Bubble Girl's phone and, amused that he could actually *hear* it, several dozen chimes from Mirio's side. Nighteye tucked his phone between his neck and shoulder and clicked on a Spotlight notification from *Joker* .

Bubble Girl squealed at her phone.

It was a picture in Nezu's office; Joker and Mona(in his 'Chibi' form) posed together with devilish grins. The rest of the thieves were fanned out around them, either falling into dramatic poses like

Spinner or La Brava, or relaxing on a couch and looking dignified like Mr. Compress and Gentle Criminal. Nezu sat at his desk, proudly holding up the Red Herring plush from the live interview incident.

Other fantastical figures were scattered throughout the office.

Cerberus and Byakko stood on either side of Joker, showing off their fanged grins, their glacial and fiery gold eyes peering into Nighteye's soul.

Mercurius held a pile of books in his arms near the back bookshelf, looking unabashed at holding a store of knowledge.

Satanael crouched in the corner beside the floor to ceiling windows, his wings sweeping around the room like great black sails, bright sunlight painting him in harsh contrast to his dark color scheme. Yatagarasu perched on one of his horns, head tilted at the camera.

Lavenza, of all people, sat upon Satanael's shoulder, looking as delicate as a flower as she read the Compendium that was a third of her size. Satanael's eyes were soft as his gaze was focused on her.

At the top was a simple phrase: *Mona and I safely arrived at U.A. with our team! Hee Ho!!*

A hundred startled responses flooded in. Some took Mona's strange appearance in stride... others didn't. More than a few questioned who Lavenza was. Some comments, though few and far in between, were upset that Joker wasn't going to be put on trial for his crimes. Several variations of 'Hee Ho!' spread like wildfire. Hawks and Miruko immediately shared it, both expressing obvious pride and way too many exclamation points for any sane person.

Unexpectedly, another post appeared seconds later with the caption: *First attempt didn't go so well....*

Another image.

It was a weird smudge of white, gold, and black. It appears Cerberus charged forward like an excited puppy, capturing a too-close-for-comfort blurred smear of his face. Joker could be picked out behind him, rushing forward to catch the camera before it hit the floor.

He had almost forgotten he was on the phone, if it weren't for the crackled reactions exploding in his ear.

Mirio chuckled as the background noises faded away, he must be walking to a more secluded spot, *"I think people are a bit excited, eh Sir?"*

"I would say so." Nighteye said, "How are you taking this, especially after what we witnessed at the end of the raid?"

"I'm okay, really!" Nighteye could hear the genuine grin in his boy's voice, *"Yeah, it was a bit shocking at first. But! Joker is still Joker, no matter how incredible his powers are! I'm not going to treat him any different for it."*

"Good. Can you do me a favor, then?"

"Anything for you, Sir!"

"Can you check in on Midoriya and the Shinsou family? Joker and Eri too, if you can. I want to make sure everyone is doing alright."

"Of course!" Mirio's voice lowered into a more teasing tone, *"I told you you would like Midoriya! It seems you actually got a soft spot for Joker, too! I'm so proud of you!"*

Nighteye, in a rare moment of being caught off guard, sputtered, "That's not-"

"Oops! The next bell rang, so I have to go Sir!"

Nighteye pulled the phone away from his ear as Mirio hung up, blankly staring at it in shock.

Bubble Girl giggled, "He's grown so much."

"Yes, he has." Nighteye sighed as he set his phone on the desk, reaching for the now cold cup of tea.

"Nope!" Bubble Girl swatted his hand away, "Let me get you a fresh cup."

"... Thanks."

She placed the plate of snacks in front of him and picked up the tray with the cold tea, but paused in front of the door. She looked at him with an ear to ear grin.

He narrowed his eyes, "What?"

"I've always wanted to say this... Hee Ho!!"

She cackled and rushed out the door, leaving a facepalming Nighteye alone in his office.

"There are already thousands of responses on both posts." Ren said as he refreshed the page on his phone again, "Any change in the USJ?"

Margaret, who stood by the wall next to a Velvet Room door, shook her head, "It doesn't appear so. There was only a slight fluctuation at the start before it returned to normal."

Nezu turned his monitor around so everyone could see the jagged graph, "It's actually lower than the readings we've gathered earlier."

"What were they during the Red Rain?" Mr. Compress asked.

The picture changed with a single keyboard tap.

Ren grimaced, "That's almost triple what it is right now, even if they've steadily been going up these past few months."

“Which means the Trickster’s performance will have to be exceptional while people are *inside* U.A.’s boundaries.” Lavenza said, “Outside stimulus seems to have little effect.”

“A completely different beast compared to what happened in Kamino, then.” Nezu mused.

“No pressure or anything.” Ren muttered.

“Apologies for bringing less than good news.” Margaret said softly, “But we should return in case there are any long term affects we’re not yet aware of.”

Lavenza flicked her gaze between Ren and the Velvet Room door with a questioning glance. He subtly shook his head. Having direct access to Nezu’s office would be fantastic, given that what he needed to safeguard his teammates’ futures was right in front of him on Nezu’s computer. But Nezu was smart. Too smart. If he’d already picked out when Ren was distracted with his Personas, then he could just as easily find out about the permanent Velvet Room doors before they were ready to share it.

Maybe he’d find a supply closet close by. Not ideal... but better than Nezu growing suspicious, or worse yet, Ren getting caught going behind Nezu’s back and getting punished for it.

Lavenza and Margaret left and the Velvet Room door faded from reality. The rat turned his monitor around, growing more amused by watching the stats of those posts skyrocket.

“Wow, the numbers keep going up and up!” Spinner shouted.

Gentle Criminal smiled, “That’s what happens when people have been waiting on the edge of their seats for *days* .”

“More like *months* since the Kamino Incident.” Mr. Compress seamlessly rolled a few marbles between his knuckles as they appeared out of nowhere, “The ebb and flow of an audience’s

expectations can be a fickle demon, but when tempered by a true master-" With a grand flourish of his hands, the marbles vanished from sight, "That's how you get the best reaction one could ever hope for."

"I dunno, dude." Spinner smirked at Mr. Compress, "We've seen that one a hundred times by now! You got anything new?"

"‘Anything new’?"Mr. Compress grabbed his cane and raised it as if to whap Spinner over the head, "You wouldn't have any idea how hard it is to come up with new acts and keep a loyal audience if it hit you over the head! I've even had some people turn on me at the drop of a hat when they thought I was no longer 'good enough' for their outrageous expectations!"

La Brava sighed in disappointment, "Boys..."

"I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it." Gentle Criminal said as he finished his cup of tea, "Though La Brava and I do understand how hard it can be in the spotlight. We've encountered more than enough of that mindset on my channel alone."

"It can't be all that bad." Ren said with a warm smile, "Didn't you have any supporters? People who kept you going no matter how bad it got?"

Morgana matched Ren's smile, "We've had people like that when things got really bad. They continued to cheer for us even when we were fighting Yaldabaoth. Surely it's the same for you?"

Gentle Criminal chuckled, "Indeed. A few specific individuals always left uplifting comments. They were definitely the brightest spots in a sea of negativity."

Lady Stubbs puffed out her chest and whacked at Mr. Compress' cane with her claws.

"I... suppose you are right. I apologize for overreacting." Mr. Compress lowered his cane, "The negative people stick with you a lot more than the few positive ones. Thank you for reminding me of that."

"You're welcome." Ren stated with a wide grin.

"Apologies for interrupting, but we have a visitor." Nezu pressed a button under his desk, and the door opened to reveal Aizawa, fist raised to knock.

Aizawa blinked slowly before his fist dropped to his side. He stepped in Nezu's office with a pointed glare at the rat.

"I didn't know a Spotlight post was planned, let alone *two* ." Aizawa came to a stop between Ren and Admiral Feesh's chair, silently seething, "You could've warned us ahead of time."

"Now where's the fun in that?"

Aizawa's eye twitched. He glanced at Ren, who only gave him an equally smug grin in return.

"Well, the students are wound up even more since the announcement during home room. Thanks for that."

Nezu casually waved away Aizawa's concerns, "Did you come here to tell us the obvious?"

"No. Ectoplasm and Hound Dog returned." Aizawa looked between the vigilante group, "They got everything you requested for your rooms. I suggest you spend the rest of the day unpacking and decorating. It would be smart to return to the dorms before the students break for lunch."

Ah, so that's why it was a clone that drove them to the USJ.

"It's that late already? How the time flies when you're having fun! Very well, then." Nezu eyed Ren and Morgana, "After your tests are

done, you'll have a few days to rest before you start practicing for your Cultural Festival performance. Do make use of it."

Ren grimaced, "But-"

Nezu held up a paw, "I know things seem grim, what with everything we've discussed today. However, we still have time and you've all travelled a long, hard road to get here. You deserve some down time after everything that's transpired."

Aizawa narrowed his eyes, "What are you talking about? How do things seem 'grim'?"

Nezu grinned, his tone returning to its chipper nature, "You'll find out soon enough!"

Aizawa sighed when he looked to Ren for an answer and only got a shrug. He'd make the man some coffee to make up for it.

"Then let's vacate before the horde of ravenous children are released." Mr. Compress tucked his cane under his arm and straightened his hat, "I'd rather not be bombarded by teenagers, thank you very much. No offence, Ren."

Ren snorted, "None taken."

"You do that. Meanwhile, I'll type up an official statement for the media." Nezu said as he waved them off. He cleared his throat when the group reached the door, "Oh, one more question, if you will Amamiya."

Ren raised a brow, "What?"

"I've been curious about the subject of your Arcana. I'm wondering which people in this room hold such a role?"

"Oh. I evolved into the World after my powers reawakened." Ren then pointed to Morgana hanging from his shoulder, "Mona's the Magician."

He then listed off their Arcana.

La Brava for Lovers.

Gentle Criminal for Temperance.

Spinner was Apostle.

Mr. Compress tipped his hat as Ren stated him as Faith.

Aizawa expression was carefully neutral as he was dubbed the Hierophant.

“And *you*,” Ren’s pointed at Nezu, and he couldn’t help his impish smirk, “Are the Devil, Nezu.”

Aizawa choked on his own spit as he broke out into a sudden coughing fit, while Nezu fell back into his chair, raging with laughter.

Ren patted Aizawa on the back, “You good, Eraser?”

“*Fine* .” Aizawa glared at Nezu, who was still laughing his tail off, “Let’s go. He won’t stop for a while.”

Aizawa stormed from the room first, followed by the vigilante group. The man was silent as they walked through the halls, passing a number of classrooms in the process. Ren was thankful that there were no windows from this side of the classrooms, otherwise he could imagine many students pressing themselves into the windows to watch them pass.

Or worse yet, break down the doors to surround them.

“You had quite the reaction to Nezu’s Arcana, Eraser.” Mr. Compress said when they stepped outside, “Why’s that?”

Aizawa stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, “Nezu has always been labeled a devil for his looks and personality, as well as how he runs the school, but I never thought he would *literally* be a Devil.”

“It’s a natural fit.” Ren said.

“Yeah, it is. Too good of a fit.” Aizawa rolled his eyes and continued down the path, the others following, “And he’s going to lord that fact over us for years. I know it.”

They reached the teacher’s dorm. Despite what happened at the USJ, the uncertainty of their findings, the pressure of an unknown battle ahead... all of that faded when they entered the dorm and Eri ran up and gave them all relieved hugs, and dragged them further inside by pulling at Ren and Spinner’s sleeves.

Over a dozen boxes and shopping bags littered the common room. Ectoplasm, Hound Dog, and Kaito waited patiently.

Kaito was the first to approach, scrutinizing Ren and the others in that certain way of his. Satisfied that nobody was injured, dead, or missing, he relaxed.

“Would you like lunch first, or would you rather decorate your rooms and eat after?” Hound Dog asked.

Several gurgles and growls chose for them.

Ren, holding hands with Eri, smiled, “Let’s do lunch first. You want to help me make curry, Eri?”

Eri energetically nodded, and they trailed into the kitchen together.

“Grr, is it always curry?” Hound Dog asked as he stared after them.

“You’ll get addicted to it in no time,” Kaito said with an ominous smirk, “Believe me.”

By the way their mouths watered at the slightest scent of Ren’s curry, they knew it was already too late.

Midoriya rushed to the infirmary after shoveling food into his mouth and waving goodbye to his flabbergasted friends. Todoroki was the only one who knew. He didn't want to break the news to everyone until Recovery Girl gave him the all clear.

He gently knocked on the door and peeked inside.

"Recovery Girl...?"

Midoriya stepped into the student infirmary. It was empty. Maybe she went out to lunch? He was about to leave and come back again after classes were finished for the day... until his eyes roamed over her office door. It was open a crack, and he could faintly hear shuffling from within it.

He walked over to knock and make his presence known, but froze at the sound of voices.

"Tsukauchi forwarded his initial report from his interrogation with Overhaul." Recovery Girl said, "The man was smart enough to keep Eri up to date on her shots, so we don't have to worry about that. Otherwise, the girl seems to be in perfect health, if a bit underweight. He also admitted to not being her biological father, either."

"Her DNA matched with the previous head of the Shie Hassaikai." Another woman's soft voice said, Midoriya could faintly see a head of silken gold hair through the opening, "And in accordance to Overhaul's interrogation, it's confirmed that Eri is the previous head's granddaughter."

Midoriya backed away. This was obviously meant to be a private conversation, he should leave before he gets caught and scolded by Recovery Girl. Yeah, that was the best course of action. He turned around and crept towards the exit-

"What's with that face, Zoey?"

There was a sigh, “Eri’s tests came back well and good for the most part, but its Amamiya I’m worried about.”

Midoriya froze.

“Yes...” Recovery Girl said, the frown obvious by her tone, “His cortisol levels are extremely high.”

“It’s more than that. All of his levels are elevated across the board.” Zoey stated, “These are the highest I’ve ever seen, and I’ve worked with long-time pros who’ve never shown this amount of stress.”

“I can’t imagine what the boy’s been through. Between what happened in Kamino and trying to recover in the horrible aftermath... It could be a culmination of these last few months plus this recent raid.”

“Maybe. Actually, I might have another theory.”

“Oh?”

“*Just* a theory, mind you. I’d have no way to test it, since we can’t do anymore in-depth scans at a hospital. Nezu agrees that it would draw too much attention.”

“He reacted negatively to the blood draw, even if he tried to hide it. The boy would probably decline it anyway, as is his right. What’s this theory of yours?”

“The extreme stress may be due to his unique powers. I’ve wondered how they would directly affect him since he doesn’t have a Quirk Factor to channel his Personas through. It’s possible that this pushes his body to-”

Midoriya's world tilted. His brain screeched to a halt as he tried to digest what he just heard.

Joker didn’t have a Quirk Factor?

“Actually,” Akira Ren had pushed up his glasses, keeping his neutral porcelain mask intact, “I’m quirkless.”

The shock and mutual understanding, the pain and misplaced sympathy from his own classmates at the term ‘Quirkless.’ Midoriya happily believed that lie until the stab of betrayal at Kamino, where Joker’s real identity was revealed to the world.

*Sure, Ren shared a fake name, but if he just heard correctly, then Ren had never lied about being **Quirkless** . But with no Quirk Factor... how did he have all of these amazing powers? How could he summon gods and beings of myth who could practically do anything? Summon storms and control other forces of nature. Heal any injury and smooth over ghastly scars? **Kill** ? Bring people back from the dead?*

*All without a Quirk. Not a Quirk, but **Personas** . Was that what they were called?*

Mona had the same strange power, too. More than that, he was a talking cat who could shapeshift and had a powerful god from Roman mythology at his back.

Nighteye never saw Joker or Mona in his visions.

As if they were never supposed to be here... Anomalies who didn’t belong...

“If Endeavor pursued my mother to the extent that he did just for her quirk, what do you think people would do if they knew the full truth of Joker’s power? He’s beyond powerful for sure, but bringing back the dead? That’s unheard of.”

“... Do you think people pursued him like that in the past?”

Shoto shrugged, “We can only speculate at this point.”

“Think of it this way,” Aizawa said gravely, “Undercover pros use aliases all the time to protect themselves, as well as their friends and family members. It would be too dangerous to walk into a villain’s den and flaunt your real name.”

“To protect himself and others...” Kirishima bit his lip, “Man, he must’ve been so scared if he had to use an alias up until now!”

“Or brave!” Ashido said, “I can’t even imagine what he must’ve been through to even come up with a fake identity like that.”

Yaoyorozu frowned, “His first appearance was at the USJ. If he never worked with the League of Villains, then I wonder what circumstances landed him there in the first place? Was he... escaping from something?”

How did everything connect? Where did all of these red strings lead? What truth were Joker and Mona hiding from the rest of the world?

A sharp trill startled him from his spiraling thoughts.

“Ah, sorry. It’s Tsukauchi.”

“Oho?”

“N-Not in the way you’re thinking! He’s having me help with a favor in Tartarus and just received permission for me to be there. Something about a suspected Nomu?”

“Well, duty calls.” Recovery Girl warmly chuckled, “But after work, do be a dear and ask him to go out for a coffee.”

“I’m sure he’s got other things to do. I’ve heard he was finally going to accept his promotion to Commissioner after everything with Joker settles down.”

“Nonsense. I know for a fact he was impressed with how you stood against Kunikazu in the Kamino hospital. He’s not an easy man to impress. You both deserve happiness, dearies.”

“C-Chiyo-san! It’s not like that!”

Midoriya snuck out of the infirmary, but he couldn’t make it more than a few steps to the hallway window. He lay his forehead on the cool glass, willing the raging whirlwind to in his mind to still. A few shaky breaths staggered past his lips.

“Midoriya-kun?”

He whirled around to see Recovery Girl and the petite woman with golden hair, staring at him.

“You’re as pale as a sheet! Are you feeling alright?”

“Y-yeah! Yes, I’m fine! Why wouldn’t I be fine!?”

Recovery Girl lost her concern as she sharply tapped her cane, “You didn’t break another bone, did you?”

“Break *another* bone?” The other woman asked with widened eyes.

“N-no! N-no broken bones, I swear! But, um...” He didn’t know what else to do aside from shove his hands right in Recovery Girl’s face.

She blinked rapidly and then stared at his knuckles, confusion falling away to shock as her eyebrows shot up to her hairline.

“Oh my.” Recovery Girl took his hand, the one she performed surgery on in the Sports Festival, and turned it around several times, “When did this happen? How?”

“During the Overhaul raid, Mona healed me.”

“Well, it looks like you have your hands full.” Zoey smiled at Midoriya, then nodded to Recovery Girl, “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Remember what I said about coffee, young lady!”

A light blush appeared on Zoey’s face before she turned and walked away.

“Now, let’s get you looked at. Why didn’t you come to me right away?”

Midoriya sputtered and let her pull him inside, the same infirmary he stood in moments ago where his whole world shattered. Everything he thought he knew about Ren’s ‘quirk’ would have to be thrown to the wind, he’d need a whole new notebook to keep track of the building storm encompassing his brain.

A single thought consumed him as Recovery Girl worked. Through the motion tests and x-rays and Recovery Girl’s scratching of a pen on a clipboard as she documented all of his healed scars...

Joker really was Quirkless.

Joker was Quirkless.

Ren was Quirkless.

Ren sneezed.

“Are you okay?” Morgana asked from the bed, “That’s like the third time you’ve sneezed. You’re not getting sick, are you?”

“I doubt it. Ishtar wouldn’t let me.” Ren said as he sniffled and focused upwards, “Put that one a little more to the left, Pixie.”

“Kay!”

Pixie’s wings hummed like a dragonfly’s as she stuck the hook to the upper wall, Ishtar floated up and attached the last of the faerie lights to it. Pixie clapped before darting over to the light switch to turn it off, while Ishtar plugged them in.

The darkness became alight with the soft glow of the faerie lights tracing around the upper half of his room. A variety of constellations dotted the ceiling from the stars they stuck on, with a familiar arrangement of seven stars directly under his bed. He and Tobita offered to wash everyone's new clothes earlier, and clean clothes were all perfectly arranged in his closet.

It allowed them to scope out the dorm more before they decorated their rooms. Like the kitchen, the laundry facility within the dorm was massive, with two walls full of high end washing machines and dryers. That brand cost an arm and a leg for *each* machine. Across from the laundry were the sauna and hot springs, separated by gender. The end of that same hallway lead to an extra entrance to the inner garden.

"Everything looks really nice." Morgana's voice distracted him from his thoughts as Pixie turned the lights back on, "It'll make our stay here more bearable, at least."

"Yeah, I guess." Ren walked over to the desk, where a Phantom Thief Banner hung over it. He stared directly at the familiar hat and mask logo, "What do you think they'll do to this stuff after we leave?"

"I... I don't know." Morgana stood and stretched, before he jumped over to the desk in one agile leap, "I'm pretty sure Nezu will hang some of it in his office or something."

Ren chuckled, "Admiral Feesh won't be alone."

Ishtar and Pixie vanished when there was a sudden knock on the door.

"Come in." Ren said without looking away from the banner.

Mr. Compress waltzed in, holding hands with Eri while the other arm held a small box.

“Are you ever going to change out of costume?” Morgana asked, “It’s been days.”

“And reveal my devilishly handsome face to these heroes? No thank you.”

“Ren-nii is de.... devilishly h-handsome, and he has no problems showing his face. Uncle Compress is just being shy.” Eri stated with the brutal honesty of a small child.

Ren and Morgana burst out laughing as a high-pitched whine escaped Mr. Compress’ throat, “I’m not shy! You wound me so, my dear.”

Eri blinked as their fits of laughter died away. Ren rubbed the mirthful tears from his eyes and had to take another deep breath to calm down.

“Did you need something, Mr. Compress?” Ren asked with a smirk, “Help with either of your rooms?”

“Kaito and Mr. Aizawa helped me, so my room is done!” Eri said.

Mr. Compress recovered what shreds of dignity he had left by clearing his throat, “Nope, I left my room rather bare compared to yours. However, I did request something special, and I wanted Eri to open it after everyone was finished.”

“Hmm,” Morgana’s ears twitched as the slightest groan came from the vents, “I think the others are almost done. Spinner is just lounging around with Lady Stubbs, and the other two are putting their final touches. Kaito is also done, he seems to be reading.”

“Perfect!” Mr. Compress handed Eri the mystery box, and then turned on his heel and marched out, “Wait here while I fetch everyone!”

Eri looked down at the box with wide eyes, “What do you think it is, Ren-nii?”

“I have no idea.” He said, crouching down to her level, “Whatever it is, it has to be good.”

Eri nodded. Ren’s heart tugged a little. She still wasn’t showing much range of emotion, aside from widening her eyes or the occasional crinkle around them. Despite their ultimate goal for the Cultural Festival, maybe he could do something to break through that mask and finally make her smile. Just give her an opportunity to *have fun* .

The door opened and Mr. Compress pushed everyone inside Ren’s room.

“What’s this about?” Kaito asked with a raised brow.

Mr. Compress firmly shut the door as everyone spread out, ogling the various decorations Ren put up.

“Go ahead, Eri.” Mr Compress said when everyone was situated. He clapped his gloved hands together, a smile radiating from underneath his mask, “I wanted *you* to open it, my dear, but know that this is a gift for *everyone* in this room to use.”

“I don’t know if that’s comforting or ominous.” Spinner stated as Lady Stubbs jumped off his shoulder, cautiously sniffing at the box in Eri’s hands.

They waited in anticipation, slowly inching forward, as Eri popped open the top of the box, removed some plastic foam, and pulled out something that made Ren’s heart stutter.

“A polaroid camera?” Ren said.

“Where in the world did you get that?” La Brava asked as her jaw dropped, “You can’t find those anymore, and the ones that exist are

in museums!”

“They’re really *that* rare?” Morgana asked incredulously, “You could still find them where we’re from... in vintage shops.”

“Apparently Nezu had one on hand, in perfect condition at that!” Mr. Compress said as Eri turned the boxy camera around in her hands, studying the lens and the slot on the bottom, “And was more than willing to gift it to us when I asked.”

“But why?” La Brava asked.

“Because of *this* .”

Mr. Compress gently nudged everyone to line up in front of the desk, making sure the Phantom Thief banner was visible. He squished everyone together and held out the camera, the lens pointed at them. Everyone was blinded by the bright flash.

Ren blinked the spots out of his eyes as the photo came out of the slot.

Mr. Compress snatched it and, after a few moments of waving it through the air, the picture appeared. They all leaned in to see it when he proudly held it up between his middle and pointer fingers. Yes, they were all practically squished together to fit the frame, but they were smiling at the obvious closeness they shared. Aside from Eri, who hugged Ren as she curiously stared right into the lens. Even *Kaito* bore the smallest of smiles.

“Ooooh, that’s so cool!!” Spinner shouted, “Can I take one next!?”

“You have to share it, you know.” La Brava said with a shake of her head, “Why don’t we let Eri take it for a bit?”

“R-really?”

Eri stared at Spinner with her doe eyes, and the lizard man crumpled.

“Go for it, Eri-chan!” Spinner said with a thumbs up.

Mr. Compress chuckled as he handed the camera to her, the photo still in his other hand.

“I know, how about we go outside?” Gentle Criminal said as he stared out the balcony doors, “We still haven’t explored the gardens yet. Perfect photo opportunities await!”

Spinner threw open the balcony door, “Race you to those trees!”

“Merp!”

“H-hey, that’s cheating! No head starts!” Morgana yowled as he jumped after them, a pleasantly cool breeze sweeping through the room.

La Brava sighed, before smiling at Eri, “Let’s go.”

“O-Okay!”

Kaito pinched the bridge of his nose, “I better make sure they don’t hurt themselves.”

They walked out, leaving Ren and Mr. Compress in the room alone. The man was staring at the photo, and while Ren couldn’t see the expression on his face, the sudden sense of sadness emanating from Mr. Compress nearly smothered him.

“... Why did you really want that camera?” Ren asked softly.

“Ah, I forget how observant you can be.” Mr. Compress cleared his throat and shook his head, as if to rid himself of the sorrow. He walked next to Ren’s desk, where a large cork board hung right beside the banner. Aside from a new mask charm hanging in the corner, it was bare.

“Because I want to make good memories with the time we have left. I want *Eri* to have good memories of us, and to have physical proof of

our time together.” Mr. Compress snatched one of the tacks on the bottom of the board and pinned the photo next to the mask charm, “We better take as many pictures as we can, Ren. You bet every last yen that I’ll make enough copies for everyone to have their own scrapbook by the end of it.”

With that, he walked past a stupefied Ren and joined everyone in the gardens. Ren looked at the photo, smiling softly at the warmth pleasantly floating in his chest, before he turned around and leaned against the balcony door frame.

The garden was rather large, containing two huge trees and a stone path from one end of the dorm to the other. Vibrant gold leaves gently fell from the ginkgo tree, while burning scarlet and hints of purple fell from the maple. There was a pair of benches on the path between the trees, and a variety of flora otherwise bare for the fall season. If he listened closely, he could hear the calming *tap* of a small bamboo fountain somewhere in the mix.

“With the time we have left...” Byakko whispered.

“Why the sudden melancholy?” Shiva asked, *“Were you touched by the Faith’s true motive?”*

“Yes... although it’s not that.” Byakko wrapped his long tail around himself, *“I’ve just become aware of my own clock steadily counting down.”*

“Uh.... what? I don’t hear a clock! Are you going crazy, furball!?” Pixie said.

Byakko snarled, *“What I mean is that it would be wise for the Trickster to fuse a stronger Persona than me... permanently.”* Ren’s breath stuttered, but Byakko continued as sympathy flowed through his other selves, *“We don’t know what lies ahead, and the Trickster needs something better than some old tiger who controls a little bit of ice.”*

"Byakko, my dear friend, give yourself more credit. The Overhaul battle would've been more difficult if your war cry didn't bolster the Trickster's attack power." Kohryu reached his whiskers out to touch the tiger, "But... how brave of you to be willing to give yourself fully."

"It's simply the truth." Byakko said as his tufted ears drooped, "We can mess around no longer."

Fafnir puffed out his chest, "We'll be all set if they are as powerful as I!!"

Baal swirled his goblet, "I suppose anything is possible, given that we are in a new Sea of Souls. Fafnir himself is proof that there may be brand new Personas yet unseen."

"I agree." Yatagarasu shuffled his wings, "As the weakest Persona in the stock, I also offer to permanently exchange my place for something stronger."

"Yatagarasu." Orpheus Picaro tilted his head at the raven, "You already have a new power budding within you... we just need to discover what that new strength is. Perhaps a new Persona can be born from you yet."

"How... curious." Satanael said, "We could cultivate this new power with time and training. Let us know if you feel anything different, alright?"

"I shall." Yatagarasu warbled.

"There's also the part where we need weapons and armor for the heroes." Ren sighed, "Let's see what happens over these next few days, then we'll figure this out."

Satanael nodded, "We'll never be apart as long as you master our bonds for the Compendium. After all-"

Every Persona, and even Ren himself, joined together in a single voice that made the very fabric of existence quiver.

“We art thou, thou art us.”

A shriek of laughter snapped him back into reality.

Spinner cackled as he had somehow trapped Mr. Compress in a headlock, with the ‘victim’ wildly waving his arms about in a goofy manner. Gentle Criminal and La Brava were nearby, whispering to Eri and pointing at the antics.

Ren could barely see Eri stick her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she raised the camera to her face and took a picture, forever locking the moment in a photo.

Spinner dropped Mr. Compress with a dramatic gasp, “No! Not a picture, my weakness!!”

The lizard-man playfully charged. Gentle Criminal scooped up Eri and balanced her on his shoulders, before he and La Brava jumped up onto one of the ginkgo tree’s branches with his quirk. Spinner crashed into the trunk and rag dolled onto the ground, spread-eagle.

There was another bright flash of camera light on Spinner, before Eri and La Brava picked some of the golden leaves and sprinkled them down. Spinner had a pile on top of him when Mr. Compress and Lady Stubbs approached, gently nudging him with a boot or fluffy paw.

“This villain is out for the count.” Mr. Compress dryly remarked.

Morgana and Kaito sat together on one of the benches, both facepalming.

Movement flickered in the corner of Ren’s eye, and he looked to see Midnight, Thirteen, and a few other teachers watching the playful

shenanigans from their balconies. Midnight winked when she saw him staring.

He ducked back inside, his eyes catching on the picture. As he looked at it, a new determination sparked within him. The *determination* to finish this at long last. He mentally listed his goals from here onwards;

-
- 1.) Grow stronger through Velvet Room training and Persona Fusion.
 - 2.) Secretly gather info on U.A. to secure his teammates' freedom.
 - 3.) Deepen his bonds with the Arcanas in this world.
 - 4.) Capture and interrogate a Shadow during the Cultural Festival, blow a few peoples' minds with the truth, reunite with his friends, then make a plan for their Final Attack.
 - 5.) Defeat Yaldabaoth once and for all.
 - 6.)... Go home.
-

It probably wouldn't be *that* simple. It never was.

But something stirred in Ren, something he hasn't felt in a long time as he finally set his focus to home.

Despite being alone in his room, he grinned at this familiar feeling.

Mission START!!

Current update schedule:

Talk - Feb. 4th

Betrayer - Feb 25th

Duplicitous Devil's Castle - March 11th

I'm really excited for the next few chapters! There are long awaited character interactions, secret plans set in motion, among other fun things as everyone prepares for the festival ;)

Talk

Chapter 86: Talk

Some questions are answered and some answers are questioned.

Heeeey, so after a little more thought there's been a slight change in name for one of the upcoming chapters that fits it way better than Betrayal.

Diversionary Tactic - February 25th

Duplicitous Devil's Castle - March 11th

Improvised Song Dedicated To The Next Prime Minister's Ship -
March 25

Voracious Waltz - April 15th

And yes, these chapters will tie up one of the minor arcs as well as the Cultural Festival. I wish I could say what the chapter name is after Voracious Waltz, but I don't want to give away the surprise ;)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

FANART!!

[time_n_clem on Twitter](#)

Ren should've known better.

The last two days have gone smoothly. *Too smoothly* . He and Morgana had been escorted to the rat's office early in the morning and returned before lunch. Then after they'd hang out with Eri and Kaito, eating and taking pictures, before the others returned from their TA training after classes ended. There were no surprise encounters with any students.

It was only a matter of time before the inevitable.

He never expected to come face to face with Class 1-A right outside the teacher's dorm on the third and final day of his exams.

It was an accident, a stroke of pure dumb luck, by how both the students and teachers became like deer in the headlights. Painfully familiar faces zeroed in on him, oblivious to how the teachers inched closer to Ren.

Midoriya *recoiled* when they made eye contact. Shock and awe and a dozen other emotions stewed thickly inside him. His mind cranked away at some puzzle Ren wasn't aware of, but Midoriya's gaze was so intense that Todoroki glanced at Midoriya in concern.

Maybe reviving Ayumu in front of Midoriya spooked him.

Ashido and Kaminari looked between the groups, wondering which would make the first move.

Kirishima and Uraraka looked seconds from breaking out into tears.

Yaoyorozu had her own war raging within her.

Iida was vibrating in place like a stalling engine, but made no move.

Nezu studied everyone from Ectoplasm's shoulder, his beady black eyes not hiding his rampant curiosity and amusement.

The cobblestone sidewalk separating them felt like a gaping canyon, all the secrets and lies poisoning the bare few feet needed for either group to reach the other.

Someone had to give. That someone literally exploded the tension like fragile glass. The Tower stomped forward, harshly knocking Ojiro in the shoulder and out of his venomous glare. Twenty pairs of eyes widened in blatant horror as Bakugo marched across no-man's-lands, his palms smoking yet his expression carefully neutral, and stopped in front of Ren.

Acrid smoke and the scent of burned caramel fluttered between them, but Ren refused to break eye contact as Morgana rubbed his nose with a paw.

Crimson eyes narrowed as Ren smiled, scanning him from head to toe as if looking for something. Ectoplasm made to step forward, but Nezu stopped him with a flick of his tail.

"You and me," Bakugo jabbed Ren in the chest, his voice full of gravel, "We're going to have a talk, got it? I'm not taking no for an answer!"

"Sure thing," Ren's voice made Bakugo flinch for some reason, "Meet me here at lunch?"

Bakugo curtly nodded. He whirled around, the whole class jumping back at another explosion from Bakugo's palm, "And what are you assholes so afraid of, huh!? Glasses, didn't you want to welcome him when he got here or were you just spouting bullshit!?"

"D-don't swear in front of honored guests, Bakugo!" Iida's voice was higher pitched than usual, but he was the second to cross the dead zone, stopping a few feet away from Ren and bowing a full 90 degrees. "On behalf of Class 1-A, w-welcome to U.A. Amamiya-san! Please forgive us for being rude!!"

Ren rubbed the back of his neck as he felt his face heat up. It didn't help that Morgana was smirking at him, clearly relieved. He felt a familiar shadow at his back before he could even utter a word.

“What is going on out here?” Aizawa snapped as he glared at his class.

“It’s okay, Eraser.” Ren said, “We would have to meet face to face eventually.”

Aizawa dangerously narrowed his eyes, the majority of students sunk in on themselves, “I don’t care. It’s no reason to stop and stare at someone like that. Get to class. *Now* .”

Most all but ran towards the school. Yaoyorozu turned and gracefully walked away with a heaviness in her shoulders. Ren’s heart hurt at the sight of the Empress like that.

Midoriya lagged behind, his expression frozen on his face. He didn’t snap out of it until Todoroki grabbed his arm and gently led him away.

Iida bowed once more before he marched off after them.

Bakugo stayed in place a moment longer, staring at Ren as if he would vanish any second. He only walked away when Aizawa cleared his throat and gave him a pointed look.

“Well, that was... certainly something.” Morgana said when all students were gone.

“Why didn’t you do anything?” Aizawa said as he turned the full force of his glare on Nezu.

Nezu chuckled, “It was a good way to ‘break the ice!’ Bakugo did the job splendidly, wouldn’t you say? As Amamiya stated, his first interaction with students would happen eventually. We can’t hide him away forever.”

Ectoplasm facepalmed, muttering rapidly under his breath.

The rat laughed as Aizawa’s scowl deepened, “Come now. It just made it easier for when when he officially starts his TA duties after

the Festival!”

“Whatever.” Aizawa said, “Let’s just get them to your office before any other class decides to crowd them. We’re not running a damn zoo.”

“Someone should inform the reporters lingering outside the school’s walls then!” Nezu chuckled as Ren shivered at the new articles about him being pumped out by the dozen, “In any case, enough fun for now. Time for the last of your testing, Amamiya!”

“Joy.” Ren deadpanned.

Nezu never lost his satisfied smirk, even after they arrived in his office and handed Ren a packet so thick it could be used as a bludgeoning weapon.

An eerie stillness overcame the block where the Blue Lotus once stood, other storefronts and businesses drained of their usual vibrancy as if they mourned their neighbor. Surrounded by yellow police tape, swept of broken concrete and glass shards, a cleansing of a murder scene that had once been their home and livelihood. The autumn sun shed rare rays of warmth, but none of it touched these stones.

It took every drop of courage within Risumi to not break down right then and there.

“There’s really nothing left…” Risumi whispered, standing where the front counter had once been.

“No.” Ayumu placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder, trying to keep the lump in his throat at bay, “But at least we still have each other. And Hitoshi and Ren and our next child, too. That’s what matter most.”

“I know.” Risumi squeezed her husband’s hand as her chest tightened, “But we created so many memories here. All of our

pictures, our things... every memory we've ever built with Hitoshi is just.... gone. How are we ever going to recover from this? Will we even have a home to bring our new child into?"

"Risumi." Ayumu's expression hardened as she faced him fully, "U.A. wouldn't throw us out into the street. Especially in your condition."

"We can't impose on them forever, either." Risumi's hands went to her stomach, "I don't... Nezu has been more than generous, but we need our own home. Our own space." She looked around, heartbreak creasing her face. "We *need* to get back up on our feet again.."

"Then we'll rebuild."

Risumi stared at Ayumu, "But we don't have enough money. Sure, w-we've saved since Ren came to us, but not enough for a whole new building and all of the supplies we need..."

Shuffling footsteps turned their attention the where the front door had been. A hero, Kamui Woods, stood beside a familiar face.

"This woman says she knows you." The hero said, "She's the one who informed Officer Akane when the incident occurred."

"Haru-san!!" Risumi ran to the woman and gave her a hug, "You're okay!"

Haru-san warmly chuckled as she wrapped her arms around Risumi, "Of course I am, deary. I was so worried about you two!"

Ayumu glanced at the hero, "Could you give us a moment alone?"

"Of course." Kamui bowed his head and walked away.

Haru-san let go, gripping Risumi by the shoulders, "Are you two alright? After what happened.... I can't even imagine what those villains put you through."

“Yes, we’re fine.” Risumi’s smile was watery, her eyes filling with tears, “Joker made sure we were okay, a-and Nezu is letting us stay at U.A. for the time being. They let us come here to see the damage ourselves.”

“And I was just telling Risumi that we’d rebuild.”

“Rebuild?” Haru-san’s smile gained the serenity of a fresh spring rain. “Then I suppose you’ll want this. I saved them for you.”

She reached into her bag and placed something in Risumi’s hand. The gentle bell tinkled as Risumi and Ayumu stared at it with wide eyes. Tied to it was the mask charm they hung in the front window.

“Thank you.” Risumi said as she enclosed her fingers over them and held them to her chest, “At least there will be pieces of the original Blue Lotus with us. Even if we can’t rebuild right away.”

A twinkle entered Haru-san’s eyes, “You haven’t been online much, have you?”

“No, we’ve stayed away from the news.” Ayumu said, raising a brow, “Why?”

“I don’t think you’ll have any problems rebuilding with all the support you’ve been getting since the Blue Lotus was destroyed.” Haru-san smirked, “And I hear U.A. is going to host its Cultural Festival soon. It’s a perfect opportunity for a fundraiser, and to draw in new customers with your food, wouldn’t you think?”

“Th-that’s...”

Ayumu chuckled, “That’s a *great* idea. There’s no way Nezu would say no.”

“I’m sure Joker would vouch for us, maybe he’ll help us cook if he has the time.” Hope flickered through Risumi’s eyes, her grip on the bell tightening. “Yes. We can do it.”

“I told you.” Ayumu planted a kiss on Risumi’s cheek, “We’ll rebuild, and I’ll be damned if we don’t do it bigger and better than before.” He placed a hand on Risumi’s stomach. “We’ll need more room for the little one anyway.”

Haru-san blinked in astonishment, and then burst into tears of joy as she trapped Risumi and Ayumu in a bone-breaking embrace.

Kamui Woods rushed to the scene, fearing the worst, but ended up sighing in relief when he saw them all hugging and crying with bright smiles.

The block around the Blue Lotus felt warmer as hope returned.

Nezu forced himself to retain a calm exterior as the scratch of Amamiya’s pen filled the room, his bursting excitement was curbed with a harsh flick of his tail. The boy was hard at work at the small desk Nezu set up for him, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Judging by the previous tests, Amamiya was a natural Erudite. He’d easily take the top spot of the second-year class... maybe up into the echelons of the third-years too! He mastered each subject with only a few mistakes... aside from history over the last 200 years, but he digresses.

That’s not what excited him the most.

The boy had said his summons were called Personas, and the very definition of a persona is an aspect of someone’s character. *I am thou, thou art I. We are thou, thou art us.*

To test how deep that went, Nezu put several languages in the tests... which showed the unexpected results that made him so excited.

French from Arsene, Greek from Cerberus, Celtic from Cu Chulainn, Hindu from Shiva and Vasuki, and a few languages from around Asia

to test whether there was a difference between *Huang Long* and *Baihu* versus Kohryu and Byakko, among others he spent the small hours of the morning studying with obsessive fervor. It didn't matter what language, the boy usually answered in the same language the question had been typed in.

Not only that, the *writing style* itself changed quite often, with some shifting right in the middle of the same sentence. The range was impressive; from the *delicate and beautiful* script of a goddess, to the **bold and thick** lines of beastly proportions, to exaggerated and carefree scrawls of a child. A few were answered with short, sharp strokes as if scratched in with a claw or talon.

A relieved sigh drew Nezu out of his thoughts, and he looked up from his grading to see Amamiya set down his pen and rub his eyes.

Mona, who had been dozing on the couch, cracked his eyes open.

"Need a break?" Nezu asked, "I can whip up some tea!"

"No." Amamiya stood up, collected the packet, and marched over to Nezu's desk, "I just finished."

"Oho!" Nezu beamed, "Very well done, Amamiya!"

"Geez," Mona grumbled as he scrambled up Amamiya's shoulder, "I thought a packet like that would take you *several* more days! Did you get even smarter since we last took exams in Shujin?"

Shujin ? Was that the name of Amamiya's school back in his world? Quite ironic to name a school 'prison.' He dearly hoped it wasn't an actual prison.

Amamiya smirked and tapped his temple, "You'd be surprised. I have the knowledge of several gods, you know."

Mona rolled his eyes, "Yeah, yeah. Mercurius and I are pretty smart too!"

“I never said you weren't.” Amamiya said as he scratched Mona under the chin. Then, he paused and looked at Nezu, “Mona and I were talking last night, and there's something we forgot to mention the other day.”

Nezu put on a more business-like smile, “Go on.”

Amamiya planted himself in one of the chairs in front of Nezu's desk, ignoring Admiral Feesh in the other, “First, in order to make my Personas into weapons or armor, they need a catalyst for the transformation to stick to.”

Nezu's ears perked up, “Such as?”

“Black Kogatanas for melee weapons, Black Robes for armor, Model Guns for anything ranged.” Ren frowned, “Back before we faced Yaldabaoth, I got rid of most of them when I thought we had the strongest gear possible for our whole team, plus a few extras just in case. We don't have enough to outfit everyone.”

“Hmm, do you have some of these items on hand?” Nezu asked.

“About one or two of each.” Mona said, “Why?”

“Do you think, if someone made perfect copies, that the copies would work just as well as the original material?”

Amamiya and Mona exchanged a long glance, before Mona slowly nodded, “They *should* work, in theory. How do you intend to copy them?”

“There is a student in Class 1-A we could ask to make such copies for us, should she be able to see one of each item. However...” Nezu sighed as he leaned back in his chair, “That student would be Yaoyorozu.”

“... Oh.” Amamiya sank in his chair, “*Oh* .”

“Indeed.” Nezu steepled his paws.

“So, she won’t help us?” Mona asked, wincing, “N-not that I would blame her for not helping us! It’s just... we *need* these items.”

Nezu’s expression softened with a fond smile, “She has been through much, but she is smart enough to know that what her parents did was wrong in the first place. Otherwise, she would not have testified against them. Would you have something to sweeten the deal, say... a certain family heirloom?”

“Wha- How did you know about that!?” Mona snapped.

“I have my sources!”

“It would be a fair trade.” Amamiya said, his expression falling into careful thought, “Gentle Criminal said he would be willing to give it back to Yaoyorozu if the time came.”

“I see. That works well enough for us.” Nezu glanced at the time, “I can call her here after classes end today, and we can have a meeting to discuss her role in this plan.”

“You won’t tell her the truth?”

“We may have to tell her a small portion of it, but not the full extent. Not unless you want to, Amamiya.” Nezu said, “We could say it is a joint exercise between you and the staff, which wouldn’t be a complete lie.”

“She *is* the Empress, and I would hate to lie to her.” Amamiya shook his head, “But I want to wait until the other teachers know the full truth first.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Nezu firmly nodded, “I presume there’s enough time between your talk with Bakugo and the end of the school day to get it from Gentle Criminal? I can have Hound Dog dismiss him early.”

“That should work.”

“Very well,” Nezu turned to his computer, “I’ll email Hound Dog about it right away. Was there anything else?”

Amamiya nodded, “We’re wondering if we can use Power Loaders lab to make additional items, such as elemental bombs and smoke screens.”

“I see.” Nezu cupped his cheek with a paw, “I’ll inform Power Loader of the situation, but I’ll have him give everything to me for safekeeping, aside from your phone. I’ll distribute everything evenly before the designated heroes go to the USJ on the day of the Cultural Festival.”

“I suppose that’s fair.” Amamiya said with a surprisingly accepting tone, “Thank you for trusting us with this.”

“Of course. I appreciate you taking all of the extra time and effort to protect my staff, too.” Nezu’s ears twitched, “Ah, what perfect timing for a visitor.”

Nezu pressed the button under his desk to open the door. Ectoplasm walked in, not even bothering to knock. He must’ve been used to it.

“I’m here to take Amamiya and Mona back to the dorms before the students get out for lunch.” Ectoplasm said as his ghostly white eyes locked onto the pair.

“Very well. Amamiya finished with his testing!”

Ectoplasm’s eyes widened as he stared at the gargantuan packets within Nezu’s reach, “Quite impressive.”

“Run along then!” Nezu said to cover Amamiya’s embarrassment, “It would be unfortunate for them to be caught up in the lunch rush!”

Amamiya stood, bowed respectfully to Nezu, and walked out with Ectoplasm.

Nezu sighed in contentment, his previous excitement returning in droves as he finished his emails to the respective teachers, then returned to grading Amamiya's work.

He was thrilled to craft much more challenging courses for the boy. It's been so long since his last personal student. He hoped Amamiya would stick around long enough to enjoy them.

Oh, he's going to have so much *fun* !

Ren leaned against the gate, scrolling through the Phantom Thief chatroom on the phone Nezu gave them. Spinner and the others flooded it with what the teachers made them do today. The other chatroom was a much more calm conversation between him and Hitoshi.

He frowned as a sudden thought came to him.

Ren had never forgotten a certain number given to him. He added the number and sent a picture. The reaction was immediate.

[Gang Orca]

Really? I gave you my number ages ago in Sapporo for any emergency, was worried sick for months after Kamino, and your first message to me right now is a picture of Mona sleeping on a couch?

[Joker]

No regrets?

He could feel Orca's exasperation oozing from the device. Ren thought the whale man would disown him before the next reply finally came several minutes later.

[Gang Orca]

...

Mona is rather adorable.

I suppose I'll forgive you if you let me ruffle your hair at the Festival.

Nezu has been very direct in saying that he wants us there for some reason.

[Joker]

I won't tell Mona you said that.

He'd have a fit.

... And that's fair.

[Gang Orca]

The others in our little hero group have been worried about you, kid.

I have the number for the chatroom we created, if you would like to join it. I'm sure everyone would be ecstatic to hear from you.

[Joker]

Sounds great!

... Just keep in mind that Nezu and the other teachers can see everything on this phone.

[Gang Orca]

I see. I'll remind Miruko to behave.

The next few minutes were comprised of a lot of screaming text messages and a constant barrage of questions. Within minutes, he, Hawks, and Miruko had started a relentless meme war. Ryukyu, Tensei, and Gang Orca replied with obvious exasperation, and though Best Jeanist replied the least, he still read every message and stated he was glad Ren was settling in at U.A.

Ren looked up at the sound of heavy footfalls, staring as Bakugo stomped over to him with shoulders slumped. His white knuckles gripped a wrapped bento. He stopped a few feet away, shuffling in place with a signature scowl.

“Come on,” Ren silenced his phone and stuck it in his pocket. He nudged the gate open and waved Bakugo forward, “There’s a place we can talk in the teacher dorms. It’ll be... mostly private.”

Bakugo’s scowl deepened, “Define ‘mostly.’”

Ren shrugged as they crossed the front lawn, “Ectoplasm will be nearby for ‘safety’ reasons. They never specified who it was for, though.”

Bakugo scoffed, “Whatever.”

They went inside. Morgana looked at Ren from his spot on a couch, but Ren shook his head as they passed. Bakugo shadowed him as Ren stopped in the kitchen to grab his own bento, before going to a side entrance to the gardens, near the laundry room. Waiting there with the door already open, was Ectoplasm.

He leaned against the door frame with his arms crossed, idly watching the two boys pass.

Ren went ahead and sat at the bench underneath the fiery maple tree, placing his bento on his lap as Bakugo studied the garden.

“Are you just going to stand there and admire the scenery?” Ren asked, smirking.

Bakugo huffed as he marched over to the bench and sat down, leaving a sizable gap between them. He practically ripped off the cloth tied around his bento and opened it. He stabbed into his food as if it had personally insulted his ancestors.

Ren watched Bakugo wolf down the first bite, before opening his own. Surprise, it was curry and an apple swan Eri made for him for dessert. The uneven cuts made the wings look wonky, but Eri was so happy to have done it. Well... ‘happy’ in her own little way.

The food caught Bakugo’s eye, but the other boy grumbled and turned away. They ate in a tense silence.

“It’s like watching a noble prince dine next to a ravenous street dog.” Satanael commented.

Ren held in a snort as he picked through his food. The quiet became disturbed with the wind gently rustling the leaves overhead, Morgana’s way of saying he was close if things went south. There was no excuse for the extended silence once their food had disappeared into their stomachs.

The awkward atmosphere crystallized like fine glass, it would take a soft breath or a whispered word to shatter it. Strange, how Bakugo broke it so easily earlier, and now he glared daggers into his empty lunch as he grit his teeth together. His shoulders trembled, his grip tightening on the box so much it looked as if it would break under the pressure.

“Why?” Bakugo growled, his voice was like gravel as he all but spit the word out.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific.”

Bakugo pinned his ruby red glare on Ren, "I called you names for weeks, taunted and insulted you, and during Kamino I *still* demanded answers from you! I was a complete asshole since I first saw you, and yet you still saved my sorry ass when it came down to the wire. *Why ?*"

Ren raised a brow, "Because I don't let the people who need my help die, no matter how they acted towards me before."

Bakugo bristled, "So *you* died instead?"

Ren flinched. He stared down at his bento as Bakugo's gaze drilled into the side of his head.

"You don't even deny it." Bakugo's shoulders sagged with a tired sigh, more exhausted than a boy his age should be. Ren felt the same. "How many times?"

Ren glanced towards Ectoplasm, who had turned fully towards them, ghostly eyes wide. Nezu and the rest of the staff would learn the truth eventually, and trying to sugarcoat it with Bakugo would just end badly.

Ren set his bento aside, leaned back on the bench, and looked up towards the leaves. A light breeze brushed his face. Satanael's silent encouragement gave him the strength to utter the truth.

"My Personas are a part of me, as much as I am a part of them. They are all me, and I am all of them. We are all pieces of the same being." Ren started, keeping his voice as level as possible, "The first time I died was when All For One killed Seth."

Ectoplasm went as still as a statue in the left corner of Ren's eye, Bakugo froze in equal measure on his right. Ren continued.

"Orpheus brought me back after that piece of our soul died, shattering the rest of us as Seth's body turned to ash."

“That black stuff that came from your eyes and mouth when Satanael came down...” Bakugo, one not usually attuned to being quiet, *whispered* in horror.

“That was the result of pushing on when my mind and soul were actively crumbling.” Ren grimaced, “The details after that are a bit fuzzy, but I died at least once more in the hospital, and Cerberus used the same skill as Orpheus to bring me back again. The third and final time was when my luck finally ran out, and my body couldn’t take the strain anymore. I stayed dead until Mona could revive me.”

Bakugo paled, then cursed under his breath as he scrubbed his face.

Ren glanced at Ectoplasm. The hero balled his hands into tight fists as his white eyes glared at the ground, though whether in regret, anger, or some other emotion, Ren didn’t know.

Bakugo suddenly shot to his feet, “Stay here.”

“What?”

“Are you deaf or something!? I said stay here!!” Bakugo snapped as he threw his chopsticks in his bento before scooping it under his arm, “I’ll be right back!”

Ren watched him storm away with wide eyes, brushing past Ectoplasm and disappearing into the teacher’s dorm. Ectoplasm stared at Ren with a question in his eyes. Ren shook his head and relaxed back into the bench as he waited.

Bakugo returned minutes later with another item. Something that sent chills through Ren’s whole body as if he had been splashed with ice water. Bakugo’s expression was unreadable as he shoved the figure in Ren’s hand and returned to his seat, leaning forward as his arms rested over his knees. He watched Ren carefully as he gaped at it.

Ren had meant to buy more figures of his Personas earlier in the year. Hell, Arsene's figure was sitting on the corner of his desk in his dorm. He hadn't had the chance to buy others before the Summer Camp.

"Seth..." Ren's throat tightened as he turned the figure around in his hands, his heart twisting at Seth's valiant pose as if he were about to take off with a mighty roar. He cleared his throat and smiled sadly at Bakugo, "How long have you had this?"

"A while. Seth found Icy Hot and I during the Summer Camp. Saved our asses from that creepy villain with the blade teeth, and then I yelled at him for it... yelled at *you* for it." Bakugo scuffed his shoe into the ground, "Looking back now, I think he was pretty badass. I even named one of my signature moves after him."

"Really? What's it called?"

Bakugo smirked, "Dragon Cannon."

"Is it powerful?"

"You're damn right it is. Strong enough to take down Gang Orca."

"I'd like to see it sometime." Ren traced a finger over the spines around Seth's head, "Wait, why are there scratch marks here?"

"The bastards who made it got the wrong number of spikes, so I filed them off to have the right amount." Bakugo rolled his eyes, "Anyone with half a brain could see they got it wrong."

Ren burst out into laughter, a crystal clear sound that mixed with the breeze sifting through the leaves. Grinning, he wiped his eyes with the edge of his sleeve, "You know Seth said the same thing when we first saw these being made. He would be... happy that you paid attention."

Bakugo sobered, "Would he be happy that I noticed, or happy because I'm the Tower?"

"I think it'd be a mix of both. Each Persona wields an Arcana, just like the people I've forged bonds with." Ren looked in between the Seth figure and Bakugo, "Seth was proud to have someone with as much fight as you to be our Tower. He wouldn't accept anything less."

"Don't bullshit me. I know what the Tower means." Bakugo muttered as he looked down at his open hands, a small explosion popped in his palm before he closed his fist, "Destruction. Chaos. Tragedy. I destroy any good thing that comes to me." He glared at Ren, "I got *you* killed in Kamino, for fuck's sake. I've been a jerk and a douche bag for most of my life. How could anybody be *proud* of something like that?"

"The Tower looks like a bad card at first, but it doesn't always mean you cause death and destruction everywhere you go." Ren channeled his inner Chihaya as Bakugo gave him a disbelieving look, "It just means that there is a chance for you to learn and grow through sudden changes. Take Kamino, for example. Yes, it was a horrible experience, but we've all grown stronger and learned from it. Without that, I never would've awakened my true power through Satanael. From what I can see, you got much stronger too."

Bakugo shook his head as his expression fell, looking up again when Ren nudged him with an elbow.

"Let's face it; Would you have admitted you were an asshole before Kamino?"

Bakugo thought it over for a moment, "No."

"Would you repeat your past mistakes, knowing now that they were wrong?"

"... No."

“Then you’ve grown from your experiences. Change is never easy, Bakugo, but sometimes its necessary to make us better people.”

“If you say so.” Bakugo said with a scoff.

“*I know* so.” Ren held out the Seth figure for Bakugo.

Bakugo pushed it back towards Ren, “Keep it. I can always get another.”

“Oh, thanks.” Ren held the figure to his chest, then smirked at Bakugo, “And you’re even giving out presents now. See? You’ve grown so much as a person! I’m so proud.”

“Shut up!” Bakugo sputtered as anger flushed his face. He suddenly grimaced as if he remembered something, “Hey, you know about the Red Rain, right?”

Ectoplasm startled in the corner of Ren’s eye, “What about it?”

Bakugo scrutinized him. He opened and closed his mouth several times, before running a hand through his hair.

“I saw a red sky over U.A. long before those shitty extras. You actually know what’s going on in this place, and not whatever bullshit Nezu is trying to hide.”

Ren stiffened as every Persona snapped to attention. His demeanor shifted, becoming the Leader so many looked up to. He sat up straight, regarding Bakugo with a terrifying sharpness to his eyes.

“What do you mean you saw it before? When and how?”

Bakugo’s eyes narrowed at Ren’s sudden shift, “It happened whenever I stepped into U.A. It was only a quick flash of red sky when I first saw it, and I got a killer migraine. I asked Raccoon Face and Shitty Hair if they saw anything, but they didn’t. What the hell is it? Why the fuck did I see it before everyone else?”

Raccoon Face? Shitty Hair? Ren could guess who those horrible nicknames belonged to, but he pushed that aside as he clutched his chin in thought.

What made Bakugo so different that he saw it first? Long before Ren or Morgana returned to the USJ... and they didn't even witness the hellish sky that currently dominated their home.

Satanael shuffled his wings, *"I hate to imply this, Trickster, but what if he were a candidate for a change of heart?"* Ren's blood ran cold as Satanael continued with a bowed head, *"Nothing as big as a Palace Ruler. Perhaps he would be a smaller target such as those found in Mementos. He admitted to being... a less than stellar person before. If he was a bully or someone of ill repute, then it's possible he had some abstract form of a Treasure that reacted to the Metaverse's presence in the USJ."*

"I sense no budding Treasure within him." Shiva said, *"Are you certain?"*

"The Moon of our world changed his own heart once he realized his wrongdoing. Perhaps this Tower went through something similar." Kohryu whispered with a sweeping breath, *"He could have become something much worse considering the Metaverse's slow corruption of this world."*

"Too bad. I would love to rip his heart out for how he treated Big Brother before."

"Alice." Ishtar admonished, *"He may not be the shining bastion of chivalry, but we can all agree that he's changed for the better."*

Bakugo stared at him, picking up on Ren's subtle change in his expression, *"If you figured it out, then tell me!"*

Ren set the Seth figure on top of his bento and crossed his arms, *"You won't like it."*

“I can take it.”

“Alright.” Ren sighed as he stared off at some inscrutable thing in the distance, “Back home, my friends and I used our powers to make someone have a ‘Change Of Heart’. We’d steal the Distorted Desires that turned people into twisted and deranged individuals, and without their Distorted Desires they’d feel remorse and confess their crimes.”

Bakugo stiffened, but listened aptly.

Ectoplasm was a forgotten ghost by the door, though he committed every detail to memory.

“Our targets ranged from a gym teacher who sexually harassed students, an artist who abused and stole work from his pupils, all the way up to a politician who used the same sort of power to murder and blackmail his way to the top. But not everyone was a big target. We had all manner of stalkers, abusers, cheaters-” Ren stared Bakugo in the eye, “... and bullies.”

Bakugo flinched as if Ren just slapped him. A hoarse, mirthless chuckle escaped Bakugo as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“So you’re saying I’d be one of those targets?”

“Maybe, several months ago. But it seems you changed your own heart, so you wouldn’t have anything Distorted in you anymore. See what I mean about the Tower and change?”

“... I guess.” Bakugo sulked as he met Ren’s gaze once more, “But what does all of *that* have to do with the Red Rain?”

Ren’s heart beat faster. He’d have to tell the truth, or some sliver of it. Bakugo was smart enough to pick up on any lie, and trying to hide it now after everything they’ve just discussed not only felt wrong, but could permanently sour their relationship.

“What’s behind the veil is the source of everything. The Distorted Desires, the blood Red Rain, the feeling of *wrongness* pervading the whole school.” Ren stood up and turned to Bakugo with a mask of conviction, his eyes flooding with golden fire, “Mona and I were fighting against it with our friends when we... when that *thing* pulled a fast one and banished us here. We’ve been separated from everyone ever since.”

Bakugo’s eyes widened, “That’s why you suddenly appeared at the USJ.”

Ren nodded.

“... What is it? This thing you were fighting?”

Ren kept eye contact, his gold gaze glowing with righteous fury as his other Personas stirred with a flurry of emotions.

“The God Of Control, Yaldabaoth.”

A breeze kicked up, cutting through their clothes with an icy chill. It definitely wasn’t Morgana’s magic, given the dizzying sourness poisoning it. No Shadows appeared, at least, but the foulness of the Metaverse clung to it.

Bakugo studied him intently as the sudden wind died down, scanning Ren for any lie. He scowled when he found nothing but the truth, the raw conviction in Ren’s voice and the sickly wind the only shreds of evidence.

“You’ll kick his ass next time, right?”

“He won’t know what hit him.” Ren’s smirk was like the tip of a blade, “That’s what Mona and I came here for. You won’t have to worry about the Red Rain for much longer.”

Bakugo stiffened. There was a firm finality in Ren’s voice that must’ve tipped him off to something, but Ectoplasm stepped into the

garden before he could say anything.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but the lunch period is almost over." The hero said solemnly, "Bakugo, you should return to the main building now, otherwise you'll be late for your next class."

Bakugo released a breath and got to his feet. He pinned Ren with another odd look, "Nobody else knows about this, do they? Everyone at U.A., especially the extras in 1-A?"

Ren gave Ectoplasm an apologetic look before turning towards Bakugo, "Not yet. Nezu put most of the pieces together, though. We're working with him to get to the bottom of this."

"Are you going to tell them?"

"... In time. I'm not ready to tell everyone the whole truth yet."

Bakugo stiffly nodded, "Then your secret is safe with me until you do."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stalked into the dorm.

Ren turned to Ectoplasm, who simply stared at him.

"I... I have many questions after what I just heard." Ectoplasm shuffled his cloak as Ren held his breath, "But Nezu assured me that we'd get answers at a later time, so I won't ask them right now. This may not mean much coming from me, but if you or Mona ever need anything, anything at all, you can ask me. Nobody should have gone through what you did."

"Thank you." Ren said with a relieved smile, "You didn't get to eat lunch. Do you want me to make you a plate of curry? I'll even whip up some fresh coffee to go with it."

Ectoplasm hummed, "... My free period is right after lunch."

"It's settled then."

Ren gathered his empty bento and the Seth figure from the bench. He and Ectoplasm walked together back into the building, and within ten minutes the whole dorm took on the scent of coffee and curry.

It kept Ren's hands busy as he thought over his talk with Bakugo.

He hoped the impending encounter with the Empress wouldn't be half as difficult as the Tower.

Class 1-A waited with their breaths lodged in their throats as Cementoss walked out with Mr. Compress following like a sulking phantom. The door shut, and the pressure in the room abated with a unified sigh of relief.

"Wow, and I thought Aizawa-sensei was intense!" Kaminari blurted.

"Right?" Ashido clapped her hands together, "I never thought someone handing out graded homework could be so aggressive!"

"He barely did anything though, aside from handing out papers." Sero said as he stared at the door, "Otherwise he just kinda... sat around and stared at us with that freaky mask of his? He didn't even talk after Cementoss introduced him!"

"Most likely because he and the other vigilantes are still training! La Brava with Midnight, even though she was much kinder, acted much the same way!" Iida chopped an arm at the smaller desk next to the teacher's, which Mr. Compress used, "It's common for them to take a more passive role until they are properly equipped for the job! At least, that's what happens with sidekicks at my brother's agency!"

"I honestly thought it would be a lot worse, kero." Asui said as her eyes turned to Bakugo, "You two barely looked at each other. Considering what he did to you at the Summer Camp-"

Bakugo bristled, "The hobo said he's not part of the League anymore, *obviously*. So drop it frog breath."

“I-I agree!” Aoyama lacked his usual flair and sparkles, taking on a sweaty and pale complexion, “Let bygones be bygones, oui?”

“I guess...” Ashido suddenly perked up and whirled to Bakugo, “Hey, what did you and Joker talk about over lunch? We didn’t get a chance to ask!”

“Mina.” Yaoyorozu warned.

“Mind your own damn business, Racoon Face!” Bakugo snapped.

“You don’t have to answer that question, Bakugo.” Todoroki’s smooth voice resonated through them like cold river water, “But... was he okay? Joker, I mean.”

“I know we saw him this morning,” Midoriya piped up, fidgeting with a certain notebook he’d been pouring over for days, “B-but none of the other students have, and he hasn’t shown up with any of the teachers for a class either.”

“He’s fine.” Bakugo said with a roll of his eyes, “He’s still the same annoying pain in the ass as he was back at the Blue Lotus.”

“And yet you say that with a much warmer tone than you have before!” Kirishima said, beaming, “You guys must’ve had a real manly talk, huh?”

“Shut up!”

“Enough about Joker.” Ojima stood from his chair and collected his bag, “We should all get together and talk about what we’re going to do about the Festival instead. We narrowed it down to a concert, but we still need to dish out roles for practice.”

Iida puffed out his chest, “You’re correct! I’ll need to make a list and-”

The door opened to reveal Aizawa. He briefly scanned them before zeroing in on a certain student.

“Yaoyorozu, Nezu wants to see you in his office.”

She nodded and stood in one flowing movement, “Everyone, discuss the Festival back in the dorms, alright? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Leave it to us, Vice Rep!” Ashido gleefully shouted as Yaoyorozu left with Aizawa.

They walked only a few steps down the hall before the whispers started, weaving through the school like fine silk.

“Oh my god, did you get to see any of them today?”

“Yes! Spinner was with Snipe-sensei, and he was so cool! He smiled and let us take pictures with him and his cat!”

“Lucky. Mr. Compress was really distant and glared at anyone who even approached him. His mask is so terrifying!”

“La Brava was so adorable! She and Midnight-sensei really work well together!”

“One of my friends had to see Hound Dog yesterday over a family emergency, and she said Gentle Criminal was there. Apparently, the tea he made was divine and helped calm her down a lot.”

“I’m still mad that nobody has seen Joker yet. When are the teachers gonna let him out?”

“Right? Oh! I heard that one of the Hero Courses bumped into him this morning!”

“Really!? They’re so lucky! Which class was it?”

“1-A.”

“Ugh, of course it was. They always hog Joker’s attention!”

Yaoyorozu turned to Aizawa when he sighed, "One of the other teachers must've let it slip."

"Word gets around fast in this school." Yaoyorozu said as they continued, the flow of students thinning as they neared Nezu's office, "What did Nezu need to see me for?"

Aizawa shrugged, "Nezu hasn't shared anything with me."

"Oh... I see."

They reached the door, which opened before Aizawa could knock. She swore she saw her teacher's eye twitch before his expression faded to neutral.

"Come in!" Nezu chirped.

They stepped inside, but Yaoyorozu stopped dead in her tracks at the other person in the room, sitting on the couch holding a cup of coffee. Joker, dressed in casual clothes, blinked at her, his expression melting her hesitation with a warm smile.

Aizawa narrowed his eyes, "Nezu, what is this about?"

"I'm afraid that's between Amamiya, Miss Yaoyorozu, and myself."

Aizawa opened his mouth for a retort, but Yaoyorozu put a hand on his shoulder, "It's alright, Sensei. I'll talk with them."

"Come on, Eraser." Joker's smile, or rather *Amamiya's*, morphed into a teasing smirk, "We won't bite. Besides, she's a hero-in-training who can take care of herself."

Aizawa deadpanned, before looking at her. She firmly nodded. Nezu waved him off, and he left with one last warning glare at Nezu, and a nod to Amamiya.

Nezu gestured to the chair in front of his desk, "Please, sit! Would you like some tea?"

“Yes. Thank you.” Nezu set a porcelain cup in front of her and poured from a pot that had been prepared beforehand, filled with golden tea. She held it before taking a sip. “Oh! Is this Golden Tips Imperial?”

“You know of it?”

She looked over at Amamiya, and nodded, “Of course I do. It’s been a staple in my family for years.”

“Hmm!” Nezu grinned after he took another sip of his own tea, “Gentle Criminal recommended this blend to me recently, and I have to say I’ve grown quite fond of it myself!”

Yaoyorozu’s smile tightened, “I see.”

Amamiya and Nezu shared a look, before Nezu sighed. He put down his cup, his expression falling into something more serious, “I would like to apologize for springing this on you out of the blue, Miss Yaoyorozu. If circumstances were different, I would let you set this up at your own pace. However, time is not on our side at the moment. It hardly ever is, it seems.”

“What do you mean?”

Amamiya set his empty coffee cup on the table, stood up, and walked over to Nezu’s desk. He set Admiral Feesh aside before taking the other chair for himself, directly facing her. Her shoulders tensed as his eyes met hers, a mixture of vibrant silver splashed with drops of sunlight. It wasn’t the full-on blazing gold when they met at the manor so long ago now, but it was just as piercing.

Amamiya took in a breath to speak, when she held up her hand. He paused, furrowing his brow at her as her expression hardened.

“I don’t want an apology from you, if that’s what you were about to say.” She said, surprised at the gentleness of her tone. She meant to

be a little harsher, but some warm feeling in her heart didn't allow her to be, "I just want to know *why* ."

"Why?" Amamiya parroted, "Bakugo asked the same thing, you know."

"Please don't change the subject."

His smile faltered, "I wasn't trying to." Amamiya crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, not losing eye contact with her, "What happened to your parents was a price for something else."

"Explain."

"Did you happen to notice all of those kidnapping rings taken down after I visited your manor?"

"Yes, I did." She ran a finger over Flit's brooch as her wings twitched again, "It was an exchange of information in return for what happened to my parents?"

Amamiya nodded, "Reveal your parents' dirty laundry for information on missing people. Children, elderly, people who were sold on the black market for their quirks, child prostitution on top of experimentation. That same trail eventually lead to where Quirkless people were being held captive in Sapporo."

Her face drained of blood.

Nezu sipped his drink as his eyes flicked between them.

Amamiya bowed his head, "Your parents were the price to save all of them. You said you didn't want an apology, so let me offer this instead."

He picked up a small box that had been sitting on the edge of Nezu's desk, and held it out to her.

She downed the rest of her tea as her mouth suddenly went dry. It was clear that the two of them waited for her to make the next move, as Amamiya was frozen, waiting for her to take it. Yaoyorozu set her cup on the desk and reached for it. It was heavy, for something so small.

She popped it open, the lid dropping from her grasp as she stared at the intricate silver pocket watch resting in a bed of purple velvet. The metal sent ice into her skin as she picked it up, mouth agape.

“My grandfather’s pocket watch? This is... it’s a family heirloom that’s been passed down for generations. I remembered it wasn’t working the last time I saw. I was only a little girl, then.”

“We found it in the old mansion.” Amamiya’s expression softened, “It was broken, but I managed to fix it up. It works like a charm now.”

Yaoyorozu opened it, the intricate gears visible under the mechanism ticking like a heartbeat. That Hatsume woman had been correct. It was well taken care of, with nary a scratch or any sign of it being mishandled.

She held the watch as delicately as if it were a baby bird, willing her eyes not to water as she looked between Nezu and Amamiya.

“Is this why you wanted me to come here? To give this back?”

“Partly.” Nezu stated evenly, “I wish to add that Amamiya left out a vital piece of information about why these events happened the way they did-”

“Nezu.”

“Amamiya was manipulated into revealing your family’s wrongdoings because All For One orchestrated everything behind the scenes.”

“That’s not an excuse.” Amamiya pinched the bridge of his nose, “There was probably another way to find those people, but I was so

desperate that I didn't see any. I should've looked for the information elsewhere."

"No."

Amamiya turned to her, "But-"

"No. You did what you did because people needed help." She held the watch to her chest, "I admit I have mixed feelings about you, Joker. When we met that night at the Blue Lotus, you were very kind and offered me admirable advice. You've continued to treat me with respect, even when we came face to face within my home. On the other hand, though I understand *why* you did it now, you're the cause of what happened to my parents. They did wrong and will be justly punished for it, but they are still my parents. It was... difficult for me to stand up to them."

Amamiya pursed his lips, but weathered her words with dignified grace, "That's... fair."

That feeling in her heart nudged the next words out of her, almost like a guiding hand, "I don't think we can start over, but-" She held out her right hand, the left still holding her grandfather's watch, "how about we call a truce instead? Perhaps we can both work to better things from here on out."

"A truce." He smiled as he took her hand in his, "It's better than what I was expecting, honestly."

They shook once and then let go. That spark within her seemed to purr with satisfaction, growing in strength as it wrapped around her heart, as warm as a cat sleeping in a patch of sunlight. Amamiya blinked oddly, as if he had felt it too. Their smiles, previously small and polite, widened.

Nezu subtly leaned forward and studied them with a strange look in his eyes.

Yaoyorozu cleared her throat as she broke eye contact, "Is this all we needed to discuss?"

Like a popped bubble, the mood changed again. Nezu and Amamiya exchanged a long glance.

With a nod from Amamiya, Nezu started, "There is one serious matter with which we'd like your aid."

"My aid?"

She found herself under the intense, scrutinizing gaze of the principal, "You can back out if you wish, but understand that what is discussed from here onward cannot leave this room."

She straightened at his strict tone, "What's going on?"

"We're preparing for another Red Rain." Amamiya said plainly.

Yaoyorozu's stomach dropped, "*Another* one? There's going to be more?"

"Yes, unfortunately. It will most likely happen during the Cultural Festival." Nezu said, causing her heart to beat faster, "And no, we cannot cancel it. Avoiding this will only worsen the situation in the long run."

She frantically looked between them, "Everyone will be safe, right? Witnessing one was terrifying enough."

"Of course, we'll do everything in our power to protect everyone." Nezu said, "If you would, Amamiya?"

He stood. Her breath was stolen from her as his costume materialized in a flowing veil of blue cinders. She, like the rest of her classmates, saw his new costume from Spotlight. But seeing it *in person* was a marvel, a brilliant mix of deep onyx with gold trimming, with a pop of scarlet and glittering gold from his gloves. The raw power and majesty he exuded made the hair on her arms stand on

end, as if she sat before a regal monarch of which thousands would eagerly bend the knee to.

Which, whenever she saw the comments on his Spotlight, wasn't so far fetched in reality.

Joker searched through his pockets, oblivious of her gawking, and set items on Nezu's desk. A folded Black Robe, a Black Kogatana, a Black Model Gun, and a blank card last.

She stared into Joker's demonic gold and black mask, so different to the white and black domino mask she saw months ago.

"I know what the cause of the Red Rain is," Joker stated, "And it is far more dangerous than it appears. What you witnessed with the rest of your classmates was barely the tip of the iceberg, and if we don't do something about it soon..."

"Then it won't only be U.A. that will pay for it," Nezu interjected with a deep frown, "But it will affect the entire world at large."

This news deeply unsettled her.

But right now they didn't need a terrified girl floundering for answers, they needed a *hero* to work with them. Her heart pounded in her ears and her palms became sweaty, but she took a deep breath and slowly let it out. She donned her hero persona, Creati.

"What do you need me to do?" She asked, her voice sharp and alert.

Joker smiled. He lifted the Black Kogatana and handed it to her. She placed the watch in her pocket and took it with both hands, running her fingers down the cold metal.

"If possible, I need you to create exact replicas of each of these items." Joker said, donning an equal air of grave seriousness, "With them, I can create weapons and armor that will greatly increase our chances for a successful mission."

Her eyes widened, “Will normal weapons and support items not work?”

Joker shook his head, “We can’t risk it. Whatever comes with the Red Rain will most likely be packing heat, and normal support items and certain quirks may not work against them.”

So not just another Red Rain, but an *attack* during the Cultural Festival on top of it? Were they insane?

She glanced at Nezu, who rested his chin on his interlaced paws, “How are you planning to keep this from the media? There’s already a fairly large group of them right outside U.A. Plus with all of the people coming to the Cultural Festival, surely this is too dangerous!”

“We believe the event will be centered around the USJ, miles away from the festivities.” Nezu said with a nod, “But even so, security will be increased to the max, and several top pros, Joker’s teammates, and robots will be guarding the facility at all times during the Festival. If things do according to plan, then the mass majority won’t even suspect anything.”

“Kohryu and a few others will be covering for us while we deal with it.”

“... Kohryu?” The pieces of this shocking revelation came together, “So you are doing something during the Festival like the rest of the classes, except you’ll have a secret mission on top of it.” She looked at the black blade in her hands, her brows hardening in determination.

She set the knife down, and picked up the robe to feel what material it was made of. The kogatana was just a carbon steel blade painted black, and the robe was simple cotton and dyed the same color. The card wasn’t made of any special material, either. The Model Gun was made from a certain type of plastic rather than metal.

With a nod, she rolled up her sleeves. Multicolored lights sprouted on her forearm and an exact copy of the black blade was born from it. She gripped the hilt as she gave it a once over before handing it to Joker.

He studied it with a practiced eye, and nodded towards Nezu. Before long, perfect replicas of each item lay next to the original.

“Will it work?” Nezu asked Joker.

“Well, there’s one way to find out, but...” Joker looked at her, uncertain.

Nezu chuckled, “She’s come this far, Joker. Do you doubt her now?”

“Of course not. The Empress is made of sterner stuff than most people.”

Yaoyorozu put her hand over her heart, “I understand the gravity of the situation, and whatever is shared will be kept secret until you or Nezu state otherwise. I’ll stake my hero name on it.”

Joker released a long sigh through his nose, “Alright.”

He grabbed the copies she made, then walked towards wall. Her brow furrowed when he took a key from a silver chain around his neck and turned it mid-air. She jumped when a glowing barred door appeared out of nowhere, and he vanished inside without a trace. A chill permeated the whole room along with the soft light, a cloud of ghostly blue fog clinging to the floor.

Nezu chuckled as she sat there, frozen in shock, “I never suspected he had something like this up his sleeve, either. I had very much the same reaction!”

She blinked rapidly at Nezu, “His powers are truly unique, aren’t they?”

“Something like that.”

“Nezu...”

“Hmm?”

“There’s something bigger going on here, isn’t there? You said that whatever is happening at the USJ could affect the entire world. It has something to do with Joker specifically, doesn’t it? He wouldn’t know so much otherwise.”

Nezu grinned, “Ah, you are wise beyond your years, Miss Yaoyorozu. However, I cannot fully share everything yet.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s just say...” Nezu looked at the glowing door, his tail drooping over the back of his chair, “Some truths are stranger than fiction. We need a solid foundation of heroes to believe us before anyone else can know the full reality of his situation. That’s one of the challenges for us to overcome during the Cultural Festival.”

She was stunned by the cryptic answer, but had no choice but to accept it.

Nezu poured them another cup of tea while they awaited Joker’s return.

Several minutes passed before the barred door opened and Joker waltzed in with an impressive (and equally alarming) bounty in his arms. He set the pile on Nezu’s desk. She didn’t comment on how pale Joker turned since disappearing into the door, his hands trembling.

“It worked. It actually worked.” He said as he held up two weapons.

The quality would make the most experienced Support Company salivate. There was something to these weapons, like a presence lingering inside. The whip was garish in looks, from its bright gold

handle studded with sparkling jewels, to the whip itself being a pink strand of light ending in a studded golden spike.

The gun was its equal, a combat shotgun painted black. Though it had no jewels or bright gold, it felt as alive as the whip.

“Dainaraka Whip from Black Frost and a Megido Blaster from Shiva. Midnight could use the whip, and Snipe could take the shotgun, or he could borrow one of my pistols if it came down to it. Vasuki could also make a rifle, too.”

Nezu hummed, “Snipe is competent in many different arms, so there’s no need to worry about that.”

Joker nodded as he set them down, then he held up a beautiful robe of black feathers next, “Black Wing Robe from Yatagarasu. He’s the only one who can make armor in my current stock. The heroes should be able to wear it under their costumes with no hindrance, just like my teammates with the armor I gave them.”

He reached for a beautiful ring next. It looked as if it were carved from the purest turquoise ice from the arctic circle, it left a faint sheen of frost on Nezu’s desk.

Joker hesitated, staring at the ring as he held it in his palm.

“What is it, Joker?” Nezu asked.

“I...” Joker scratched the back of his head, “Byakko was supposed to make a Skill Card, but it didn’t work. Elizabeth said Byakko wouldn’t become a Skill Card, or a weapon, or any piece of armor. She suggested that he needed something else and gave me a rock. A *rock*. I thought she was joking, but we got this ring out of it. So I tested Cerberus for the Skill Card, and instead of Megaton Raid he became God’s Hand.”

This whole conversation was officially lost on her.

Nezu nodded along as if he understood everything Joker said.

“Not only that. These weapons... this armor...” Joker frowned at them, some emotion flickering across his eyes. She didn’t like to think it was *pain*, but... “They’re stronger than before. Upgraded versions of the items I would get back home. Much higher attack power for either weapon, with more defence on the robe.”

“Why such a drastic change?” Nezu asked, clearly intrigued.

“Lavenza said its because we’re using a completely different source. It’s how Fafnir was born in the first place.” Joker paced a small circle around Nezu’s office, fidgeting with the ring between his thumb and pointer finger, “But if this ring does what I think it does, then it could add a whole new level of strategy and bigger advantages over Shadows-”

Nezu cleared his throat. Joker froze and stared at them, horrified.

“... Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright. What do you want to do?”

“I’d like to keep the ring for now.” Joker said as he met Nezu’s void black gaze, “To test something before we give it to anyone. Just to be safe.”

“By all means, keep the Skill Card and the ring. However, I’ll request that the weapons and armor stay with me for the time being.”

Joker nodded. He pocketed the Skill Card and the ring before his costume disappeared in a shower of bright blue embers. The blue door faded away along with the ghostly mist, and if she didn’t know any better she’d think nothing out of the ordinary had ever occurred here.

“How much do I owe for the gear?” Nezu asked.

“Well, since you asked.” Amamiya dug out a phone to text something.

Nezu picked up his phone after it chimed. Whatever it was, he didn’t react beyond a flick of his ear.

“... I see. This will be quite the expensive ordeal, indeed.”

“This is nothing.” Amamiya chuckled, “Just wait until I start fusing.”

“Um, is there anything else for me to do?”

“Ah, my apologies.” Nezu smiled at her, “But could you come back every day after classes to make copies of these items? I don’t want you to overuse your quirk by doing them all in one go.”

“It would be no problem for me, Principal Nezu.”

“Excellent! That marks one thing off the list. Now then...” Nezu mischievously grinned, “Could you escort Amamiya to the support lab?”

He raised a brow, “I thought you wouldn’t let me be alone with any of the students? Bakugo definitely wasn’t an exception earlier.”

Nezu waved his paw, “Most students are out of the main building and other teachers are otherwise occupied. I’m sure a two minute walk with Miss Yaoyorozu would be no trouble. Unless, of course, you feel like you need a babysitter for such a trivial task?”

Amamiya shook his head with a weary sigh.

“Good. Run along now. I’ll collect your payment and meet you in the lab in twenty minutes!”

Amamiya grumbled under his breath, but the dismissal was obvious.

Yaoyorozu stood and gave Nezu a polite bow. They walked out together, and stopped when the door to Nezu’s office closed.

“You don’t have to take me there if you don’t want to.” He said as he stuck his hands in his pockets, “I can probably get there by myself. Eventually. This place is huge.”

“It’s no trouble.” She said, waving her hand, “It’s this way.”

They walked in silence through the empty halls. Amamiya took to scanning their surroundings, his eyes lingering over windows and doors, occasionally winking at any cameras they passed under. Her curiosity got the better of her.

“Can I ask a question?” She asked to distract herself.

“Shoot.”

“Am I really the Empress?”

Amamiya stopped, his eye brows raising, “Yes, you are. Did the whole class figure out the Arcanas? Bakugo asked me about being the Tower earlier.”

“We did, somewhat. Tokoyami was of great help in that regard.” They continued walking at a leisurely pace, “Why do you assign Arcanas to people?”

Amamiya smirked, “That’s two questions.”

“O-Oh.” She felt her face heat up as her eyes went to the ground, “You don’t have to answer-”

“I don’t assign them to people.”

She blinked, “You don’t?”

“It’s the other way around, really.” He said, smiling wistfully, “The Arcana takes to whoever I develop a deeper relationship with. In return, that bond provides me with strength. You’re the Empress because of the way you are naturally, Yaoyorozu, not my personal interpretation of you.”

“I see.” Her mind turned over the possibilities, “Can I ask who holds other Arcanas? I’ve read that there are many, and I can’t help but wonder.”

“There’s quite a list. Nezu is the Devil, Aizawa is the Hierophant. Midoriya is the Chariot while Bakugo is the Tower. Believe it or not, Miruko herself is the High Priestess and Hawks has the Star.” He leaned closer and whispered, “Judgement is *All Might* .”

She gaped, “No way.”

“Yes way. Miruko was so excited she punched me when she found out.”

“Do you yourself have an Arcana?”

“I started out as the Fool, and evolved to the World after Kamino...” He frowned suddenly, “But there have been some new developments, an extended deck if you wanted to call it that. A few are in the Reversed position, while another person can be the Upright of the same Arcana. That’s... never happened before. There’s also extra cards such as Apostle, Aeon, and Faith. There’s also Hunger, but let’s just say I’m glad that one didn’t get very far and leave it at that.”

“Why are there so many extras?”

“My original Strength said it was my body’s way of coping for a sudden lack of a deck, and to stockpile extra power from this unique Sea-” He cut himself off and cleared his throat, “Nevermind. Sorry for chatting your ear off. I haven’t had the chance to talk about this with someone else in quite some time.”

She stiffened. Original Strength? A *sudden* lack of a deck? A Fool evolving to the World...

That begs the questions she asked mere days ago in class; *Where was Joker from? What happened to him before the USJ?*

Had he been torn way from his 'original deck'? An entire group of people with whom he's forged deep bonds with. Were they gone? Or was the distance so great he had to forcefully adapt to less than ideal circumstances. But if they were still around, why didn't Joker go to them instead of staying here to develop new ones?

... That implication made her stomach sink deeper.

"No, don't apologize." She whispered before the silence stretched too long, "I was the one who asked such sensitive questions in the first place. Come, the Support Lab is just down this hall."

They turned the corner and came to the heavy steel door.

There was a sharp intake of breath before Amamiya grabbed her arm and yanked her back. She could barely cry out before an explosion rocked the hallway, the thick door of the Support Lab getting blown off of its hinges. Two bodies flailed with the black smoke flowing into the hallway, one coughing and the other cackling with mad glee.

"That was a voice modulator for my hero costume!" A vaguely familiar voice yelled, "How did you make it explode!?"

"I thought I could improve it by adding a jet engine!"

"That could've been my head!"

"Come onnnn! You have to admit that it would've been cool!"

"It's not cool if my head gets exploded, Mei!"

Amamiya sighed in relief as he let go of her arm, the smoke fading away to reveal Shinsou Hitoshi and Hatsume Mei. Soot covered Hatsume head to toe, but she had a face-splitting grin.

Annoyed lavender eyes landed on them, equally filthy, but Shinsou's expression lit up like Christmas lights.

“Ren!!” Shinsou was a blur as he ran to Amamiya and threw his arms around him, backing off just as fast, “I was wondering when you’d-”

“JOKER!!” Hatsume tackled Amamiya, who stumbled but didn’t fall as Hatsume squeezed the life out of him. She stepped back, grinning, as she locked her hands on his shoulders and looked at him up and down, “I’m so glad you’re here! Momma and I were so worried after Kamino, all of our babies overran the shop for days!!”

Yaoyorozu flinched when Hatsume’s gaze landed on her, her expression falling flat, “Oh. It’s you.”

“Um... I-”

Flit suddenly came to life from her brooch form, her wings singing like wind chimes as she buzzed around Hatsume’s head. Amamiya and Shinsou blinked rapidly as Hatsume stuck out her finger.

“Flit! Momma said you went with your person!” She glanced at Yaoyorozu, her previous iciness melting away, “And Flit’s always been a good judge of character. Wanna be friends!?”

“I-I... Um... of course.”

“Great! You and me, we’re gonna take the Support world by storm!!”

“HATSUME!!!”

Power Loader emerged from the Support lab, looking livid.

“Woopsie doodles. Sorry Power Loader-sensei!!” Hatsume shouted.

Power Loader looked down the hall, “Oh, you’re here, Amamiya. Nezu said you were on your way.”

“On your way for what!?” Hatsume said, bouncing in place, “Are you here to make babies with us!?”

“Mei!” Shinsou snapped, his red face falling in his hands, “Please stop wording it like that.”

“There’s no fun in that, Hitoshi!!”

“‘Hitoshi’? ‘Mei’?” Amamiya’s grin grew sly as Shinsou’s face turned a deeper red under his hands, “On a first name basis now, are we?”

“I-it’s not like that!”

“What!?” Hatsume shrieked, “You said we could make babies together!! Your hero costume needed a complete overhaul anyway!”

Shinsou looked as if he wished for the earth to swallow him.

“Are you sure you don’t want advice?” Amamiya locked an arm around Shinsou’s shoulders, “As your big brother, it’s my job to tease you and give you pointers on dating. Do I need to give you *the talk* or have your parents covered that already?”

Hatsume cackled.

Shinsou’s neck and ears were brighter than cherries, “Ren!!”

“Ugh, enough teenage drama.” Power Loader stomped over and put a firm hand on Hatsume’s shoulder, “You’ve got some cleaning up to do, young lady.”

“Fiiine! Oh!” Hatsume smiled at Yaoyorozu, “Can I borrow Flit for a while? I haven’t seen her in so long! We gotta catch up! I’ll give her back later!”

“Sure? Just don’t make her explode, my classmates would be very upset.”

“I wouldn’t dare! She’s Momma’s favorite little baby! Aside from me, of course!”

Power Loader grumbled as he pushed her towards the lab with Flit floating after her, then turned to Amamiya, "I'll show you where everything is, if you'll just follow me."

"I guess this is where we part ways, Joker." She said with a smile.

"Just call me Ren." He said with a wink, "See you later, Empress."

"Hey, if I can call you Ren, then you can call me Momo. Or Yaomomo, as my classmates do."

"Will do, Yaomomo."

Power Loader and Shinsou stared at him oddly as they went into the lab, leaving her alone in the hallway stained with smoke and ash. The metal door had been embedded in the opposite wall, deep cracks spread around it like lightning. With a sigh, she collected herself and headed towards the dorms, the events over the past hour encompassing her thoughts.

She grabbed her phone from her pocket and scrolled through explanations of the Arcana as she walked.

The High Priestess.

The Star.

The Devil.

The Hierophant.

The Aeon and Apostle.

... The Empress.

But it was the description of the World that gave her pause in front of the 1-A dorms.

The World: When this card appears in the Upright position, it signals that a long-term project, relationship, or career has come full circle. A major goal is either completed, or just needs a few more steps in order to do so. The hardships of the World's journey have finally come to fruition, gaining enrichment and vast knowledge along the way. The World would do well to fully contemplate this journey before it comes to an end.

Full circle. Joker first appeared at the USJ, and from the way they were preparing for another Red Rain centered around the USJ... it might end there too.

She shook her head as she pocketed her phone, her fingers brushing the cool metal of her grandfather's pocket watch. She walked into the dorms, familiar voices filling her ears.

"No no NO!!! Deku and Iida, you're way too stiff!! You have to be loose and flexible, like this!"

Yaoyorozu stepped into the common room in time to see Ashido perform a fluid break dance in the middle of the floor. Her movement stopped, and she saw Yaoyorozu standing there, albeit upside down from being in a headstand.

"Yaomomo!!" Ashido fluidly rolled to her feet as other eyes turned to her, "Welcome back!!"

"Thank you." She said with a smile, "Where do you need me?"

Tokoyami stood from the couch, "We could use another person in the band. Can you play an instrument?"

"Yes, I can play a few."

Tokoyami waved her to follow, and they walked to the other end of the room. Guitars and a drum set were already being set up. Bakugo sat by the drums, expression soured by annoyance. They met eyes.

There must have been some internal spark, a glint of forbidden knowledge Joker shared, visible between them that only they knew of.

Bakugo's brow hardened, and he gave her a nod.

She nodded back.

With that, the Tower and the Empress vowed to do what they were able for their classmates as the next Red Rain loomed over the near future.

Heeeey so I want to chat about something quick.

So, from here one out we'll be wrapping up remaining arcs and focusing on the character interactions as Joker and co march forth towards the inevitable confrontation with Yaldy. I know this fic is long, very long, so I really appreciate everyone's patience and want to thank those who have read this far and will continue stick with me to the end. Heck, I've even counted the chapters we have left and have known what the *final words of the whole fic* are going to be for a very long time. We only have limited room to fit so many interactions. Once we reach the true Endgame, that's it. No more cute interactions with Eri, no more joking around with Spinner or any of the other Thieves of the BNHA world, no more interactions with the students or teachers. That'll be it. The End. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we should savor the last leg of the story and these characters as much as we can before it all comes to a close.

Speaking of arcs, I will say that there won't be an arc with the MLA. Sure, I will add some of the characters in token appearances, but honestly I don't think the MLA would be that stupid to pick some big fight with Joker or U.A., and without the League Of Villains to kick that arc off... well, I don't really see a point. And it would be forcefully extending the story longer than it already is, so... yeah.

I'm So Tired, ya'll

Diversiónary Tactic

Chapter 87: Diversiónary Tactic

“Ah, that.” Nezu’s tail flicked and Ren caught Cementoss giving Nezu a side-eyed look, “I promise they’re in good health! In fact, they’re working on something with a few of the other teachers for extra credit. You may not see much of them for the remainder of the week, I’m afraid.”

Morgana narrowed his eyes, “Extra credit.”

“Extra credit!”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Fanart!

[sosothesoap](#) on Twitter!

The four forms surrounded a single imposing figure, the mist of the Challenge Room churned as they prepared their final attack.

“Take this!!” Mona shouted as he jabbed the pointed tip of a beautifully curved horn.

“No hard feelings, of course.” Mr. Compress said, flicking a gorgeous lily made from diamond through the air, as a painter would the final stroke of his brush.

“I’ll join this waltz!” Gentle Criminal held up an orb the fit perfectly in the palm of his hand, shifting through a thousand colors.

“Hey, don’t leave me out!!” Spinner yelled as the icy ring on his right middle finger glistened.

Two components of ice crackled and writhing electricity danced in tandem, swallowing the figure in the center within the wrath of elements. The ice was repelled, swirling away in beautiful fractals and jagged points. The Dragon’s Heart in Gentle Criminal’s hand stopped the ice from reaching his comrades, warping reality in a dizzying vortex of neon. The elements stilled, the Challenge room grew thick with mist from the chaotic fallout.

The four combatants, all panting in exhaustion, waited as stray ice shards shattered over the stones.

A shadow moved within, blowing away the mist with a flick of his wrist. His white cape and pitch black hair bellowed with the movement, his cape settling down around his feet. His gold helmet, with two long horns pointing straight up, shined oddly in the cool light that made the Challenge Room so ominous. An eye patch covered his left eye.

He slammed the butt of his spear into the ground, “I commend thine valor and camaraderie,” His deep voice echoed, “But thine attacks did nothing. Now, you shall feel my might!”

Static washed over their skin as the figure held up his hand.

“Enough, Odin.” Joker, who leaned on the entry to the hallway, pulled himself up and walked to the middle of the room as the others all but collapsed onto the floor.

Odin lowered his hand and bowed to Joker, an odd sight considering Joker didn’t even reach Odin’s shoulder. He returned to Joker, the other Personas welcoming their newest self into the mindscape.

“Our attacks really did nothing!” Spinner cried, “Just how powerful was that guy, Joker!?”

Lavenza, who sat next to La Brava and Lady Stubbs by the entry, chuckled, "Odin was born between Fafnir and Shiva. It's no wonder he's so strong."

"Well, that plus three passive skills for extra defences." Joker said as he rubbed his neck.

Fafnir preened within the mindscape, ignoring Cu Chulainn's slight jealousy over another caped spear wielder.

The last few days were filled with executions to gain arms and armor for the heroes. Yesterday, due to Fafnir's insistence, they performed their very first fusion since entering U.A. The result was none other than Odin himself, an absolute powerhouse and a master of thunder and lightning. Shiva didn't mind being replaced by Odin since they had similar builds, and now he was safely in the Compendium with Titania.

"I'd fear for the sanity of this world if you'd had that one earlier in your budding vigilante career." Mr. Compress said as he stood and dusted off ice chips from his coat. He looked at the sparkling diamond lily in his grip, "Just as I'd fear anyone who held this and had ill intentions. I can tell for a fact that this is made from real diamond and would sell for a kingly sum if people knew about its powers."

"No kidding." Spinner sat up, "But I'm totally bushed! These things take a lot of energy. I feel like I'll sleep for the rest of the week!"

"Really?" Gentle Criminal said as he rolled his shoulders, "I'm a bit tired, but otherwise I feel fine."

Mona sighed, "These spells use your own energy, with each spell costing a different amount depending on how strong they are. Although..." Mona chuckled, "Your Blizzard Ring needs only a fraction of what the rest of us used."

“Really?” Spinner gaped at the others, “How the hell are you guys still standing?”

“You’d probably be more of a physical build, like Skull was.” Joker said, clutching his chin, “He wasn’t really good with casting magic too often, but he really packed a punch with his bigger health pool and raw attack power. I’ll see if I can’t get you one with a physical ability, somehow. I haven’t fused any new Personas except for Odin, so I’ll keep you posted.”

Spinner beamed at him, “I’d appreciate it, Buddy!”

“Well, now that our test is over, what should we do with these?” Gentle Criminal asked as he stared down at the orb, “Holding Kohryu’s heart in my hands is... rather strange, but I feel his immense power as if it were my own.”

“It’s more than that.” Mr. Compress turned the diamond flower over in his hands, “These things feel alive. A constant presence that’s as comforting as it is empowering.”

Mona exchanged a look with Joker, before he held up the curved horn, “We are technically holding pieces of Joker’s soul after all, so it’s no wonder why they feel this way.”

“Dude.” Spinner’s eyes went wide, “Are these even safe for you to make!? I remember the *last* time you said your soul was broken!”

“This is a lot different.” Joker said as he waved off their concerned looks, “It’s a natural process in the Velvet Room, so there’s no need to worry about me getting sick again.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Gentle Criminal said, sighing in relief.

“We would never intentionally harm Joker that way.” Lavenza stated with grim determination, “However, might I suggest keeping these powerful items hidden until they’re needed?”

“They’re more dangerous than the arms and armor I’ve given Nezu, so it would be smart not to flaunt them around.” Joker waved the others to follow him to the bag nestled by La Brava, “We’ll keep them in here for the time being.”

They handed him the items; the Blizzard Ring from Byakko, Goddess Horn from Ishtar, Dragon’s Heart from Kohryu, and the Diamond Dust Lily from Gabriel, and placed them into the bag. Joker’s hand brushed the small box from Power Loader, full of the parts he’d need to fix his original phone.

Joker zipped the bag shut.

“When are you going to repair your old phone?” Gentle Criminal asked, who watched from over Joker’s shoulder.

Joker winced, “Soon.”

Mona cleared his throat at the sudden silence, “How’s it looking, La Brava?”

“Wellll,” She looked at her laptop, another item they kept hidden here, “It doesn’t have internet access of course, but I should be able to make a virus from U.A.’s security. We just need to get the information first.”

“Which is basically impossible.” Spinner stated as he plopped down, rubbing both hands down Lady Stubb’s back as she jumped on his lap, “We’re watched 24/7 when school is in session, and we don’t have an excuse to leave the dorms in the afternoon.”

“Going off by ourselves will seem suspicious.” Gentle Criminal said, frowning as his hand traced over his facial hair, “We’re lucky to even meet like this so early in the morning.”

Joker shrugged, “Nezu technically hasn’t forbade us from the Velvet Room.”

Lavenza smiled, her eyes crinkling in a truly terrifying way, “Let me know if he does give you trouble. A simple Megidolaon would be able to show him the error of that way of thinking.”

Mr. Compress chuckled, “It’s not that Nezu *wants* to ban us from coming here, it’s that he knows he *can’t* because the Attendants are too powerful even for U.A. to handle.”

Joker shivered. He had yet to beat *any* of them. Yet. Sure, he had beaten Caroline and Justine once, but he had a full team of Phantom Thieves. Lavenza and the other Attendants played by completely different rules in their battles and, quite literally in Lavenza’s case, were twice or thrice as strong as Justine or Caroline.

He was getting close though, judging by how there was a single bead of sweat on Elizabeth’s brow last time, or Margaret being slightly winded before she wiped the floor with him. It was only a matter of time before he tasted his first victory.

Hopefully.

“In any case,” Mr. Compress picked up his cane resting against the wall, “I may have an idea about our security predicament.”

Joker and Mona exchanged glances before Joker asked, “What idea?”

“Nezu is allowing you to practice for your upcoming performance, correct?”

“Yeah, in one of the gyms around campus.” Joker raised a brow, “But the area will be heavily monitored too.”

Mr. Compress hummed, pacing small circles as he muttered to himself. They haven’t seen his face since coming to U.A., though Joker and the others could tell that his brow was furrowed in deep thought.

“Earth to Mr. Compress!” Mona said, jumping and waving his arms, “What did you have in mind?”

The man cleared his throat, “There may be an opportunity for one of us to sneak into Nezu’s office *if* we all play our cards right.”

“Should we make an attempt so early?” Gentle Criminal asked. “If we get caught, the consequences could be disastrous.”

“We’ve only been here a week.” La Brava said.

“Yes, one week, out of how many?” Mr. Compress asked, to which nobody replied, “Exactly. We don’t have a concrete timeline for when we have to... part ways. Wouldn’t it be better to be as prepared as we can at the earliest we can manage?”

“I see your point.” Joker said dimly, “So, what’s your plan then?”

“The Cultural Festival is in two weeks.” Mr. Compress resumed his pacing, hands and cane tucked behind his back, “The students are turning their focus to their respective Festival duties, while the teachers will be keeping a close eye on everything from here on out.”

“Okay, and?” La Brava asked.

“What if the heroes had an additional distraction? A situation they truly could not turn away from?”

“Uh, I dunno if I like where this is going.” Spinner muttered.

Joker studied Mr. Compress, “A major distraction will mean less eyes on us, which means someone has a better chance to sneak away undetected.”

“The best option would be you, Joker.” Mona said, giving his partner a determined look, “Since you can teleport between Velvet Room doors. If you put multiple Personas at play when ‘practicing’ while a few doors around the school are active...”

“Right. I could sneak in when they’re focused on my Personas.”

“What’s this distraction, Compress?” Gentle Criminal asked, “It must be good if you’re so sure it’ll work.”

Mr. Compress turned his back on them, “It’s a matter that concerns all of us, really. But it’s also a deeply personal one. I don’t want to share it until after it’s over, Joker. Spinner, however, can come with me for insurance.”

“Me!?” Spinner gasped.

“Yes, you. It may take a few days for the heroes to prepare, giving Joker time to put up the doors he needs.”

Joker studied Mr. Compress’ back with a hardened gaze, “You promise to tell us what it was when it’s over?”

He faced Joker and drew an X over his chest, “Cross my heart and hope to die, Ren.”

A few moments of intense silence pass before Joker sighed.

“... Okay. I’ll trust you.”

Mr. Compress’ shoulders relaxed, “Thank you. You won’t regret it.”

“In that case...” La Brava pulled out a USB drive and put her laptop aside. She stood up and handed it to Joker, “Just plug this in Nezu’s computer and it’ll copy everything I need from it.”

Joker held it in his palm, chuckling at the irony, “Now I know how Queen felt.”

“Remember team, we *can* pull this off.” Morgana said as he straightened his posture, “If we’re careful, Nezu and the other heroes won’t know a thing until its too late.”

Joker enclosed the drive in his fist, “No pressure or anything.”

“And no regrets either!” Spinner said.

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs helpfully added.

~*~ ***14 days until the Festival*** ~*~

“Okay, maybe I do regret this. Just a teensy bit.” Shuichi muttered the following evening.

Mr. Compress wagged a finger, “You worry too much, my dear Spinner.”

Present Mic and Snipe, the teachers he and Shuichi had been assigned today, exchanged confused glances as they escorted them to Nezu’s office.

“Sooooo, what do you Listeners need to talk to Nezu about!?” Present Mic tried, breaking into his signature energetic grin.

“That’s for Nezu’s ears to hear first, I’m afraid.” Mr. Compress remarked dryly.

Snipe said nothing, though they could feel him watching through his gas mask.

They approached Nezu’s door, which opened by itself when they got close enough. An entirely electric lock, he noted, without so much as a keyhole to pick. Mr. Compress made a mental note to inform Ren while he marched in without breaking his stride.

“My, my.” Nezu turned away from his computer to face them, smiling, “To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure, gentlemen?”

Mr. Compress planted himself in the chair in front of Nezu’s desk, then turned his masked face to the heroes. Nezu nodded to Snipe

and Present Mic, who hesitantly left after staring at one another in concern.

Shuichi stood behind Mr. Compress, arms crossed and expression set in hesitant curiosity.

“Shall I prepare some tea?” Nezu asked, “Whatever needs to be discussed seems serious.”

“No.” Mr. Compress stated, “I’d rather get this little chat over with so we can assemble the war party. It’s a dire matter that’s been on my mind for quite some time, and now I want to put this issue to bed. *Permanently* .”

Shuichi sputtered as his eyes nearly bugged out of his head, while Nezu frowned.

“Oh my. That bad?”

“That bad.” Mr. Compress leaned closer to Nezu’s desk, the rat leaning in to listen, “After all, I just happen to know where All For One’s elusive doctor is hiding.”

A beat of silence passed. Nezu was taken aback, his ears and tail shot straight up, his brilliant white coat standing on end. There was a sharp inhale behind him-

“*YOU WHAT!?*”

The pair of heroes listening in jumped back at the sheer volume.

“My coffee is totally better.”

“It is *not* .”

“It so is!”

“You can’t even make your own cup on a good day, Kayama. How do you expect me to believe yours is better?”

“Then we let Ren decide!” Nemuri eagerly grinned at Ren, “What do you say, kiddo?”

The kitchen island was a disaster. Honestly, it looked like a tornado came through here and spat out all assortments of coffee beans and brewing instruments everywhere.

Eri sat on the stool, sipping on a jelly packet given to her by Aizawa. The others were scattered around the dorm, Manami, Kaito, and Morgana were in the common room while Tobita offered to do everyone’s laundry to keep himself busy.

Lady Stubbs left the dorm in the afternoon, and since school was out the heroes had no objection to her sudden absence. A few hours had passed, and she hadn’t come back yet. Ren had no idea what she was up to.

“Alright, alright.” Ren chuckled as he held up his hands in surrender, “I’ll taste them and give the verdict.”

“Yes!” She smirked at Aizawa, “A thousand yen says mine’s better.”

Aizawa groaned and looked up to the ceiling as if he regretted his life choices. His eyes then snapped to her, “Two thousand.”

She licked her lips and rubbed her palms together before they stared at Ren in expectation.

Ren poured coffee from Aizawa’s container into his mug, then downed it in one go. He kept his expression neutral as pure caffeine coated his tongue, followed by a burnt aftertaste. He did the same for Nemuri’s.

Hers was *too* weak in taste, with a cloying sweetness that didn’t compliment this blend.

He firmly set his mug down on the messy island. "You both failed."

"What!?"

"How?"

Ren sighed, Kohryu noted that it sounded very similar to one of Sojiro's, "Aizawa, you put way too many grounds in the filter and the water temperature was too high. Nemuri, why in the world is yours so sweet? Mexican Altura is supposed to be savory."

"Was I not supposed to put sugar and powdered coffee creamer into the grounds?"

"No. You weren't. How much did you add?"

"About six tablespoons of each?"

Ren facepalmed. "I even did a demonstration right before the both of you tried. Why did you think it was a good idea to do that?"

She sheepishly shrugged.

"Does that mean Ren-nii gets two thou... thousand yen from both of you?" Eri asked, "Since you both lost?"

"Great question, Eri." Ren's hand dropped as he smirked at the two teachers, "Does it?"

Nemuri and Aizawa stared at Eri, who stared back in complete innocence as she loudly slurped the last of her apple jelly pack. At that moment, both of their phones pinged. Ren heard a few more in the common room.

"Saved by a text from the boss." Nemuri said as she whipped hers out.

Ren recognized the moment their internal switches flipped from civilian to hero mode. Their relaxed postures hardened into furrowed

brows with grim glints in their eyes.

“What is it?” Ren asked.

Midnight shoved hers in her pocket, “Nezu called a meeting with the teachers.”

Genuine worry flowed through his face, “Is something wrong?”

“He didn’t say.” Eraserhead sighed as he pocketed his phone, “But it must be serious. He never calls meetings out of the blue like this.”

Hound Dog popped his head into the kitchen, “Did you get it?”

“Yeah, we did.” Midnight said.

“Grrrr, you two go ahead with the others.” Hound Dog shook his mane, looking equally worried, “I’m supposed to stay here and watch over things with an Ectoplasm clone.”

“Sorry to cut the lesson short, Ren.” Midnight turned to him with a soft smile, “I promise I’ll make better coffee next time!”

“You wish.” Eraserhead muttered.

They left, joining the march of footsteps rushing out the front door. The dorm was eerily silent. It was only this quiet in the early mornings, as the evenings were full of bustle with all the pros in one place.

The sudden disquiet was off putting. The constant ringing in his soul from the Metaverse’s presence only made it worse.

Hound Dog studied him with a worried look, “Nezu told me to tell you not to worry about anything, in case you asked.”

“So... everything *is* okay?”

“For the most part. Just try to relax for the rest of the night.” Hound Dog approached the messy island with a kind smile, “I can go ahead and clean this up, if you want.”

“I can help.”

Hound Dog grinned, revealing his rows of sharp canines. Ren didn't feel anything threatening, rather the opposite. How this hero, who was literally a giant vicious-looking dog walking on two legs, made his fanged smile so comforting... Ren had no idea. They made quick work of the mess and went into the common room, Ren holding hands with Eri. Hound Dog gave them a respectful nod before going to one of the couches.

Ren and Manami shared a subtle look.

“Well, I'm turning in early.” Manami said as she slid off a couch, “Good night, everyone.”

“Night.” Kaito sighed when Manami disappeared into her room, then he glanced at Ren and Eri, “It's almost her bath time.”

Ren looked at Eri, “Do you want to try the indoor hot springs instead of having your usual bath? You and Ishtar will have it all to yourselves tonight.”

“Oh. O-Okay.”

Ishtar stepped into reality and swept Eri into her arms, stopping at her room to gather clothes first. The heroes were slowly getting used to the Personas appearing out of nowhere, Hound Dog and the clone barely flinched this time.

Morgana jumped to Ren's shoulder, “What do you want to do?”

“I don't know.” Ren said, “Be lazy in my room and scroll through all the new articles that came out about us today?”

“Please don’t take any of those seriously.” The Ectoplasm clone stated, his eyes softening as he met Ren’s gaze, “Some of those news sites have not been sympathetic to your situation.”

The media were relentless and cast him in every shade of the morality spectrum; From being the obvious choice as the future #1 hero and the epitome of all things heroic and good, to a vigilante that should be put in jail for his crimes because he’d never follow the law, down to the nastiest articles claiming U.A. was wasting their time ‘raising the next Demon Lord of the underground’ who take All For One’s place.

Ren couldn’t wait to tell them he wouldn’t be around long enough to fulfil any of the twisted expectations they threw on a teenager’s shoulders.

“I never do.” Ren turned on his heel and walked to his door, “Good night.”

“Good night, Ren.” Kaito said.

The other two replied in kind before Ren went into his room, then into the bathroom. He closed the door with a long sigh and leaned against it.

Morgana jumped onto the counter gave him a once over, “You’re not going to relax, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Why not? Whatever Mr. Compress and Spinner are doing seems to be working so far.”

“I need a distraction, that’s all. Not knowing what’s going on bothers me.” He turned on the shower, the hot water forming a lazy cloud of steam, “I’m going into the Velvet Room to train. I want to test Odin out more and master his bond while I’m at it.”

“I’ll cover for you in case the heroes check in, but don’t take too long.” Morgana glared at him, “And *don’t* overdo it. You’ll need to conserve your energy.”

“I know.” Ren opened the bathroom door for Morgana.

Morgana gave him one last pointed look before stepping out. Ren closed the door and locked it with a *click* . He summoned his costume, brushing the stray embers that fell to the tile floor with his boot. The familiar cold weight of his Key hung from his neck.

The Velvet Room door cast a mystical glow as steam flooded the bathroom and fogged up the mirror. It opened with a clank of chains, and Joker disappeared inside.

An air of anticipation painted the meeting room as all participants took their seats around the U-shaped table. Spinner sat on Nezu's right, Mr. Compress on his left.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, everyone.” Nezu said.

“What’s this about?” Eraserhead wasted no time asking.

“And why call a meeting so late?” Power Loader asked.

“Apologies for the surprise,” Nezu *never* apologized for anything he suddenly sprang on the teachers, but they all stiffened at the genuine note in his voice. The first one in... well, the first time ever. “But some vital information came to my attention that must be taken care of at the earliest possible time.”

“Spill it, then.” Vlad King folded his hands on the table and leaned forward, “What information?”

Nezu looked at Mr. Compress, who stood to take the center stage, “In short, I know where All For One’s doctor is hiding.”

“What!?” Yagi shot up from his chair, face pale and eyes wide, “Where? People have been trying to find him ever since the raid on his lab in Sapporo, and all leads have long gone cold!”

“Yagi.” Midnight gently put her hand on his arm. He sat down, all but deflating in his chair, “Mr. Compress, how did you come by this information? How do we know that the doctor hasn’t moved on from this supposed location, and why are you telling us now?”

“I would like to know why you didn’t say anything before, either!” Spinner said, his hands balled into tight fists, “You could’ve told us where that snake was hiding all this time!”

Mr. Compress sighed, “To answer Miss Midnight’s question first, I came upon it accidentally. The doctor first introduced me to All For One when I joined the League, and I overheard him talk about this location once I left. I don’t think they knew I was eavesdropping.”

Midnight nodded.

“For the second question, I believe he’s stranded there without his master’s boundless resources. His cover was blown wide open after Sapporo, and without Kurogiri and anybody else from the League to support him... well, he has nowhere to go. I doubt he would leave anyway.”

“And why’s that?” Nezu asked, attention zeroed in.

“Because it’s the last bastion for his Nomu research. Moving such big pieces of delicate equipment without help would draw too much attention.”

The temperature plummeted. Livid anger appeared in most of the heroes’ faces, barely masked by their heroic professionalism.

Mr. Compress turned to Spinner, his tone patient and apologetic as he fidgeted with a few marbles, “And to answer your demands, Spinner, there was never a good time.”

Spinner frowned, "But you... you could have at least said *something*."

"When? After Kamino, where Ren was severely ill? The time where his health had improved somewhat, but he had no powers and hardly the strength to fight on? How about when Eri came into the picture and Overhaul kidnapped Risumi and Ayumu?"

Spinner opened and closed his mouth several times, "... Okay. I get your point."

"What's stopping you from telling Joker now, when he's the strongest he's ever been?" Power Loader asked, "Shouldn't he and the other vigilantes be at this meeting, too?"

"No." Nezu stated, his beady eyes sharpening, "I believe we owe this to Joker to take down the doctor ourselves."

"What? But..." Snipe floundered, "With his powers, apprehending the doctor would be much easier. Especially if there are a lot of Nomu."

"And that's exactly why he shouldn't be." Mr. Compress snapped, the full force of his angry mask staring Snipe down, "People have relied far too much on Ren because of how powerful he is. Ren was a victim to this madman, too. The doctor contacted him during the Overhaul Raid through Gigantomachia. Most of you weren't there to listen on how terrified the boy was when he heard the doctor's voice."

"I was there." Eraserhead said, his expression dark and thunderous, "I heard it too."

"I..." Spinner glared at the table, "I saw it first hand, you know. At Sapporo. Ren had a Quirk Suppressant on, and the guards there gave him a really bad head injury." Spinner slammed a fist on the table, most heroes' expressions falling into shock at the sudden and violent display, "That low-life piece of shit *enjoyed* psychologically torturing a kid when he was out of it from a bad concussion. Drugged

him up to the gills and everything after. We're lucky Hawks found us when he did, otherwise we wouldn't have made it outta there alive."

The air turned from a chilly winter's day to as frigid as the arctic.

Midnight and Present Mic's eyes were glossy with tears of rage, though they had enough self-control to not let them fall. Eraserhead and a few of the others looked seconds from murdering something, while Nezu's calculating gaze was sharp enough to cut through glass.

Just the way Mr. Compress wanted.

"I don't want Ren to know about this until that monster is put away for good." Mr. Compress spoke after several seconds in stifling silence, "You know the second he hears of this, he'll push down his own trauma and throw himself headfirst into danger if it means keeping people safe."

"I agree." Nezu stated, "Do we not owe this to Joker and the other victims? To those who've been turned into brainless puppets against their will? Let's prove that we can serve justice without relying so much on a single teenage boy."

Yagi stood once again, calmer, yet his blazing blue eyes ignited that same fire in everyone, "I don't have a quirk to fight anymore, but I'll provide support where I can. Let's bring in the last of All For One's most loyal lackeys and put an end to the Nomu once and for all!"

The teachers agreed with hearty cries.

Nezu jumped up on the table when they settled down, "I've already reached out to Nighteye's Agency, along with Hawks and other heroes to help. He won't escape this time."

"Will Endeavor be there?" Midnight asked, "He fought the first High-End Nomu, and we could use his strength in case the doctor has any more stored in that lab."

Nezu sighed, “I’m afraid Endeavor has taken a leave of absence, so that’s not an option. We’ll have to rely on solid teamwork to get this done.” Nezu looked at each of his staff with utmost seriousness, “Remember; We don’t want to tip off Joker and the other vigilantes until the doctor is in Tartarus. We’ll set up another meeting with the other heroes in a confidential location before we go into more detail. I’ve already compiled a list of which heroes here will be present in this attack and which will stay at the school-”

Mr. Compress and Spinner didn’t need to look at one another to know that they had the same thought. So far, this had gone down as well as could be.

With any luck, they’d kill two birds with one stone and *not* get caught with bloody feathers.

~*~ ***13 Days until the Festival*** ~*~

“Don’t we have the right to interview Joker at least once!?” A familiar voice grated in Taneo’s ears, “Why has Principal Nezu kept him locked up in U.A.? Why hasn’t Joker been able to get his Hero License right away and be out in the field where his powerful quirk will be put to good use!? What about those stuck in hospitals with incurable diseases and injuries!? Shouldn’t it be *their duty* to help these people in need!?”

Taneo sighed as he leaned against the wall a good ways away from the metal gate that sealed U.A. He retrieved his phone from his pocket and messaged his new boss.

[T]

Kizuki Chitose is at it again.

You might want to do something, she gets more and more desperate as the days go on. The other journalists are getting feral with her around.

[Rat God]

I see.

Thank you for keeping up the good work, but unfortunately my hands are tied unless they try to break into the school directly.

[T]

I'll let you know if they get their hands on any tanks

[Rat God]

Please do, I would love to shut down more uncouth news studios if anything happens! ;))

Taneo cursed under his breath.

Nezu paid extraordinarily well, but dealing with him long term has become a thing of nightmares. Being a plant in this group of ravenous reporters with nothing better to do with their lives was easy... at first. This was the fifth morning he stood outside the gates of the school, bored out of his mind but steadily growing more concerned when Kizuki Chitose's obsession stooped to dangerous levels.

Demizu Mika never gave off the weird vibes he got from this woman, and he hadn't seen her on the news scene with Joker before. Why the sudden obsession now? Has she always been this way about

Joker and just kept on the down-low about it? Honestly, she just gave him the creeps.

At least Joker was okay.

The kid contacted him a few days ago with an apology, but Taneo had to keep his messages few and far between. If any of these reporters knew that he was in direct contact with Joker, then they would be on him like bloodhounds on a fresh scent.

He tucked his phone away and settled in for another long day outside U.A.

Ren waved to the group of students outside the main school building as whispers, gasps, shrieks and everything in between peppered the air. He stepped onto the bus before any phones were whipped out for pictures or video. He nodded at the Ectoplasm clone in the driver's seat, then turned to where Cementoss and Nezu sat.

"You're fitting in well, all things considered." Nezu said as he crossed his legs, Ren chose to sit directly across from the heroes. Morgana, and surprisingly Lady Stubbs, were on either shoulder, "Smaller appearances have worked in our favor. Perhaps your Personas can appear around U.A. if things continue to go well!"

The clone started the bus. The vehicle lurched forward, and they were off towards one of U.A.'s many gyms. Several students tried to take one last look at the bus until the growing group faded into the distance.

"You mean we're just not getting mobbed because teachers are always around us." Morgana muttered as he jumped into Ren's lap, "I'd hate to see what happens otherwise."

"Hmmm, but say something *does* happen without any staff around." Nezu said as he studied Ren, "Would you be able to handle yourself accordingly? Like what happened with 1-A, I can't guarantee you

won't be caught unawares by curious students, especially with the hustle and bustle of the upcoming Festival."

Lady Stubbs chose that moment to roll off Ren's shoulder, flopping onto her back with her legs up into the air, puffy paws splayed. She tried to correct herself, but the bulk of her belly cemented her in place. With a deep huff, she melted into a pile of thick fur.

Ren chuckled as he rubbed her belly, earning deep motorboat purrs, "I've survived Bakugo and Yaoyorozu, haven't I? I can handle anything else these students throw at me."

Morgana snickered, "That's our Leader."

Nezu nodded in satisfaction, "I'm glad to hear it."

Ren couldn't ignore his curiosity any longer. Especially since Lady Stubbs was with them instead of Spinner. Ren had found her spread out in the corner of his bed when he woke up, the door to his balcony cracked open.

How she got in through the enclosed gardens or what she spent her night doing was a mystery he didn't want to know the answer to. She refused to leave his side since.

"Where are Spinner and Mr. Compress?" He asked, "They didn't come back to the dorms last night and they weren't at breakfast this morning."

"Ah, that." Nezu's tail flicked and Ren caught Cementoss giving Nezu a side-eyed look, "I promise they're in good health! In fact, they're working on something with a few of the other teachers for extra credit. You may not see much of them for the remainder of the week, I'm afraid."

Morgana narrowed his eyes, "Extra credit."

"Extra credit!"

The bus pulled to a stop and the clone set it in park, putting this conversation to a swift end.

Nezu hopped off the bench, Cementoss following with a resigned sigh. Morgana jumped to Ren's shoulder as he nudged Lady Stubbs. The feline rolled off the chair to land perfectly on her feet. She stuck her nose high in the air and marched out of the bus like a princess covering some sort of social blunder.

Ren shook his head with a smile, and they found themselves standing before a massive wall when they stepped out. The giant gate was already open to a wide street lined with office buildings, tall skyscrapers peeked over them in the distance.

"Welcome to Ground Beta!" Nezu said as he held up his arms, "This is where you'll spend your time practicing!"

Ren blinked in astonishment, "We get a whole city all to ourselves?"

"Precisely." Cementoss spoke up for the first time, "You and your... Personas will have plenty of room to maneuver around and do as they wish. I'll be watching in the observation room by the gate, and will fix up any building in case something happens."

"Unfortunately, I have an important meeting to attend so I can't stick around to watch." Nezu said as he walked back to the bus. He stopped on the bottom step and grinned at Ren over his shoulder, "Have fun!"

The bus door closed, and it drove off.

"Wait, wasn't that our ride back?" Morgana said.

Cementoss snorted, "I'm sure the clone will come back. Eventually."

"Kohryu could give us a ride to the school."

"No!" Morgana yelled, "No way! Nu uh! Rejected!! If anything, I could turn into a bus and you drive us!"

“Do you even have a driver’s license, Amamiya?” Cementoss asked.

“Uh, no.”

“Then doing it Mona’s way is a no go, unless you’re fine with me driving.”

“... No offence, but I prefer Ren’s driving. Nobody else is allowed to drive me like a maniac! Ive had enough of that for a lifetime!”

Ren grinned, “Then it’s settled. We’ll ride Kohryu!”

“NO!”

“Aw, come on! Nezu even said that our Personas could start exploring the school grounds soon! What better way to introduce them to the students than with Kohryu? The other ones would be a piece of cake after him!”

Cementoss sighed, “I make no promises, but I’ll speak to Nezu about it.”

“Yes!”

Morgana groaned.

Cementoss chuckled as he turned towards the gate, “I’ll get situated in the observation room, you have the green light to do anything you want as long as it stays in Ground Beta.”

“Wait.”

Cementoss stopped, staring in surprised as Ren donned his costume in brilliant flame. Lady Stubbs caught an ember between her paws, looking disappointed when she lifted her paw off the concrete to find nothing. Joker dug around in his pockets for a thermos. He held it out to Cementoss with a cheeky grin.

“Made coffee for you. I hope you won’t get too bored watching us mess around for a while.”

Cementoss smiled as he took it, “Thank you. I did bring some books along to help pass the time, so I appreciate the gesture. Oh, and the other teachers all have a running bet on whether Eraser or Midnight will make a successful cup of coffee first.”

“I know.” Joker smirked, “Thirteen told me this morning when they weren’t around. I bet 500 yen on Eraser.”

“Of course you did.” Morgana muttered, “Isn’t that illegal since *you’re* the one teaching them?”

Joker waved his hand, “Details, details.”

They took their first steps onto the barren streets. Cementoss hadn’t even stepped away when Joker let Kohryu out. The golden dragon’s musical roar echoed through the heavens, the winds kicking up as he playfully twirled through the sky.

His mindscape was filled with laughter, and the joy of flying freely just for the sake of it became contagious. There was no big battle. No enemies to worry about. No obvious threat other than the pinpricks of the Metaverse on the edge of their mind, which was mostly harmless... for the moment. He could let his Personas play for a while.

Gabriel appeared and rose into the sky with a flap of her viridian wings, scattering blue cinders everywhere. Pixie and Alice took off down the road, giggling.

Odin entered reality in a small twister of blue flame next to Joker, towering over everyone as his long cape fluttered in the wind. He stood at Joker’s side like a dutiful body guard. Joker could summon six Personas at once, though it would give him a migraine after a while. Five was good enough for now.

Kohryu circled a tall building on the other side of Ground Beta, his golden scales sparkling in the crisp clear sunlight. Gabriel was a bright sparkle chasing after him.

"Your wings are young yet, Gabriel. You'll never catch an experienced flyer such as I!"

"Oh yeah?" Gabriel teased, *"Bring it on, Grandpa Danger Noodle!"*

"Heeeeeeeey, save some fun for us!!" Pixie shouted.

Joker smiled as Cementoss stared in stupefied awe, "Sorry. I think they got a little stir crazy."

"It's fine." Cementoss said after a moment, his eyes landed on Odin as the Persona posed with such regal authority, "Is that a new one?"

"Yep! Meet Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology!"

Odin barely took notice of the hero gaping, his focus solely on Joker and that of his brethren. Cementoss shook himself out of it and headed into his designated observation room.

"Should we start on the rooftops?" Morgana said as his eyes traced Kohryu and Gabriel's paths through the sky, "We'll need a better view of the city before we can come up with anything."

Joker looked at the grappling hook on his wrist, "There's one easy way up-"

Lady Stubbs grabbed one of his coattails with her mouth and tried to pull him towards the closest building.

"... Or not." Joker chuckled as he followed along, the chubby feline trying to drag him along like a troublesome kitten. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"Mrph."

“This alien creature always dictates thy destination?” Odin asked as he walked alongside Joker.

“Uh, not usually?” He said, “She’s been acting strange all morning.”

“Hmmm.”

Joker looked at Morgana, who gave the feline version of a shrug.

They went inside, an office by the looks of it. Empty cubicles littered the first floor, but that was the extent of the decorations. They went up the first set of stairs they found, the space opening up into empty floors and barren rooms from then on.

Odin had to duck under the doorways and hunch his shoulders lest his grand horned helmet pierce through the ceiling, a sight that Joker found funny.

Joker used Third Eye as they reached the third floor, Lady Stubbs continuing to drag him.... somewhere, the blue world highlighted by threads of gold wires in the walls. Bright green cones were shed from otherwise well-hidden cameras. Joker stopped as they reached a hallway on the top floor that split off in several directions.

This was a blind spot, no cameras were pointed to this intersection and no listening devises were in sight.

“What’s up, Joker?” Morgana asked.

“This is a good place for a permanent door,” He said as he looked around, “But coming in here too often could look suspicious, especially if we’re going to explore other parts of Ground Beta.”

“You could wait until the other door by Nezu’s office is put up first.” Morgana said, “That way, we can search the other buildings with blind spots and not be stuck with one option.”

“That’s.... actually pretty smart, Morgana.”

Morgana chuckled, "Of course it is! Who do you think you're talking to!?"

"Mrph." Lady Stubbs finally let go of Joker's coat. She planted herself in front of Joker, her hackles raised and ghoulish eyes staring deep into Joker's soul.

"What's wrong, Lady Stubbs?" Joker asked, "Do you feel sick or something?"

"Mrph." She scratched at the yellow-gold bandanna tied around her neck, something she wore alongside Spinner every day.

Joker frowned, "Oh, is it too tight?"

"Mrph."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Mrph!"

Joker knelt down, his frown deepening as he tried to undo a rather complicated knot. Lady Stubbs sat perfectly still as he worked. The fabric loosened with a final tug, but something fell out as the bandanna's knot fully came undone, dropping onto the floor with a sharp *clack* .

"Uh... what." Morgana stated as they stared at the blue marble.

"Merp!" Lady Stubbs puffed out her chest in pride. When nobody moved, she pushed the marble towards Joker.

The moment Joker's fingers touched it, it broke apart to reveal a folded note.

"Oooh, a message! What does it say!?" Morgana said eagerly.

Joker plucked it from the ground and flipped it open.

Dearest Joker and Mona,

Apologies for the bizarre delivery of this note, as speaking openly in person is dangerous outside the Velvet Room and using our bugged phones isn't an option. I wanted to inform you that the lock on Nezu's door is completely electronic. No lock pick will help you there, so you'll have to get creative.

P.S. I've located a perfectly suitable supply closet one hallway from the objective. It'll provide the path of least resistance to the Devil's abode.

P.P.S. Do be sure to burn this note after you memorize it.

P.P.P.S I'll inform you when it is time to strike using this same method. Be prepared.

~From, your favorite Faith Arcana!

"Wow." Morgana deadpanned, "He really doesn't do things by half measures, does he? He even drew a map of that hallway on the back."

Joker committed it to memory and used a flick of Cerberus' flames to turn the note to ashes, "No, he doesn't." He looked at Lady Stubbs, "Do I even want to know how you got this from Mr. Compress when he was with the pros?"

"Merp!"

"You won't reveal his secrets, huh? I can respect that." Joker retied the bandanna around her neck and gave her an affectionate pet.

"Let's get to the roof. We don't want to stay out of the camera feed for too long."

"We'll pretend this never happened." Morgana said.

“Agreed.”

They walked onwards to the final set of stairs to the roof, Lady Stubbs prancing ahead as if proud of her accomplishment.

Odin stared at the spot where the marble dropped.

“A strange creature, indeed.” Odin muttered before he followed his Trickster.

~*~ **12 days until the Festival** ~*~

Hawks expected a longer break between major raids, but he couldn't say no when Kagome informed him of Nezu's urgent request. With his speed, it was a simple task to fly through the night to reach his destination in secret. He had sent in a bunch of feathers into the Jakku Hospital's air conditioning system before hiding on an opposite rooftop with a lot of coverage.

Child's play, really.

Night became morning, morning turned into afternoon. Afternoon strolled lazily into early evening.

His feathers picked through the whole hospital, memorizing the patient rooms to the doctors' offices, to even the bathrooms and the laundry down in the basement. But then, he discovered a new passage. An air duct that sunk several hundred feet below the earth.

The air became chilled as his feathers went down.

Screeching metallic sounds and mysterious rumbles trickled in from the grates. Bubbling liquids in tubes. A gurgled breath and a muffled scream trapped in fluids. A *hiss* of steam. A frantic half-mad voice echoing in a vast underground space.

The bunch of feathers flowed around the small maze of vents until each feather picked up the vibrations that sent a clear voice back to Hawks.

*“That heathen... taking away my master’s most prized possession! But don’t worry... I’ll get him back... oh yes, just wait until these High-Ends are done... Not even Tartarus can stand against them... The real work will begin once Shigaraki is reclaimed, and then that boy will be **mine**”*

Hawks whipped out his phone and called the #1 speed-dial, the other person picked up before the second ring.

“The information is accurate.” Hawks stated, almost letting the snarl bleed into his voice, “He’s down there right now with what sounds like a bunch of Nomu in tanks.”

Several voices spoke on the other end, though he could clearly hear the ‘I told you!’ from Mr. Compress.

“Thank you for your hard work, Hawks.” Nighteye said in a tight voice, “We’ll begin preparations right away. Bubble Girl and Centipeder are on route to your location. Switch with them when you need to rest, but don’t go too far if you can help it.”

“Got it.” Hawks hung up. A happier chime broke through his sour mood, his scowl softening with buttery warmth.

Joker had sent a selfie to the ‘Joker’s Squad’ chatroom. Joker had an ear to ear grin, Mona was beaming from his shoulder, the background a carpet of sparkling gold scales with one entire corner being taken up by a giant ruby red eye.

Joker left several messages, and Hawks felt bad that he and the others couldn’t answer since they were *preoccupied* .

[Big Bro Birb]

Looking cool Joker!

[#1Troublemaker<3]

Uh oh.

Mona's mad you stole one of his catchphrases.

[Big Bro Birb]

Uh.... I did???

[#1Troublemaker<3]

Yep, you did.

He's demanding tuna for the emotional damage you just put him through.

Lots and lots of tuna...

I hope you don't mind going into debt over sushi ;)

[Big Bro Birb]

Ah, hell.

I'll give him so much tuna he'll be sick of it for the rest of his life.

[#1Troublemaker<3]

We'll be counting on you!

Those words hit him like a sledge hammer to the chest. Rage built in his heart like a Star ready to go supernova, his phone creaking as his grip dangerously tightened. His thoughts flickered to the wild, desperate, and severely injured kid he saw in the bowels of a sickening Sapporo lab. He shoved his phone in his pocket before his anger got the better of him.

“Yeah, you can count on your big bro alright.” He muttered darkly.

Hawks looked to the Jakku Hospital, his gaze as sharp as a blade. His feathers twitched, aching to slice through something, *anything* . Preferably that doctor. He forcefully settled them as he got comfortable.

Right now, he was a patient hunter awaiting the demise of the prey that hurt his family.

~*~ ***10 days until the Festival*** ~*~

Hitoshi knew something was going on with the staff.

None of his classmates noticed their serious eyes or darker demeanors, as they were focused on setting up for the upcoming Cultural Festival. Innumerable boxes of ribbons, confetti shooters, and any number of other supplies littered the hallways. An unthinkable mess for a normal school day, but it was the new normal in the coming days before the Festival. He was excited too, of course, but the sudden flip in the teachers' attitudes put him on edge.

Should he blame Ren?

Maybe, maybe not. Ren didn't know what was going on when Hitoshi texted him about it. His phone chimed. Hitoshi reached into his bag for it.

It was five minutes of class before the lunch bell, so Ectoplasm didn't seem to mind.

"Speak of the devil." Hitoshi whispered.

[The World]

Hey, wanna have lunch together?

[The Moon]

Are you allowed to have lunch with me or...?

[The World]

Nezu won't mind. We need to catch up on everything that's happened since the summer.

I wanted to show you something too.

Meet me at the west entrance?

[The Moon]

Sure?

There was something I wanted to ask you anyway.

[The World]

Sweet.

Also, look out your window ;)

Hitoshi blinked and did just that.

A smudge of light, as bright as the northern star, appeared over the school grounds. And it was getting closer. *And bigger* . Much, much bigger. He wasn't the only one to notice. The girl who sat in front of him shot to her feet, her chair screeching back drew the attention of everyone in the room.

"Sensei!" She shouted, jabbing her finger at the window, "What's that!?"

"Remember this morning's announcement during homeroom?" Ectoplasm said as he looked out, "Nezu is allowing Joker's summons to put on a small show during the lunch period today. He means no harm."

Excitement broke out as Kohryu's body became more distinct, vibrant gold against a chilled blue sky. The sheer size of Kohryu floored Hitoshi. He'd seen the dragon on the news before, but seeing Kohryu in person stole the breath out of his lungs.

Kohryu veered away when he got close, the windows completely covered with a carpet of shining amber scales. The bell rang for lunch, and everyone else rushed out of the room. Ectoplasm remained in place, his stoic graveness obvious to Hitoshi.

"Are you not going to join your classmates?" Ectoplasm asked.

"Uh, I just... are you okay, Sensei?"

"Hmm? I'm alright. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing. I... it's nothing."

Hitoshi left before it got too awkward. The hallways were an organized madhouse. Everyone was in a hurry to see Kohryu up close, but they took turns going through doors and didn't push or

shove. No boxes or decorations got knocked over. Nobody got trampled.

Maybe people *did* learn from the mad lunch fiasco before the USJ attack.

Hitoshi followed the crowd outside. Groups of students were spread around the front of the school, many faces turned up in glee or awe as Kohryu danced through the sky. The dragon twisted and turned and swirled before diving towards the students. Some in the second and third year Hero Course dropped into battle stances.

Many cried out before Kohryu pulled up, flying close enough for everyone to get a detailed look at his scale pattern, but not so close that the wind he generated knocked anyone over. Some cheers and laughter spread around, the older Hero Course students relaxed.

Then, Kohryu coiled around himself mid-air and hovered there, his shadow engulfing the students.

His golden body was a flowing ribbon, his whiskers floating peacefully on a breeze. A bright white light sparked in his throat, and everyone gasped when he shot a bright white beam into the sky. Blink and you would miss the tiniest form of a fairy nestled between Kohryu's horns. A *boom* struck their chests when the beam collided with another white explosion that came out of nowhere.

All went silent as showers of beautiful white stars floated serenely down onto the students, the dragon's shadow making them all the brighter. Hitoshi held out his hand as one fell over him like a snowflake. It radiated warmth, but it was the same type of comforting warmth when you had hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.

The tiny star shattered the moment he touched it, spreading an array of different colors all over the grass before fading away. Hundreds of other reactions took place all around him as the stars fell on students or the ground. Stillness overtook the school when all the stars were gone, then students began cheering.

Hitoshi spotted a couple of teachers hanging around, smiling at one another.

His phone pinged.

Oh, right. Lunch with Ren.

He snuck away as everyone's eyes were on Kohryu. Hitoshi went back into the school, which was now nearly empty.

Ren waited by the west entrance, his hair ruffled as if blown back by a powerful wind.

"Hey." Hitoshi said as he approached, "What's with your new hairdo?"

"Hey!" His eyes oddly flicked to Hitoshi's side for a moment, but he smiled at him all the same as he tried and failed to fix his fluffy hair, "Oh, riding Kohryu when he's going so fast will do that. He dropped me off before starting the show outside."

"Speakin of, I didn't know you could do something like that."

Ren shrugged, "It's a small part of our performance for the Festival."

"Wait, that was just *one part*?" Hitoshi said, eyes wide, "That was cool as hell."

"Thanks. We kind've discovered it by accident. I didn't know that Almighty spells could react to each other like that, and we're trying to find other ways to combine that sort of magic." Ren said, chuckling, "It could still use some work though. We're trying to figure out how to have those stars go off mid-air to spread more color around. I won't spoil the rest of it."

Hitoshi stared at him, "Huh. And here I was excited for a haunted house."

"Your class is doing a haunted house?"

“Yeah. That’s what I wanted to ask you about.”

“Come on,” Ren chose a direction and stepped away. Hitoshi wasn’t stupid, they were getting farther from where a majority of the students and teachers were, “We can walk while we talk.”

“And find a spot for lunch?”

“That too. We’ll get lunch after I show you something.”

“That’s totally not ominous at all.” Hitoshi remarked.

Ren stuck his hands in his pockets as they walked side by side, “What did you want to ask?”

“Could I borrow Alice for our haunted house? A terrifying little girl would totally make ours way cooler than any other class.”

“I don’t think I’m technically allowed to-” Ren stopped mid-sentence, the golden flecks in his eyes shining for a moment. “Well, never mind. Alice wants to do it and she doesn’t care what Nezu says.”

“Sweeeeet. My classmates are going to be *stoked*. ”

“But for your own safety,” Ren patted him on the back, “Don’t ever ask her about teddy bears.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that.”

Hitoshi was left in a puzzled silence. He followed Ren through a half dozen hallways until Ren stopped in front of a door, looking at it up and down as if appraising a piece of jewelry. Then he looked around the hallway, absently touching the bridge of his nose.

“He was right. This one is perfect.”

“A perfect... supply closet?”

Ren chuckled as he opened the door, “It’s what’s inside the closet that counts.”

“Uh huh. Sure. This isn’t confusing me in the slightest. Nope.”

Ren winked before he stepped inside. Hitoshi good-naturedly rolled his eyes and followed. The door closed and his vision drowned in black.

“Okay, we’re in a dark supply closet. Now what?” A few moments of silence pass, making him uneasy, “Uh... Ren? Are you done being all mysterious and slightly terrifying?”

Hitoshi scrunched his eyes shut at the sudden, yet soft, flash of velvet light. He opened his eyes to see the last of Ren’s vigilante costume disappear into normal clothes, but his gaze locked on the barred door that appeared from nowhere.

“Nezu and Aizawa have already met the Attendants, same with the rest of my teammates.” Ren smiled, his body highlighted by the purple light, “I figured you’d want to meet them too. Well, we’ll start with Lavenza for now. The others are terrifying if you’re not ready for them.”

Hitoshi blinked slowly, “I have many questions. Who are these Attendants? What is that door? Could you do that the whole time and why the *heck didn’t you tell me ?*”

Ren’s expression turned somber, “They’re people from home. We reunited shortly before the Overhaul raid.”

“They’re-” Hitoshi froze. “*Oh .*”

The door opened. Velvety mist pooled around their feet as the clink of chains and iron hounded his ears. He heard footsteps somewhere in the impenetrable mist, growing louder with each one.

Someone walked out.

Hitoshi stared at the small girl wearing a blue dress and a butterfly headband. Her long pale hair flowed down her back and she carried a book half her size under her arm.

“Greetings, Moon.” Her voice, like the door, had a velvety softness to it, “I am Lavenza.”

“Uh, hi. You don’t have to call me the Moon. Just Hitoshi.” Hitoshi crossed his arms and smirked, “You know, from your footsteps I expected someone taller to come out of that door.”

Ren and Lavenza blinked in astonishment, before Ren clutched his stomach in laughter. Lavenza huffed, but she was smiling.

“Be careful, Hitoshi.” Ren said as his expression smoothed out, though there was still a hint of humor in his eyes, “The Attendants are stronger than me.”

Hitoshi’s stomach dropped as the smirk fell off his face. He thought of Kohryu dancing through the sky over U.A., and what the dragon accomplished *by itself*. That, on top of Satanael descending during Kamino and practically every other amazing feat from the rest.

How could anybody be stronger than Joker?

“I’m sorry I called you short?” Hitoshi said, his voice higher pitched than normal.

“It’s alright. You meant it in jest.” Lavenza’s citrine eyes gained a playful spark, “Elizabeth is going to have fun teasing this one, Trickster.”

“Just don’t let her take it too far. Besides, he’s just meeting you for today.”

“I see.” She turned back to Hitoshi, “Make sure to bring a lot of jam filled cookies. That’ll get you on her good side.”

Hitoshi looked to Ren, who only had that smirk on his face. “Okay?”

Lavenza glanced at the door, "Is this where-"

"I think its time for you to get back, Lavenza." Ren said suddenly, "Hitoshi and I aren't going to have much time for lunch if we linger here too long."

Lavenza blinked.

Hitoshi glanced in between them, an invisible conversation he had no context for going right over his head. Ren's nod to her wasn't seen in this dreary lighting.

"Very well, you're right. I shouldn't keep you." Lavenza said after a moment. She politely bowed to Hitoshi, "I hope we can speak again soon, Hitoshi. Remember what I said about those cookies."

She walked through the door before he could say anything, which closed with a slam of iron.

Ren stared at something behind Hitoshi, "Isn't this enough eavesdropping, Mirio?"

Hitoshi whirled around. Mirio's face was, in fact, sticking out of the wall.

"What's with you and spying on me in closets!?" Hitoshi snapped.

"This has happened before?" Ren asked dubiously.

Mirio beamed, "Oh, I didn't mean to take it this far! Honest!"

"Then explain yourself." Ren said with a slight edge to his voice, "Why were you following Hitoshi before?"

"Can we take this conversation outside the closet?" Mirio asked jovially.

"Sure." Ren deadpanned.

Mirio followed him? *When?* It must've been when he came back inside the school. And here he thought he knew *all* the tricks of knowing when someone was tailing him. Guilt must've been written on his face, as Ren's expression softened when he saw it.

Hitoshi looked where Mirio's face was to find it gone, "Why didn't you say anything before?"

"Mirio following you wasn't expected, but its something we can work with. I'll explain everything later." Ren whispered as he passed.

The Velvet door faded. At first Hitoshi thought it was gone, but something in his chest tightened whenever he looked at the spot. He could faintly see the air shifting, and when he squinted, a ghostly outline of the door could be picked out.

"You coming, Hitoshi?" Ren asked as he held the closet door open.

Hitoshi decided to ignore the weird magic door and walked out with Ren. They both stared at Mirio, who looked completely unabashed.

"I'm sorry, really!" Mirio rubbed the back of his neck, "I saw Shinsou going off by himself, and I remember what happened the last time-"

"What happened last time?" Ren asked.

"It's not a big deal." Hitoshi said, "Just some other students who followed me."

"It sounds like a big deal to me." Ren said, frowning.

"Hey, I handled it." Hitoshi smirked at Ren, "Just like you taught me."

"He did!" Mirio beamed, "He sure gave them the run around before pulling a disappearing act!"

The worry drained out of Ren, "Okay, if you say so. You were just concerned for him, Mirio?"

“Yeah. I was going to stop when I made sure he got to wherever he was going safely, but then I saw you.”

Ren raised a brow, “Me?”

“Yeah, you!” Mirio’s grin held the brightness of the sun, “I haven’t seen you since the raid! Tamaki and Nejire wanted to know how you were doing too! Oh! And Sir Nighteye!” Mirio’s expression turned sheepish, “We all wanted to make sure you were alright? The teachers wouldn’t say anything or let me ask the new TAs, so here I am by pure luck?”

“Back up. *Nighteye* was concerned for me?” Ren asked with obvious doubt, “He certainly didn’t give off that vibe when... I saw him last.”

“Don’t take it personally. Sir is like that with everyone at first! You should have heard the way he talked about you after. I think you got him to like you.”

Damnit. Mirio’s innocent expression could melt anyone’s heart. Hitoshi’s bullshit detector wasn’t going off either. After a long moment of Ren staring him down, he relented.

“Okay, I believe you.” Ren said. Mirio somehow brightened even further, but Ren held up his hand, “*But* you can’t tell your friends about Lavenza. Nighteye, Nezu, and Eraserhead already know about her. She’s one of my close friends, and I wanted to introduce her to Hitoshi before we eat lunch.”

“Oh! I see. Was that weird door part of your ambush tactic in the raid?”

“It was. You should have seen the look on Overhaul and Shigaraki’s faces when all those heroes came out of nowhere.” Ren grinned, “Priceless.”

“I would pay good money to see Ren kicking Overhaul’s ass.” Hitoshi said bitterly.

Mirio looked at Hitoshi strangely. He passed that same look to Ren, who shook his head.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Ren said, though there was a tone in his voice that put Hitoshi on edge, “Should we get lunch? I was thinking we can head to the dorm for curry. Kohryu can cover for us so we don’t get spotted.”

The sudden change in subject only deepened Hitoshi’s suspicion, “Uh, sure?”

“Can I join?” Mirio asked, “I also wanted to see Eri, if that’s okay? I was going to ask Nezu, but he’s been pretty busy the last couple of days so I haven’t had the chance.”

Ren stiffened, “That’ll be up to her.”

Mirio firmly nodded, his expression turning grim yet determined.

“Who’s Eri?”

“I’ve never told you about her, have I?” Ren’s eyes widened as he stared at Hitoshi.

“Nope.” Hitoshi stated, “We haven’t had the chance to fully catch up yet. Kinda the point of having lunch together today?”

Ren nodded, “Eri was one of Overhaul’s experiments.”

A cold ball of rage settled in Hitoshi’s stomach, “Well, now I’m even more happy that you took that bastard down.”

Ren smiled sadly. They walked towards the dorms in silence until they got outside. Many students had scattered around the school, watching Kohryu as they sat on blankets and ate from bento boxes. They skirted the edge of the crowd, and true to Ren’s word Kohryu

drew their attention away, miraculously nobody saw them until they got to the cobblestone path leading to the dorms.

It was then that Hitoshi saw Kaito for the first time in several months, standing next to Aizawa as they watched Kohryu.

Then Hitoshi saw *her* .

Sitting on Kaito's shoulders, her moonlight hair done in complicated braids, was a little girl. Her red eyes were filled with wonder as they followed Kohryu, but the rest of her expression was a blank, stoic mask. A tiny horn poked out of her hairline.

"What are you guys doing out here?" Ren asked.

"She wanted to see Kohryu." Kaito said, the man's eyes flicking between him and Mirio, "Good to see you, Hitoshi."

Hitoshi smiled, "Likewise."

"Ren-nii!" Eri's small voice tugged on Hitoshi's heartstrings, Mirio flinched in the corner of his eye, "Why haven't I met this one yet? He's so cool!"

"He was a little too big, and I didn't want him to scare you." Ren turned to look up at Kohryu, then back at her, "Would you like to meet him now?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Aizawa said, "He's a lot bigger than the rest of them."

Ren looked at Eri, who eagerly nodded.

"The boss has spoken, Eraser." Ren said with a smirk.

Ren turned around and looked up to Kohryu, who stopped mid-air. The dragon looked right at them. He descended. Hitoshi heard the cries of awe from the massive crowd of students, and several eyes fell from Kohryu to their group.

Sweat broke out on the back of Hitoshi's neck as the ginormous dragon drew closer and closer. Hell, the tip of the claw on Kohryu's pinky finger could easily crush several people without even trying. His vision was filled with dazzling scales, horns, and spikes as Kohryu lowered his head to the ground, the rest of his body floating peacefully in the breeze.

Ren put a hand on Kohryu's snout. "Eri, meet Kohryu. If Ishtar is the mother of the group, then Kohryu is definitely the grandfather."

Kohryu snorted, blowing their hair and pulling at their clothes, "I have long awaited to meet you face to face, young Aeon. It is my pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

Kohryu's voice was like deep rumbles in the earth.

Any other little girl would probably scream and burst into tears. But instead, Eri reached for him. Kaito stepped closer until her tiny hand touched the tip of Kohryu's snout, unafraid of his size or the fangs poking out of his lips that were as tall as her.

Eri leaned forward and kissed Kohryu on the tip of his nose, "Thanks for being there for Ren-nii, Grandpa Kohryu."

The dragon froze, his blazing red eyes dulling as the rest of his body stilled in the air. His breathing stuttered to a stop.

"You okay, Kohryu?" Ren asked.

Kohryu's eyes blazed to life, a sharp breeze rustling the trees as he suddenly ascended. A joyous roar sang through the whole of U.A. as the dragon happily thrashed through the air at thrice the speed he did before. He did loop-de-loops and barrel rolls, and circled around the main school building like there was no tomorrow.

Aizawa pinned Ren with a look, "What just happened?"

Ren chuckled, "I believe that's what we call 'cuteness overload.' He just needs to work it off."

"Uh... Ren?" They all looked at Hitoshi, who pointed towards the school.

At least a hundred pairs of eyes were on them, and more than a few had their phones out. All in full view of Eri kissing Kohryu. A couple of phones obviously recorded Kohryu's reaction as they struggled to follow the dragon's erratic movements.

Aizawa sighed, "I'll handle this. The rest of you get to the dorm."

They followed Aizawa's order, their footsteps almost racing over the pavement. Several smaller robots zoomed by them to aid Aizawa. They stopped at the front of the teacher's dorms, thankfully nobody had gotten through Aizawa or the robots, so they were alone. Even if a wily student snuck past, they wouldn't get close because of the way Mirio guarded their flank.

They stood a moment in front of the dorm to catch their breath, but Mirio shifted between his feet.

"So... the coast is clear, but I can come back later." Mirio said with a sheepish smile, "It doesn't seem like this is a good time, so-"

"Wait!" Eri cried.

She patted Kaito's shoulder, and he knelt so she could get down. She straightened her ruffled dress and walked up to Mirio, the faintest knot appearing in her brow. She pointed to the ground.

Mirio blinked in confusion, but followed her order and crouched in front of her.

"It's not your fault." Eri stated.

"Huh?"

“R-Ren-nii s-said that what Overhaul did to me w-wasn’t my fault,” Her little hands bunched into fists as she stared Mirio in the eye, “S-so what happened w-wasn’t your f-fault either. Heroes save people, s-so you would have s-saved me later, right?”

Ren, Hitoshi, and Kaito exchanged alarmed looks when Mirio’s blue eyes flooded with tears. The hero student nearly crumpled under the small girl’s gaze.

“Yes! I would have, I swear!” Mirio said, “I should have never left you with him in the first place! I’ve promised myself that I would never leave anybody like that ever again!”

“It’s okay.” Eri wrapped her arms around Mirio’s neck, “I never would’ve met Ren-nii, a-and Overhaul would have hurt you if you tried. P-please don’t cry.”

Mirio hugged her back while tears fell down his cheeks, but he had the biggest grin on his face as Eri buried her face in his neck. After a few moments of respectful silence, Ren cleared his throat.

“So you’ll be staying for curry, then?”

Eri let go of Mirio, her hands gripping the front of his blazer, “Please?”

Mirio sniffled and wiped his eyes, “Well, I can’t say no now, can I?”

“Yes! Ren-nii’s curry is the best!”

Eri grabbed Mirio’s hand and dragged him through the gate of the teacher’s dorm.

“Go on ahead, Kaito. I need a quick word with Hitoshi.”

Kaito nodded, then followed Eri and Mirio into the teacher’s dorm. Hitoshi looked at Ren with wide eyes.

“What’s up?”

“Seeing her with Mirio just now made me realize something.” Ren sighed, his gaze falling to the ground, “Eri needs to have more good people in her life aside from me. She’ll need them when Mona and I are gone. I hate to ask this of you Hitoshi, but-”

“I’ll protect the baby unicorn with my life.”

Ren sputtered.

“We should introduce her to my parents.” Hitoshi said with a grin, “You know they’d fall in love with her on the spot. And who knows, maybe she’ll be like a little sister to me. She could be a big sister to my next sibling, too.”

“....Thanks, Hitoshi.” Ren said softly, “It would mean a lot to me.”

Hitoshi felt his ears heat up, “Don’t mention it.”

Their phones suddenly chimed at the same time. Hitoshi unlocked his to see a notification from a news site he follows. He blinked several times, reading and re-reading the newest title several times to make sure he got it right.

“They work fast.” Ren muttered, “And people say that *I’m* not human.”

Hitoshi smirked, “Breaking News: Joker Has A Daughter!?!?!’ I think they need a few more exclamation points to really sell it.”

“Talk about jumping to conclusions. You’d think they’d guess she was more related to Kaito, since they almost have the same hair color.”

“Don’t worry about it too much. This news station creates crazy click-bait headlines all the time, most aren’t actually true and people know it. They’re probably just jumping on the bandwagon because people posted footage already.” Hitoshi held out his phone, “See?”

Ren squinted at the screen, watching a muted version of Eri kissing Kohryu on the nose followed by the dragon’s reaction.

Ren sighed as if he had thousand pound weights on his shoulders, "I'll talk to Nezu to see if he can do anything about it."

"Next thing you know people will start saying you're Aizawa's kid just because you both have black hair."

Ren playfully glared at him, "No curry for you."

"W-wait! It was just a joke, Ren!" Hitoshi startled when Ren waltzed past the gate without him, "Ren!!"

Ren laughed as he broke out into a sprint with Hitoshi chasing after him through the yard.

They had loads to talk about and events to catch up on, and though some of those topics weren't fun or easy, it was the best lunch period Hitoshi's had in ages.

"They're really all gone?" Morgana asked later that night, curled up on Ren's chest as they scrolled through news sites.

"Yup. Nezu said he'd 'take care of it' and they all disappeared right after, and no other article like them came out as far as I can tell." Ren said, "Nezu is scary when he wants to be."

"In this case, that's good." Morgana glared at the phone, "Eri doesn't deserve that kind of attention."

"The videos are still up though."

Morgana's ears drooped, "There are so many all over the place. It's not surprising. Look on the bright side, people will know they'll have an angry dragon to deal with if they try to bother her."

Ren smirked, "Make that two angry dragons, a murder rabbit, a whale, and a hawk on top of that. Best Jeanist and Tensei were ready to throw hands too."

“They weren’t too happy, huh?”

“Nope. Miruko already named herself as Eri’s ‘Best Aunt Ever’ on the chat. She and Ryukyu are probably going to battle over the title.”

Morgana chuckled, “Well, we should get some sleep. You’ll be working on that special move tomorrow for your performance, right?”

“Yeah.” Ren shut off his phone and put it under the pillow. Just in case Nezu decided to listen in on top of active monitoring. Futaba taught them well enough to know they couldn’t be too careful. “Kohryu and Pixie think they know what to do to make it better-”

A scratching noise, like claws on glass, crept through the room. Morgana and Ren stiffened when the balcony door moved, sliding open a few inches before stopping. There was an indignant huff before a familiar shape jumped on Ren’s bed.

“Lady Stubbs?” Morgana said, “What are you doing here?”

“Mrph!”

Ren’s heart stopped as he sat up, “... Is your bandanna too tight again?”

“Mrph!”

Ren and Morgana exchanged serious looks. He untied the tough knot and, like before, a small marble plopped onto the comforter. Ren grimaced as it broke to reveal a small note. He held it to the pale moonlight streaming in from the open door.

It had but a single word.

Tomorrow

HECK YES NEW PERSONAS!!

You can start expecting brand new Personas to make appearances real soon, I already have the next 3 chosen out for the next couple of chapters! I like doing them one or two at a time as compared to just replacing the whole stock in one go, because I think that would be insulting to the other Personas who've been on this journey with us and we get to properly explore the new ones personalities without them being squished or overtaken by others! Ghost just recently read the upcoming interactions between the next pair and, five minutes after their introduction, said that they were forever changed. I honestly can't wait to show them off! I'll probably also do a Chapter 9 on the Thieves Den for the 'Endgame Persona Builds' starting with Odin. Hooooo booooy if people thought Joker was 'too powerful' before, just wait until you see what's planned for the Endgame ones ;)

Any predictions of what Personas are coming next? Which ones would you like to see? What are your favorite Personas and why? I'd love to know!!

Fun fact: I did consider putting Odin in at the start of the fic, but didn't because both he and Cu Chulainn were too similar. I ended up choosing Cu over Odin because he's one of my personal favorites.

I just finished the first draft of Improvised Song recently, and as I looked at the list of remaining chapters after that one I nearly did a spit take with my coffee because Holy Canoli that's even less chapters than I thought. Who knows though, there's still the possibility of a chapter or two getting split in half to let one of the final plot threads have a little more breathing room.

Overall, I am EXCITED!

Duplicitous Devil's Castle

Chapter 88: Duplicitous Devil's Castle

“Okay. But be careful. I don’t want you hurting yourself by doing something crazy.”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs rubbed against his ankles.

Ren winked, “You know me, I’ll be fine!”

An extra long chapter for you guys because I didn't want to split this one in half. Enjoy the chaos!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[MULTIPLE IMPORTANT UPDATES](#) Please check them out!

Fanart!

[MissNoir17 on Twitter](#)

~*~ **9 Days Until the Festival** ~*~

The citizens in Jakku never thought twice when the hospital director suddenly announced that the hospital would be going under emergency renovations, following a report that one of the crucial support pillars in the building had cracked. Within days patients were moved to other hospitals, nurses and doctors took a short leave for the work to be done.

The blocks around the hospital were cut off from traffic, and citizens pointed and whispered at the various trucks from an unknown construction company who were allowed to pass. That was the extent of the excitement. People moved on with their lives, unaware of the scarlet hawk watching from so high above. Overlooked were the workers driving trucks full of gear not meant for construction, their muscular physiques and colorful costumes hidden under baggy, plain uniforms.

Nobody would think twice until the rumbles deep underground began hours later.

“Nezu’s not joining us?” Ren asked as he and Cementoss stood by the bus, “Not even on the way there?”

“No, he’s needed elsewhere. My apologies, but I won’t be there with you, either.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll begin building your venue for the Cultural Festival. Nezu sent the blueprints for me earlier this morning.”

“By *yourself* ?” Morgana gaped, clinging to Ren’s shoulder, “That’s crazy!”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs chirped from Ren’s other shoulder.

Several plans were made and scrapped for the venue. Ren and Nezu slowly refined their ideas as Joker’s routine became more concrete, until they settled on their final design just a few days ago.

Large enough to hold an enormous Persona like Kohryu, while also shielding thousands of people from the Red Rain. Smaller pieces of their plan would be sprinkled across the Festival Grounds, every part building up to their ultimate performance.

Cementoss chuckled at their concern, “Don’t worry. I constructed the Sports Festival stadiums within a few days by myself. This time I’ll have the help of a few Ectoplasm clones and robots. It’s no trouble for me.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Ren said.

Ectoplasm appeared on the steps of the bus, “We better get going, Amamiya. We’re gathering the usual crowd.”

They looked over towards the school building. Students, both familiar and not, came to this spot every morning just to get a look at him. One particular student was at the front of the group.

Monoma puffed up when Ren simply glanced at him.

“Right.” Ren turned away from the onlookers, “Let’s go.”

Cementoss guarded the bus as they boarded. Instead of their usual place in the middle, they chose the chair right behind the driver’s seat. Ectoplasm shuffled his cloak and sat down, within the minute they were off.

“It’s not just Nezu who isn’t here today, is it?” Morgana said to Ectoplasm, “Most of the teachers left before the sun rose this morning. Spinner and Mr. Compress, too.”

The only heroes who *stayed* were Cementoss, Ectoplasm, Lunch Rush, Thirteen, Hound Dog, and more than enough Ectoplasm clones to fill in for the rest. Ren learned how to differentiate between the clones and the real Ectoplasm, as the clones glowed green during Third Eye while the real one glittered gold. The one driving the bus had been gold when Ren checked, his grip tight over the steering wheel.

“Everyone should return later today, if things go according to plan.” Ectoplasm said coolly, “We’ll inform you if anything changes.”

Ren frowned. Morgana didn't look happy either.

"Merp..." Lady Stubbs sagged from Ren's shoulder and flopped onto the seat next to him.

Ren comforted her with pets. It wasn't only the heroes bearing some invisible weight. Ren's heart beat was extraordinarily loud in his ears, and while he pretended to be fine to the heroes, Morgana picked up on his nervousness.

"Worry not." Kohryu whispered, "We'll give you time to do what you need to do."

Sanatael nodded, *"Believe in us, Trickster."*

"And have faith in yourself as well. Your skills have been honed to a razor sharp point." Baal raised his goblet, *"We art thou, thou art us."*

"Our Trickster fears no obstacle!" Odin slammed his spear down, the reverberating sound chased away the last of Ren's nerves, *"I'll not allow it!"*

Ren's lips quirked in a small smile, *"You're right. We'll have this in the bag if we're careful."*

Fafnir bellowed with laughter, *"That's more like it!"*

"Ren, we're here." Morgana snapped him out of his thoughts.

Ectoplasm stood by the open door, ghostly white eyes narrowed in concern, "Are you alright, Amamiya? You were spacing off for quite some time."

Ren got to his feet, "I'm fine. My Personas and I were just going over what we wanted to practice today."

Ectoplasm did another once over on Ren before he walked out of the bus.

Lady Stubbs rolled off the chair and followed them. Ren stopped when he got to the gate, drawing Ectoplasm's attention when he frowned at Morgana.

"We'll be practicing some riskier moves today, Morgana. Why don't you and Lady Stubbs wait with Ectoplasm so you don't get hurt by accident?"

The tip of Morgana's tail twitched. In other words: *Watch the hero so he doesn't see through us.*

"Okay. But be careful. I don't want *you* hurting yourself by doing something crazy."

"Merp!" Lady Stubbs rubbed against his ankles.

Ren winked, "You know me, I'll be fine!"

"Whatever you say, Leader." Morgana dropped from Ren's shoulder, and with a mutual nod to Ectoplasm, they trailed towards the observation room.

Ren donned his costume and turned towards the empty city.

Kohryu appeared behind him, a long ribbon of golden scales glittering in the sunlight.

The tip of the dragon's nose touched Joker's back, "Shall we go, Trickster?"

Joker smirked as he hopped on Kohryu's head, "Let's do this."

Kohryu took off towards the skyscrapers on the other side of the fake city, the other Personas buzzing in excitement as their true mission loomed near.

The atmosphere around the Jakku Hospital flooded with a sense of quiet urgency. Trucks hauling large trailers arrived, the trailer doors

to some opening to a small army of officers equipped with heavy riot armor and shields, a few carried guns slung over their shoulder.

Another truck opened its trailer doors too, but instead of police ready for a fight, it dumped a small mountain of earth over the pavement.

Miruko threw open the door to the vehicle she drove and hopped out. She ripped off the stuffy construction uniform and the hat, shaking her long snowy hair free of its tresses. She tossed the clothes into the truck and slammed the door shut.

Pixie Bob did much the same from the other door.

They nodded to one another, no words exchanged as they marched towards the command center in the middle of the parking lot. White tents all interconnected together, with coils of wires and cables powering computers and other tech tapping into the hospital. A medical tent was off to the side, protected by the larger ones.

Nighteye turned to them, his body highlighted by the several dozen screens, "Pixie Bob, the last of the trucks carrying earth are arriving now. You know what to do."

"Got it." Pixie Bob smiled at Ragdoll and Mandalay, who sat in front of their own respective computers before she walked out.

Miruko huffed as she went to stand by Nezu, "When can we go in and kick ass?"

"Soon!" Nezu said, mad glee oozing from his tiny body, "We're doing our final preparations as Pixie Bob makes her beasts."

"I have tabs on everyone." Ragdoll said as her visor lit up, "... Including Spinner and Mr. Compress."

"Are you sure they should be allowed on this mission?" Mandalay asked, her expression firm, "I know Spinner helped us during the

Summer Camp alongside Joker, but Mr. Compress was with the League at that time.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Mr. Compress has proven to be a true ally, according to Joker’s own word.” Nezu typed away on his computer, some screens changing to a camera feed nearby, “They have as much stake in this as we do.”

“I agree. We worked with Compress on the Shie Hassaikai raid.” Iida Tensei said from another monitor, “We can trust them with this mission.”

The screens showed Pixie Bob hard at work making another small army of creatures of all sizes. Giant serpents, dragons, tiny lizards and feline shapes, large chimeras of all combinations of animals, to tall earthen knights wielding great-swords of stone. Each was trapped in a marble by Mr. Compress and added to the box Tiger carried.

Tiger’s job was to pass them around with Spinner, who stood at his side.

“His quirk will be vital for this operation to be successful.” Nighteye adjusted his glasses, eyes glued to Nezu’s screen, “Arming our teams with Pixie Bob’s creatures will give us another advantage over any Nomu they encounter, but they obviously can’t fit down the hidden elevator Hawks found in the morgue. Transporting them this way is indefinitely easier and adds a layer of surprise.”

Mandalay still looked unsure.

Ragdoll squeezed her shoulder, “If Joker says he’s trustworthy, then he’s trustworthy. The least we can do is believe in Joker, especially after everything he did for us.”

Mandalay relaxed, and firmly nodded. Ragdoll smiled at her before they resumed their duties.

“Speaking of, how’s it looking, Hawks?” Nezu asked.

“I don’t know.” Hawks’ voice trickled in through the speakers, *“The doctor doesn’t seem to know we’re here, but...”*

“What’s wrong?” Nighteye asked.

“Something feels off with this guy. He’s been muttering and talking himself in circles for hours about Joker and Shigaraki, and what he’d do to either if he got his hands on them. It makes me sick.”

“So the wacko completely lost it.” Miruko smirked as she cracked her knuckles, “This’ll be easy then!”

“Don’t underestimate him.” Yagi was like a ghost secluded around his own computer screens, “All For One kept him close for a reason.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t discount the doctor’s mental state just yet.” Nezu said, “He may have been driven to madness from All For One’s death and the League being dismantled, but that could also make him more dangerous and volatile. We’ll need to take extra precautions.”

Nighteye gained a critical gleam to his eyes, “Underestimating him could prove fatal. I’d rather not make that mistake.”

Miruko sobered, “... I guess you’re right.”

At that moment Aizawa walked in, his posture tense and alert, “Nezu, everyone’s ready.”

Nighteye glanced at Iida.

“Pixie Bob, are you almost done?” Iida Tensei asked into his headset.

“Yep! The beasties are all packed and ready to go!”

“Very well.” Nighteye turned to Aizawa and Miruko, “Meet with your assigned team by the elevator. It’ll get hectic once I give the green light to go down.”

“On it!” Miruko rushed out, “Let’s go, Eraser!”

Eraserhead sighed, but followed her out and kept pace as they entered the hospital.

They’d be the first to go in.

Team 1 would be the heaviest hitters who would protect the strike team, whose sole purpose was to capture the doctor; Miruko herself, Gang Orca, Hawks, Eraserhead, Snipe, Present Mic, Mr. Compress, and the largest share of Pixie Bob’s earthen beasts.

Team 2 would focus on restraining any defeated Nomu from Team 1: Best Jeanist, Tiger, Pixie Bob, Spinner, Vlad King, Midnight, Bubble Girl and Centipeder, along with a majority of the armed officers and the lesser share of the beasts.

Team 3 was full surface support, led by Ryukyu as she circled overhead to prevent any possible escape attempts. Those who would provide intel and back-up communications; Nighteye, Yagi, Nezu, Iida Tensei, Ragdoll to keep tabs on everyone’s location while Mandalay would relay orders in case something happened to their tech. The smallest group of beasts and remaining police, under the command of Tsukauchi, would maintain the hospital’s perimeter.

Tsukauchi’s... acted strange. An ice cold fortitude overtook him. Miruko thought it was business as usual for a detective. But yesterday as they finalized their plans, Tsukauchi gave Eraserhead and Present Mic the most brokenhearted expression when they had their backs turned. She’d only ever seen such despair on his face

once... after Kamino. He caught her looking and kept his stoicism from there.

There was obviously something immensely *personal* in this raid that the detective wasn't sharing. She wouldn't pry as long as she got to kick ass and make a madman pay, but it stuck to the back of her mind.

She and Eraserhead raced through the small maze of hallways and down a set of stairs until they reached the morgue. It was cold and musky, the scent of iron slabs and chemicals made her stomach churn. The elevator had been hidden behind some false walls next to the cold storage she absolutely refused to look at.

The others, aside from Mr. Compress, were already here. The elevator was guarded with two police officers, who saluted as they entered the room.

Gang Orca, Hawks, and Snipe huddled next to each other, rearing to go.

Present Mic's expression brightened when Eraserhead came in, but the hero maintained his professionalism by staying quiet.

Mr. Compress shot into the room last, breathless.

"I'm here! And I brought presents." He reached into his coat pocket and shoved several blue marbles in each of their hands.

Gang Orca stared at the tiny orbs rolling around his palm, "How are we to use these?"

"And are they safe to put in our pockets?" Snipe asked, "I'd hate to have my costume torn apart by accident, partner."

Mr. Compress snorted, "Simply throw them down on the ground and they'll break. But do give them ample space just in case your marble has a bigger beast."

“What about the other teams?” Present Mic shoved the marbles in his jacket pocket, “You gave them the warning too, right?”

“Have a bit of Faith in me, won’t you?” Mr. Compress wagged a finger at the heroes, “Yes, I gave the same instructions to the others. And yes, I’ll make sure they work as intended every time. I have a mental link with every marble, so I know what each of them contains, their exact location, and those who hold them.”

Hawks’ wings twitched, “Huh, so it’s not that much different to the link I have with my feathers. Nice.”

“Enough chit-chat.” Nighteye’s voice came through their comms, cleaving their mood like a ruthless executioner, *“I’m giving you the green light to go in. Team 2 will follow after exactly 5 minutes have passed. Good luck.”*

Gang Orca nodded, “Understood. Team 1, going in.”

One of the guards pressed a button for the elevator. They tensed as the door let out a pleasant *ding*, its doors scraping open. The elevator was empty. Nothing happened.

They piled inside and Miruko jammed the only button with her thumb.

The doors closed with a metallic groan, and they descended into the bowels of a true devil’s castle.

Joker closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The wind caressed his hair and made his long coat tails flutter around his legs, the dull murmur of its breath whispering in his ears. After a few moments of reveling in the fresh air, he opened his eyes to the full might of the chilled autumn sun.

The fake city stretched out all around him. The rest of the school could be seen from his vantage point at the top of the tallest

skyscraper in Ground Beta. The main building, that giant H shaped monument to heroism, was a shining speck in the distance.

He looked down as the cool wind gained strength, the dull murmur becoming something of a small roar. To any witness, the situation would look grim. A single teenager standing at such a height that made the streets and surrounding buildings look like tiny smudges of color, nothing stopped the tips of his boots hanging from the edge of a sheer drop that made him dizzy. One step and he could surrender to gravity.

Before his thoughts strayed too far, a bright ribbon of golden scales swirled in his vision. Kohryu circled the lone skyscraper, floating as free as a baby otter taking its first swim away from its mother. He turned his ridged back to the ground, his belly exposed to the sky as he kept his eyes locked on Joker.

“Are you prepared for such a drop?”

“It’s daunting, but I know you’ll be there. Fafnir, Alice, Pixie, are you in position?”

Fafnir cackled, Joker could see nothing more than the silver reflection of his scales on the roof of a building far below, *“Ready for chaos!”*

Alice curtsied from another rooftop, *“Ready, big brother.”*

“Let’s get this show on the road!!” Pixie yelled from a third rooftop.

Joker stepped forward. Wind wailed around him as he plummeted, coat tails flapping wildly in the wind. The raging sense of freedom from his free-fall boiled in his chest until bubbles of laughter escaped him, and he grinned as he pulled his momentum forward into a head-first dive. He stared at his own faint reflection in the glass skyscraper, a smudge of ebony swimming in gold as Kohryu rushed to meet him.

Joker shot out his grapple, the coiling wire wrapping around one of Kohryu's great horns.

His stomach dropped at the sudden shift in momentum as he swung in a large arc over the city skyline. He imagined a bright spotlight and thousands of people cheering under his feet during the real thing, but for now Kohryu circled the skyscraper with Joker dangling like a spider on a web.

"Now!" Joker commanded.

Kohryu roared as he cast the first spell in the chain of magic.

Concentrate's blue light filled the city with dancing aurora. Fafnir followed with a bellow of his own as he added Cosmic Flare to the stream of enhanced magic. A blanket of darkness covered the sky, shifting the whole of Ground Beta from a bright and sunny day to a mask of blackness shimmering with a galaxy of stars. A blue meteor of astronomic proportions streamed overhead.

Their united soul shivered as Pixie and Alice's bonds tangled together, combining their Almighty magic to concoct a refined version of the Megidolaon Stars. The darkness of Cosmic Flare masked the bright white flash, and the stars rained down as if they were tears shed by the cosmos itself.

A sea of twinkling white lights fell around them as gentle as snowflakes, rainbows of a thousand colors shimmering through the air as they burst in timed intervals. The colors reflected from Kohryu's scales and sent additional speckles of light in all directions.

Joker activated Third Eye as the cosmic show neared its end, "*Time to 'stick the landing'.*"

"Understood!" Kohryu replied.

Kohryu dropped towards a particular set of buildings, one of which Third Eye highlighted in gold. The dragon suddenly veered upwards

when they got close enough. Joker retracted the grapple and soared. He pulled himself into acrobatic twirls, and looked as if he would pull off a majestic landing at the center of the designated rooftop.

But Kohryu purposely overshot.

Joker zoomed over that building and towards the glass windows of the taller one next to it. He covered his head with his arms as the glass shattered, his vision blurring as he rolled several times, his boots skidding across the floor as he slid to a stop. Glass peppered the floor around him in tinkling shards.

Joker's heart pounded frantically, the adrenaline coursing through him ebbing away as he caught his breath. He stood and brushed stray pieces of glass from his costume and shook some from his hair. As if on cue, his phone rang from within his pocket. Ectoplasm's number showed on screen and he answered.

"Are you alright, Joker!?" Ectoplasm exclaimed before Joker could open his mouth.

"Yep! I'm perfectly unharmed. Why, were you worried about little old me?"

Ectoplasm breathed a long sigh of relief, *"Geez, kid. You sure know how to keep people on the edge of their seats."*

Joker smirked, *"It's my job."*

"You idiot!" Morgana yowled in the background, *"I told you not to do anything crazy and get yourself hurt! Mercurius was twitchy the entire time!"*

"Merp!!"

"But I didn't get hurt. I'm fine, honest. You know Fafnir has the best physical defence in my stock." Joker turned towards the camera in

the corner of the room and gingerly waved, "See? There's not a single scratch on me."

Morgana grumbled under his breath as Ectoplasm chuckled, "*As long as you're really okay, Joker, that's all I care about. That show was impressive though. Is that your finale?*"

"No, but it does lead directly into it. Can't tell you the rest though or my Personas would be mad."

"Fair enough. Did you want to keep practicing or take a break?"

Joker pretended to think it over, "I'll make my way down and take five while my Personas keep practicing."

"Very well. We'll stay in the observation room in the meantime."

"Roger." Joker hung up, and gave a two finger salute to the camera before taking an easy stride out of the room. He turned off his phone when he was out of camera view.

This building could not be more perfect. While not the tallest by any means, there were still 34 floors chock-full of blind spots they could use for their cover. Kohryu shot him into the 31st floor. There'd be plenty of time for him to 'walk' his way down to ground level. Joker strolled through the first blind spot on the 30th level, then another one the 28th. But he broke out into a sprint once he entered the largest one on the 26th floor.

"We'll keep Ectoplasm busy with our light show!" Pixie said as he shot around the first corner.

"He won't even notice that big brother is gone."

"We'll cover you as best we can, Trickster, but make haste regardless." Kohryu said.

Joker slowed to a stop at an intersection, double checking his surroundings with Third Eye to make sure they were in the clear.

With a nod to himself, he retrieved his Key and opened a door. Elizabeth stepped out and held it open to him, her golden eyes alight with mischief.

“Have fun!”

Joker handed her his phone and stated dryly, “I’ll try.”

Joker dove inside.

Lavenza, Margaret, and Theodore stood around the entry point, the wall of light at the top of the stairs. Lavenza touched the stones around the frame of the white light. It rippled like a stone dropped in water, then returned to normal.

“It should be connected to the other door now, Trickster.” Lavenza said with a polite smile, “Please be careful.”

“And remember you can use your Key for a quick escape as well. There’s no need to sneak back to the closet.” Theodore frowned, “... Just in case.”

Joker nodded before he walked through the light.

The elevator door opened to a nightmare.

A single long hallway stretched before them, covered in pitch black pools of darkness with the occasional dot of light. The single bright bulb in front of the elevator flickered and sparked. This would be prime real estate for a B-rated horror flic, Miruko thought, as long as the heroes weren’t too stupid to be reduced to bloody pulps by the end.

“What’s that smell!?” Present Mic covered his nose as a thick pungent stench hit them, “Why didn’t you say anything, Hawks!?”

His voice carried through the cold iron hallways.

“Shh!” Eraser shoved his hand over Present Mic’s mouth, “Be quiet. Unless you *want* the Doctor to know we’re here.”

“Ugh, my feathers only pick up sound, not smell.” Hawks whispered as he pinched his nose, looking rather green in the face, “We’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Y’all should invest in gas masks.” Snipe said as he tapped his mask with his left pointer finger, his right hand holding on to the gun at his hip, “I don’t smell a thing.”

“Or any normal masks, for that matter.” Mr. Compress tipped his hat, “The smell is greatly reduced for me. I don’t envy those with enhanced senses.”

“Lucky.” Miruko grumbled as her stomach turned sour.

“Focus.” Gang Orca took the first step out of the elevator, “Be prepared for anything.”

A few scarlet feathers shot from Hawks’ wings and pinned themselves in everyone’s clothes, “I’ll guide everyone through here, and get the strike team away if it gets too heated.”

They crept onward, keeping their footsteps silent as they melded into the first stretch of darkness. Hawks kept his wings half open when they fell into shadow, searching for any sign of life. Miruko’s ears twitched for a similar reason. She picked up their faint footfalls and the metallic groans and creaks throughout the tense silence. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as they ventured further into the lion’s den. The pungent scent only got thicker as they reached another hallway

Odd stains and scratch marks littered the walls and floors, and they stiffened when an animalistic groan echoed from somewhere ahead.

“Stop.” Hawks commanded in a hushed tone. A pair of feather blades flew into his hands as he pointed at an intersection ahead,

“Something’s coming.”

Snipe unlatched his gun from his belt and whispered, “Is it the Doctor?”

“I don’t think so?” Hawks squinted, his head tilting like an owl listening for a mouse, “It’s.... as small as a child? It’s not an animal, as it’s walking on two limbs. I didn’t sense it before now.”

The hero teachers’ expression darkened considerably. Gang Orca’s hands tightened into fists, his grip powerful enough to crush skulls into powder.

“A child?” Mr. Compress mused, “I don’t remember the Doctor saying anything about children-”

The squeak of shoes reached them. They froze when a strange creature walked into view. A tiny green-skinned Nomu who traipsed awkwardly on arms laced up in bright yellow shoes, a long wire trailed from its backside and down the hall it came from, a glass cage encompassed its exposed brain. Soulless blank eyes and a toothy smile turned to them.

Its mouth cracked open... and it *screamed*.

Shock-waves of deafening noise hit them. The walls and floors cracked under its power, and Miruko clamped her hands over her ears as a sharp pain pierced her skull. A *bang* skirted her muffled hearing, and the screeching stopped as soon as it started.

Miruko gasped as her hands fell to her side, a small trickle of blood speckled on her left palm. A sharp pounding hammered her left ear, accompanied by the feeling of cotton being stuffed in her brain.

By the looks of it, most of them were either dizzy or gently prodding bleeding ears. Hawks had his eyes scrunched shut as he massaged his temples, his feather blades forgotten as his wings became a frazzled mess.

“What the hell was that!?” Present Mic said.

Gang Orca looked in shock at Snipe, who pointed the smoking barrel of his gun towards the pile of guts and blood staining the floor.

“What?” Snipe jabbed his thumb at Present Mic, “Being with this guy every day taught me about the importance of having a stock of good quality earplugs.”

“Thank heavens for that.” Mr. Compress muttered, “Otherwise we’d all be rendered unconscious before the fight even began.”

“We should move.” Eraser shook his head as if to clear his muddled thoughts, a small trickle of blood leaking from his right ear, “We don’t know if we alerted-”

“Johnny, what’s wrong!?” A voice called out, “Johnny!!”

Skittering shuffles and footsteps rushed towards them, and their target appeared. He staggered to a stop in front of the bloody corpse of the tiny Nomu, his doctor’s coat littered with tears and grisly stains. His bushy mustache was untamed.

“Johnny!?” Fat tears leaked from the Doctor’s goggles as his voice broke, “How did... what-”

Stupefied, he looked at the group of heroes still trying to recover. He cried out and scrambled away, the silver flick of Eraserhead’s capture weapon missing him by a hair’s breadth.

“After him!” Gang Orca roared as he lunged forward, digging his meaty claws in the wall to help throw his unsteady gait around the corner.

All notion of stealth was thrown to the wind as the sounds of breaking glass, sloshing liquids, and the grating shrieks of Nomu heralded the *true* nightmare of the underground lab.

Three steps was all it took to travel from Ground Beta to a dark supply closet several miles away.

“Why couldn’t I have this back home?” Joker muttered.

He smiled sadly as he wondered how Yusuke and the others would react to teleporting across Tokyo to cheat the system. It would’ve saved him time and train fair. He idly wondered if it was possible to teleport across Japan’s major cities. He doubted he’d be allowed to test it though.

Kohryu, Fafnir, Pixie, and Alice’s presences pulled at him like a magnet. The distance prodded his brain like the end of a sharp stick. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shoved the unease to the corner of his mind, instead focusing on his current objective. He searched his pockets for the one and only item he had been able to sneak under Power Loader’s nose; a Convertizer.

An upgraded version of Stealthanol he created through experimenting with Hatsume and Hitoshi, and it was thanks to Hitoshi distracting Power Loader when they were in the lab a few days ago that he was able to swipe it.

Vasuki could use a skill to make the heroes forget if Joker got caught, but having a weird gap in their memory would have its own risks. He used the upgraded Convertizer on himself, and then crept towards the door.

He put his ear to it.

Silence.

The remaining teachers should be in class with their students for the next half hour. He closed his eyes and listened for a few seconds more before cracking open the door. A sliver of light spilled in, but it looked like he was in the clear.

He took a deep breath, activated Third Eye, and left the closet.

His steps were quick and agile, and he stuck to the short route Mr. Compress set out for him. There was only a few corners to turn before Nezu's door became visible at the end of the hallway. It looked too easy to the naked eye.

Third Eye told a different story.

Cameras shed green cones of light to touch every facet of the hallway, bright red invisible lasers would let none pass their ridiculously complicated web undetected.

"Mr. Compress said Nezu had an electronic lock on his door, but what the heck are we supposed to do about this? There was no mention of invisible lasers back at the Sports Festival!"

"Perhaps Nezu added such security because of your break in at the Sports Festival?" Ishtar said.

"You mean this is all my fault?"

Ishtar smiled sweetly, *"It's not impossible, no?"*

Joker sighed sharply through his nose. Third Eye revealed all the wires to the security system fed into Nezu's office, and his office alone. There would be no way to shut them off from the outside. Someone as small as Pixie *could* slowly flutter through this mess and get to the other side, but she was busy at Ground Beta, and without an accessible off-switch that would be pointless anyway.

Baal's chuckle echoed through the mindscape, *"Remember, Trickster, there's always a path through the stickiest of situations for those who think **outside** the box."*

Joker's eyes trailed towards the windows lining the hallway.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me." He muttered.

He walked towards one of the windows and to the drop below. He wondered if Fafnir's defences covered such a fall so he wouldn't get

injured, or would he be uninjured but make a perfect indent of himself in the concrete like in old American cartoons? Since it was *Repel Physical*... would he just bounce right back up? He wasn't keen to find out.

There was a slight ridge running along the outside, so if he could just shimmy himself across...

But Nezu's office had floor to ceiling windows, with no obvious way to open them. He squinted and looked to the end of the hallway at Nezu's door. There were one or two windows he could enter through, untouched by the visible cones from the cameras and the wall of lasers.

"I could carry you across from the outside." Gabriel offered.

"Like a princess!?" Alice teased.

"It's too risky," Joker looked at the sunlight shining through the windows, *"The cameras could pick up on our shadows. I'll just do it the old fashioned way."*

"Very well, but do be careful." Gabriel said, *"I would hate to see you end up as a stain on the pavement..."*

The window opened without protest and he hopped on the sill, crouching there like some demented gargoyle. He gripped the window sill and clambered out. His boots slipped over the smooth glass, and he scrambled for several moments before he found proper traction.

"I almost can't bear to watch..." Byakko said as he placed a paw over his eyes.

"It's fine. We're fine." Joker said with a breathy laugh. *"It's going to be just fine."*

"Keep telling yourself that, and maybe you'll believe it one day."
Byakko replied.

Joker used his head and shoulder to close the window, and then he began his perilous journey across.

"Get out of our way!!" Miruko howled as blood splashed and Nomu bodies fell all around her.

She flipped and kicked her way through the long hallway, Hawks' blades cut through them like butter, while a targeted sonic attack from Gang Orca tore through another. Eraserhead trapped a smaller Nomu in his capture weapon and left it vulnerable enough for Snipe to shoot it through the head.

Mr. Compress hopped merrily around their strikes, sealing large parts of their bodies in his marbles and leaving a bloody mess behind.

The Nomu fell like dominoes. Miruko cackled as a heavily reinforced door appeared at the end of the hallway, her bulging leg muscles tensing as she launched herself at it like a rocket.

The underground lab trembled as the door crumpled like aluminum foil.

They streamed into a large room, hazy purple light and a low fog clung to the floor. Several Nomu tanks lined the walls. But these were no baseline Nomu. They had more unique body types and intelligence gleamed from their eyes as they screamed and writhed in their tanks, glass cracking under their pounding fists.

"High-ends!" Gang Orca yelled.

A shriek of terror came from the other side of the room, and they saw the Doctor flee through another door.

Gang Orca grabbed Hawks' jacket and flung him towards the door, "Take Eraserhead and Snipe and go after him!"

"What!?" Hawks straightened himself out and hovered, "We can't leave you here!"

"But we can't let the doctor get away either." Eraserhead stated.

"Just go, you dumb bird brain!!" Miruko screamed as bigger cracks lined the tanks, fluid spewing out, "We can handle these losers!"

Hawks swore.

He, along with Eraserhead and Snipe, tossed down their marbles just as the tanks gave way to the High-Ends' relentless assault. Several stone beasts and warriors rose like valiant titans in the face of an impossible wave.

With a hard flap of his wings, Hawks zoomed towards the door the Doctor went through, dragging Eraserhead and Snipe along from the feathers in their costumes. Their escape was covered by a beast sacrificing itself, a tiger with bat wings and a scorpion's tail that was impaled with a tentacle extending from one of the Nomu's head.

Sprays of dirt peppered their backs, but they didn't look back as the horrible sounds of battle battered their injured eardrums.

"We're never doing that ever again." Joker said as he massaged the burning soreness out of his fingers.

"I admit, watching you nearly fall again at the end almost gave me a heart attack." Satanael said.

Joker rolled his eyes. He almost lost his grip trying to get the second window open. He ended up having to slide the tip of Paradise Lost into the window to open it. Maybe he closed it a bit too hard out of spite, but at least they were out of camera view.

Joker turned towards Nezu's door, just a few feet ahead without any cameras or lasers. *"Now that that's over, let's just-"*

"STOP!"

Joker froze at Satanael's roar.

"What's all this ruckus, Demon Dad Of Doom!?" Pixie snapped.

"Joker, look at your feet."

Joker looked down, and Third Eye revealed a single laser cutting across the floor inches from his boots.

"Between the silent alarms, cameras, and motion detectors, its no wonder how Nezu knows whenever someone is close to his office." Joker said, *"I figured it was just his enhanced hearing."*

He gathered up his coat tails and gingerly stepped over it, double checking the last foot and a half to Nezu's door for any more traps before letting his coat tails down. Joker gave a silent sigh of relief when there were none. Now, to the final obstacle: The door itself.

Joker ran his gloved hand down it. The door handle proved it was locked, but like Mr. Compress informed them, there was no keyhole to pick through. Maybe he could do the same thing he did to open the window, but shoving a dagger through it might leave obvious damage.

A presence rose in his mind like a building storm, *"Such a meager security measure is no match for my power."* Odin's lightning trickled through Joker's veins, *"It requires but a fraction of the might we wield!"*

"Too much and we'll blow out the circuitry and leave our entry obvious, too little won't do anything." Satanael said.

"Hmph." Odin ignored Satanael, *"Well, Trickster?"*

Joker closed his eyes and concentrated on Odin's bond, a long stream of bifrost crackling with golden lightning. The prismatic energy stream, oddly enough, had quite a potent smell of mead to it. It took three hours of meditation in the Velvet Room to master the intoxicating force of nature.

He pulled on the smallest stream of Odin's magic, and opened his eyes to the tiny snap of lightning buzzing from his palm into the door. Joker waited, holding his breath at the electronic hum inside the door, and the door opened without protest.

Odin beamed with pride as Joker rushed in and closed the door. He went straight to Nezu's desk and turned on the computer monitor. He paused, looking at Admiral Feesh sitting innocently in one of the chairs.

"You don't mind, do you, pal?" Joker chuckled after a moment, "Of course not. Thanks."

Then he looked at the monitor and frowned.

"Password protected. Of course."

He dug through his pockets for La Brava's flash drive and plugged it into the tower hidden under Nezu's desk. Joker smirked as La Brava's virus within the flash drive cracked through the password with ruthless efficiency. The screen gave a happy chime as it opened to the home screen.

"He-hee has the background set to a picture of himself and the stuffed fish, ho? How-he strange-ho!" Black frost commented.

Joker ignored this as a pop-up appeared and began the copy of Nezu's whole hard drive.

"Wow. Over 20 petabytes?" Joker said, *"Oracle would salivate at this much data."*

"Can La Brava's tiny device hold that much?" Baal asked.

"I guess we'll find out." Joker watched the download meter sluggishly hit 5%, *"This is going to take ages. Let's see what else he has on here."*

Joker decided a little extra snooping was in order. He found the camera feed. Hallways, busy classrooms, the cafeteria, and various points from all of the training gyms could be viewed from here. Joker lazily scrolled through them, but froze on one of them in a nearby hallway.

Hound Dog walked with a folder under his arm with Gentle Criminal at his side. On the outside, Gentle Criminal seemed calm. Joker knew his tells. Twice Gentle Criminal tried to smooth down his immaculate hair or fix his scarf and tailcoat.

Time already wasn't on their side, but it was about to get a whole lot worse.

Joker watched the screen like a hawk as Hound Dog led him through the familiar hallways until he reached a certain intersection, farther down than where Joker entered.

Don't turn left.

Don't turn left.

Hound Dog turned left, now directly facing Nezu's door and confidently striding closer.

Sweat broke out on the back of Joker's neck when Hound Dog walked under the first camera, nose twitching as he curiously sniffed the windows. Just a few windows down, right out of the camera feed, and Hound Dog would have the exact window Joker clambered out of. Gentle Criminal said something, and Hound Dog simply shrugged before he continued. Hound Dog passed under the cameras and through the invisible lasers without a care in the world. A little

notification appeared on Nezu's toolbar when the first laser was broken.

Joker looked at the download progress as his heart rate picked up.

15%

He reached up and traced his gloved fingers around the Key.

17%

It wasn't enough for La Brava to make a virus. He could leave it here to finish, but this was supposed to be their one and only shot to get this information. Joker looked between the screen and the door, which Hound Dog was less than ten feet from.

19%

Hound Dog passed though the last motion sensor closest to Nezu's door, another notification appearing on his computer.

Muffled voices halted at the door, giving Joker the time to make his snap decision. The drive would be hidden since the computer tower was under Nezu's desk, so if he just turned off the screen... maybe Hound Dog wouldn't notice anything out of place.

"Damnit." Joker whispered.

He turned the monitor off and whipped out the Key, the Velvet Room door vanishing as Nezu's door opened.

Hawks swung his feather blade down.

Blood splattered as he sliced another tiny Nomu in half, blood, organs, and sickly yellow skin falling to the floor with a nauseating *splat*.

"Mocha!!" The Doctor screamed as he backpedaled, "You monsters!"

"It's the end of the line." Hawks stated, his voice toned with biting ice. "Give up."

They had chased the Doctor into the final chamber with a huge tank connected to a network of thick tubes and wires all throughout the room. Thankfully, it was empty.

The Doctor fell over the front console when Eraserhead wrapped him up in a silvery cocoon, but something strange happened when Eraserhead activated his quirk. The Doctor's skin melted like clay, sagging and swimming in wrinkles, leaving behind a decrepit old man.

The shock of the change made Eraser blink, the doctor returning to normal when the quirk stopped.

Before they could say a word, their prisoner broke out into heaving laughter. Streams of tears leaked from his goggles as he collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath between fits. He fully succumbed to his madness as the horrible wheezing laughter grated their ears and made them shiver.

Snipe grumbled under his breath as he walked up to the Doctor and smacked him in the head with the butt of his pistol. Eerie silence filled the room as the Doctor collapsed, unconscious.

"Nighteye, we have the target in custody." Hawks said, scowling as he kept eyes on their captive, "What's the status of everyone else?"

Dust rained down on them as another rumble shook the lab.

"... Still fighting." Nighteye said, "Team 2 joined the battle against the High-Ends right after you chased the Doctor. Tsukauchi has a transport ready for him, but it's not safe to bring him up yet."

"I'm going to back them up." Hawks looked between Eraserhead and Snipe, "I'll come back for you when its safe."

Eraserhead tightened his capture weapon over the Doctor's body, "Snipe and I have him."

"Damn right we do." Snipe kept his gun pointed at the Doctor, "Even if he wakes up, this snake's not going anywhere."

Hawks nodded and dove out of the room.

He never wanted to know what the Doctor originally had in store for that huge tank, and thankfully, they'd never have to find out.

A few minutes before...

Gentle Criminal made a pained grunt before Hound Dog could take another step.

"Are you alright?" Hound Dog asked as they stood before Nezu's office, "You've been acting off today. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"Ah," Gentle Criminal put on an easy smile, "I'm afraid my breakfast isn't agreeing with me very much. I'm hoping it won't evolve into food poisoning."

Hound Dog's expression softened, "Recovery Girl isn't here today. We'll finish this up and you can go back to the dorms to rest, if you want."

"It would be appreciated."

Hound Dog nodded. He turned back to the door, but stopped halfway through. His nose twitched by another window, his brow heavily furrowing.

"Is something the matter?"

"No... It's nothing." Hound Dog shook his head and reached into his pocket for a key card.

Ah, all this preparation and they didn't know about these cards. This secret mission of theirs would have been much easier if they knew about them, but a missing card might lead to its own troubles.

Relief washed over Gentle Criminal as it opened and they walked into an empty office.

"It feels strange to walk in here without Nezu present." Gentle Criminal said as he scanned the bookshelves and desk, "Why have we come here? Could this not wait until he returns?"

"These files need to be dropped off now in case things get... busier later." Hound Dog pocketed the key card and gestured to the files in his hands, "Besides, these can't wait too long."

"What are they?"

Hound Dog's toothy grin turned sad, "A list of students and various programs separate from U.A. We offer counseling, but sometimes the students and their families need a little extra help to get by. Nezu takes care of any fees, especially for medications students need but can't afford."

"That's..." Gentle Criminal blinked rapidly, "That's incredibly kind of him."

Hound Dog nodded, "It's something I suggested ages ago, and Nezu was more than happy to do it."

The hero walked to Nezu's desk and set the file on it.

Gentle Criminal knew Hound Dog sensed something when his shoulders suddenly tensed, his fur bristling as he put his hands flat on Nezu's desk and smelled the air around it.

"What's wrong?"

"I smell... *nothing* ."

“Isn’t that good?”

“I’ve delivered dozens of these folders to Nezu’s office, both when he was here and not.” A growl rumbled through his throat, “I know the scents like the back of my hand; his collection of teas, paper and ink, the slight musky smell around Nezu himself. Nezu’s scent is too weak here. *Any* scent is too weak for it to be natural.” Hound Dog turned towards Gentle Criminal, his eyes piercing through Gentle Criminal. “There has only been one time where there was a suspicious lack of scent... right outside Musutafu General Hospital.”

“Perhaps its because Nezu hasn’t been in here at all today? He’s been gone quite often as of late.”

“Hmm...” Hound Dog stared at him, as if searching for something, “I need to make a quick call. Return to the dorms, you’re dismissed for the day.”

Gentle Criminal nodded, turned tail, and did just that, keeping a natural pace without looking like he was running away.

Red feathers pinned the female High-End Nomu to the wall, screaming and thrashing, “I’ll kill you! I’LL KILL YOU!!”

Miruko was a blur as her kick smashed into the female Nomu’s head, blood and brains flowing into the deepening cracks spreading all across the wall. They expected the Nomu to regenerate at a rapid rate, and be back in the fight within seconds, as with what happened with all of these High-Ends. The Nomu’s arms went limp and she fell into a heap against Hawks’ feathers.

“Crush the head...” Hawks whirled around to the bedlam of blood and earth, of heroes being pushed to the brink against a losing battle.

“Crush the head!!” Miruko screamed as she launched herself at her next target, the largest High-End currently grappling with Gang Orca,

“These assholes can’t regenerate without the brain!!”

Many tired voices howled in renewed vigor as the tide of battle changed.

“Woah! Look at that!” Mona bounced on all fours as they watched another shower of stars fall, “It gets cooler every time.”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs declared.

Ectoplasm chuckled, “Joker’s never done anything like this before, for fun?”

“No...” The excitement died on Mona’s face, replaced by a sadness that tugged on Ectoplasm’s heart, “We’ve been too busy just trying to survive. We haven’t been able to let loose and have fun in a really long time.”

“Merp...” Lady Stubbs gently rubbed her head against Mona’s, making the other cat smile.

“... I see. Oh, one moment.” Ectoplasm reached for his phone as it rung, frowning at Hound Dog’s number on the screen. He answered it, “Yes?”

“Do you have eyes on Joker and the cats?”

Ectoplasm glanced across the collection of screens. He frowned, as he hadn’t seen Joker in the last several minutes. He was about to answer, when the kid finally showed himself, calmly walking across a hallway as he looked down at the phone in his hand. Mona and Lady Stubbs were, of course, right beside him.

“Yes, I do. Why?”

“Grrrr, I just wanted to check something.”

“You’re not making much sense, my friend.”

“Are the cats around you right now?”

“Yes?”

Hound Dog hung up. Ectoplasm looked at his phone in bewilderment as Hound Dog sent a text seconds later.

[Hound Dog]

So Joker and the cats have been in Ground Beta all day?

[Ectoplasm]

Yes, I'm positive. I've been watching Joker and his Personas practice since we got here this morning.

[Hound Dog]

Hmm....

Gentle Criminal was at my side throughout the day and Thirteen confirmed the same for La Brava. Kaito is with Eri at the dorms, being watched over by one of your clones. All cards and keys have been accounted for.

I'm going to check Joker's phone, just in case.

Ectoplasm's stomach sank.

Did Hound Dog suspect Joker of something? In all honesty, the thought of spying on a teenager's phone didn't sit well with him. But in this instance, with Hound Dog acting so strange, he decided to check on it, too.

Joker's GPS information for today started at the dorms and followed the bus route from the school to Ground Beta, and perfectly mimicked everything he did at Ground Beta today. Not a single line was out of place. Joker's current conversation with Kaito was just... normal.

[Grandpa]

Did you have any plans for dinner tonight?

[Joker]

I'm craving something hot and sour.

You don't think the heroes would let us order take out, would you?

[Grandpa]

You could ask Nezu when he gets back.

[Joker]

And insult Lunch Rush? No way!

Ectoplasm backed out before he felt too invasive.

[Ectoplasm]

All information points to him being in Ground Beta. His GPS information proves it.

What exactly are you insinuating right now?

Do you suspect him of something?

[Hound Dog]

I don't know.

It could be nothing and I just overreacted. If so, I'll need to apologize to Gentle Criminal. We'll see when everyone comes back to the dorms.

Hound Dog said nothing else. Ectoplasm sighed and switched to a chat with Joker.

[Ectoplasm]

You've been in that building for a while, kid.

Everything okay?

[Joker]

Yep!

That botched landing took a little more out of me than I realized, so I had to sit down for a few minutes.

Sorry to worry you!

[Ectoplasm]

Are you sure you want to continue practicing?

[Joker]

I'll be fine :)

I really want to try that landing with Kohryu again before we call it quits.

[Ectoplasm]

Very well, just don't push yourself too hard.

User Joker changed Ectoplasm's name to Best Ghost Uncle

[Best Ghost Uncle]

... Seriously?

[Joker]

I haven't had many people check in to make sure I was alright.

So... I appreciate it.

Congrats on the new nickname, Ghost Uncle! ;)

Ectoplasm startled.

"Are you okay?" Mona asked as both cats stared in concern, "You've been gawking at your phone for a while."

"Yes." Ectoplasm awkwardly cleared his throat as he willed his heart to stop being so darned *warm*, "I'm fine."

"If you say so." Mona said with a teasing lilt.

Ectoplasm ignored them and watched Joker descend to the ground level.

Kaito grimaced.

Last night their little group gathered in the Velvet Room, minus Mr. Compress and Spinner, to come up with dozens of flavor or food combinations as code words for Joker's mission.

Sweet and salty - Complete success with no trouble.

Umami - Some trouble, but still a success.

Bitter like dark chocolate - Too risky to leave Ground Beta for any reason.

Cold and savory - Left Ground Beta, but couldn't access Nezu's office.

Among many others.

But *hot and sour* meant that he reached Nezu's office and began the copy, but had to bail without the drive because he was about to get caught.

"Shit."

"What's 'shit'?"

Kaito looked up at Eri. The dorm's kitchen table was a mess of papers, paint, and more crayons than one little girl could shake a stick at. Eri's current work was a scribble of gold that looked somewhat like Kohryu, with stars all around him in different colors.

"It's a bad word." Kaito said, "Don't repeat that to anybody, okay?"

"Oh." She resumed coloring in Kohryu's scales with a yellow crayon, "I heard a lot of bad words... and other things... from Overhaul's friends."

Kaito frowned, but he decided to change the subject as his brain scrambled to find a way to fix their situation before it ended in

disaster.

“Say, we’ve been cooped up in here all day.” Kaito said, “Why don’t you grab the camera and we can take pictures around the school? We can show Nezu how good you are at photography when he gets back.”

Eri’s eyes lit up as she dropped the yellow crayon, “Okay!”

She hopped off and ran out of the kitchen to get the camera from her room. Curious, the Ectoplasm clone popped his head in.

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes.” Kaito stood and began collecting Eri’s artwork and supplies into a neat pile, “I want to take some more photos with Eri. Nezu’s been wanting to see her pictures, and I was thinking we could show him when he gets back today. Is that alright?”

The clone nodded, “As long as you don’t mind me coming with you.”

“Of course. We could all use some fresh air.”

“Very well. I’ll wait for the two of you by the door.”

Kaito frowned when the clone left.

He could pull off his half-baked plan with no small amount of luck. He just needs to pull the wool over the eyes of the smartest beings in the world. Hopefully he could pull it off without a hitch.

... Hopefully.

“Has anyone ever called you Doc Jeanist?” Miruko asked.

“A few of my sidekicks, but it’s a nickname that doesn’t come up in the public.” Best Jeanist said as his quirk controlled the clean thread stitching a grisly gash going down Miruko’s arm, “People usually

think of clothing lines when my name comes up, not the fact that I have years of medical training under my belt. My quirk always came in handy with this sort of thing.”

Miruko snickered as she gently kicked her legs off the side of the cot, “Well, it makes your job easier since we’re literally in a hospital.”

“Quite.” With a fluid flick of his wrist, the thread tied itself at the end of the wound while a long roll of gauze wrapped around Miruko’s arm, “Keep the wound dry and change the gauze every day. If it feels hot to the touch after a few days, or any sign of infection shows, then go to the hospital right away.”

“Aye aye, Doc Jeanist!”

Best Jeanist smiled and shook his head before he helped her to her feet.

They were all on the surface now to have their wounds tended to in the medical tent. The more critically wounded had been shuffled to the surface first with Hawks’ feathers, while the rest of them slowly walked up. He, of course, offered to cover when Recovery Girl had to do emergency surgery on Gang Orca.

Miruko was his last patient, as she simply shoved him away to help others before herself.

Meanwhile, the lab was, for a lack of a better term, completely destroyed. Before they left, dozens of police officers had scattered around, highlighted by the spooky purple lighting while taking notes of the headless High-End Nomu bodies lying on the floor surrounded by pools of their own blood. Mounds of earth revealed the final resting sites of Pixie Bob’s beasts, most of which sacrificed themselves against attacks that otherwise would’ve been fatal to the heroes.

Best Jeanist was glad to have left that behind.

One of the tent flaps opened, and Gang Orca and Recovery Girl walked through.

“Gang Orca, you’re okay!!” Miruko said in obvious relief.

“Orca, you shouldn’t even be on your feet!” Best Jeanist said. “Come and sit down.”

Orca chuckled and waved them off with his good arm, “I’m fine, I promise.”

“It was a close thing.” Recovery Girl solemnly looked at the bandages and sling around Gang Orca’s right arm and shoulder, “The surgery was a success, so you should make a full recovery and have full use of your arm and shoulder again, but don’t push yourself too hard. Rest here for a little while and I’ll do another round of healing to speed things up for you.”

“Thank you.” Gang Orca sat down on another cot, which creaked under his great weight, “It would be appreciated.”

Recovery Girl nodded before her gaze landed on him and Miruko, “Thank you for helping out with the other injuries.”

“It’s no trouble.” Best Jeanist said, his eyes falling on Gang Orca, “I’m just glad our friend is okay.”

“Taking that hit from a High-End was no joke!” Miruko said, “What were you thinking!?”

“There were no more beasts to cover for us, and that hit was aimed to kill you, Miruko.” Gang Orca bowed his head, “And I could not let that Nomu take another one of my friends away from me.”

“Aw, geez.” Miruko scratched the back of her head with her good arm, “I owe you sushi or something.”

Gang orca chuckled despite the obvious pain he was in.

Hawks ducked his head inside, "Tsukauchi said the Doctor is on his way to Tartarus. The police have a handle on things from here." He looked at Gang Orca with a slight wince, "We can all go home as long as we get the green light from the boss lady."

Recovery Girl tapped her cane on the floor, chuckling, "The rest of you are free to go home, but Gang Orca should stay for another healing session."

"Good." Miruko stretched her good arm over her head, "I'm wiped!"

"Where are Spinner and Mr. Compress?" Best Jeanist asked, "I haven't seen them since we got to the surface."

"Nezu's with them, along with the other teachers." Hawks said, nodding, "They'll be going back to U.A. soon, according to what Tsukauchi told me."

"Welp." Miruko turned on her heel and walked towards the exit, "It was fun fighting with everyone! Let's do this again soon!!"

Gang Orca and Best Jeanist shivered.

"Let's not." Gang Orca muttered, but Miruko was already gone.

"What can be worse than the High-End Nomu?" Best Jeanist asked, "Or All For One at Kamino?"

"....I hope we never find out." Gang Orca said, unknowingly jinxing themselves against the Shadowy adversaries lurking in their near future.

"The Convertizer has long worn off by now." Satanael said as Ectoplasm led them back into the teacher's dorm, "Play it cool, and maybe he'll notice nothing is amiss. We've had plenty of time thanks to Gentle Criminal's subtle warning."

"This is Hound Dog we're talking about." Cu Chulainn said, "Dogs aren't easily tricked by scent."

"One dog knows another." Alice said with a smirk.

"Why you little-"

Vasuki cut Cu Chulainn off with a sharp hiss, "I'll erase his memory before an accusation is made."

"No." Ren said, "Not until we know for sure. We'll keep our composure no matter what."

"Spoken like a true Leader." Satanael warmly said.

Ectoplasm held open the front door for them, and nothing in the hero's body language spoke of suspicion or anger. Ren smiled as he walked through first, Morgana and Lady Stubbs following by his ankles.

La Brava was in an active conversation with Thirteen in the common area, waving her hands around excitedly as Thirteen nodded along. Nobody else was in here... aside from Hound Dog, who shot to his feet.

Ren blinked as Hound Dog came to a stop in front of him, nose twitching and eyes narrowed.

"Can I help you?" Ren asked as he put his hands on his hips, keeping his posture relaxed.

Ectoplasm stood beside Ren, "Hound Dog, what on earth-"

Hound Dog put his hand up, inching closer to take in more scents around Ren and down around the cats, his brow falling in confusion. Vasuki crept closer to the edge of Ren's psyche, mind-bending magic rippling under sickly purple scales. After several moments in tense silence, Hound Dog pulled back, scratching his thick mane. He turned away as if in embarrassment.

“Maybe I was overreacting over nothing.” Hound Dog ran a hand down his face, “These festivals always make me tired.”

“Are you okay?” Morgana asked in genuine sympathy.

“Yes, I’m fine. Excuse me, I need to go apologize to Gentle Criminal.” Hound Dog turned away and headed towards the kitchen, and a gnarled knot of tension released in Ren’s chest.

“I told you were we worrying over nothing.” Ren said.

Vasuki hissed, before disappearing deeper into the mindscape like a serpent creeping under the water.

“What was that all about?” La Brava asked.

“No idea, honestly.” Ectoplasm shook his head and sighed, “But whatever was bothering him seems to have resolved itself.”

“Well, aside from that, I got a message from Nezu.” Thirteen said.

Ectoplasm tensed, “What kind of message?”

“Everyone’s coming back, safe and sound. They’ll be here in an hour or so.”

“‘Safe and sound’?” Morgana asked as his eyes grew wide, “What the heck is that supposed to mean? Were they in danger this whole time!?”

“Why didn’t they tell us?” La Brava said, her hands bunching into fists.

“Nezu said he and Mr. Compress would explain everything to you once they returned.” Thirteen said, their tone softening, “The teachers all knew what they were going to do today, and I apologize for keeping it from you.”

“I...” Ren huffed, “Well, they’ll be back in an hour, right? Enough time for a shower, at least. I smell like dust and ozone.”

He beelined straight for his room, Morgana trailing behind him while Lady Stubbs went to comfort La Brava. They sighed in relief once they were secluded in Ren’s bathroom, with Ren clutching a clean set of clothes to his chest.

“What in the world were Mr. Compress and the others doing?” Ren muttered.

“We’ll find out soon. At least the heroes don’t suspect anything.” Morgana said from his spot on the counter, “We still have a chance to turn this around.”

“I hope so.”

“I don’t sense Kaito or Eri in the dorm.” Morgana kept his eyes on Ren as the shower was turned on and left to heat up, “Knowing him, he’s already working on something that’ll get us out of this.”

“If that’s true, then we need to back him up however we can.” Ren opened the door for Morgana, “I’ll do some brainstorming in the meantime, just in case.”

“Mercurius and I will too.”

Ren nodded and closed the door when Morgana left.

Mr. Compress and Spinner sat on opposite couches in Nezu’s office, expressions down turned as they waited for Aizawa to fetch the rest of their crew. They were a bit roughed up from the fight, with minor damage to their clothing, Spinner more so than his companion, with more than a few of his scales cracked in places that weren’t hidden by his costume.

Nezu took a quiet sip of tea and contemplated from the comfort of an armchair at the end of the table.

Joker was telling the truth on just how vastly superior arms and armor from his Personas are. Spinner took a direct blow from one of the High-Ends and managed to walk away with nothing more than bruises and broken scales, while a similar blow against Gang Orca, without such armor, got his arm and shoulder shattered to bits. It was only thanks to Recovery Girl's swift healing that Gang Orca walked away with his arm intact at all.

There was a knock on the door before it opened.

Aizawa walked in with Amamiya, Mona, Lady Stubbs, La Brava, and Gentle Criminal.

Mona gasped when he saw the state of his comrades, "What the heck happened to you two!?"

Amamiya and Gentle Criminal rushed over to them. Lady Stubbs clambered over Spinner and licked his nose, her motorboat purrs rumbling in her throat.

La Brava locked a heated glare on Nezu and Aizawa.

"We're fine, really!" Spinner beamed as he grabbed Lady Stubbs and held her up, "Our mission was a total success!!"

"Mission?" Amamiya looked between Mr. Compress and Spinner, "What kind of trouble did you get yourselves into?"

"Trouble, eh?" Mr. Compress chuckled as Amamiya sat at his side, "Coming from the star troublemaker himself, that comes off as awfully humorous."

Mona cackled while Amamiya turned a shade of red.

Amamiya cleared his throat, "Do you two need to be healed?"

“Nah,” Spinner placed Lady Stubbs in his lap and waved his hand, “This is small time stuff! You should have seen Gang Orca and Miruko, they-”

“*Spinner* .” Mr. Compress warned.

“You don’t need to worry about them.” Aizawa said as he leaned against couch Amamiya and Mr. Compress used, “They walked away with relatively minor injuries.”

“Tell us what’s going on.” La Brava crossed her arms, unmoved from her spot by the door, “*Now* .”

For someone of her tiny stature, she certainly gave off the aura of a frightening goddess whenever she was angry. Nezu himself did very much the same. Tiny but mighty. Nezu idly wondered if any of Amamiya’s Personas felt that way about her, too.

“I’d like to break the news, since this was all set in motion because of me.” Mr. Compress sighed and faced Amamiya, “In short, I knew where All For One’s doctor had been hiding for quite some time, and presented everything to Nezu so that we could get a team together and take him down for good.”

Amamiya went as rigid as stone. The golden flecks in his eyes lit up like the last rays of a sunset.

“You WHAT!?” Mona screeched, “Why the heck didn’t you tell us sooner!?”

“I had the same reaction.” Spinner said, his smile falling as he stared at Amamiya in concern, “He had good reasons not to share it until now! I promise!”

Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged worried expressions before they landed on Amamiya, his eyes still swimming in molten gold. The boy seemed frozen to the core.

“Part of it was because we weren’t in the right head space or health to take him down,” Mr. Compress said gently, placing a hand on Amamiya’s shoulder, “The other is that I didn’t want you to face him yourself, Ren. Not after what he put you through.”

Spinner scowled, “That asshole is lucky he didn’t come face to face with me, otherwise I would’ve beaten his face in.”

“It was Hawks, Snipe, and I that captured him.” Aizawa said, “He is currently being transported to Tartarus, where he’ll be thoroughly interrogated by Tsukauchi for every crime he committed.”

“We gathered as many allies as we could for this fight.” Nezu said as he studied Amamiya, who remained tense and silent as his gaze met Nezu’s, “All of those in your hero group, along with Nighteye and the Wild Wild Pussycats. Pixie Bob’s quirk was integral to winning the fight. Imagine the irony of being beaten by a quirk that your former master stole once.”

“So... everyone is okay?” Mona asked softly.

“Yep!” Spinner’s grin returned, although much softer, “Recovery Girl was there, so no long hospital stays for anyone!”

Nezu nodded, “And the remaining High-End Nomu have all been taken care of. As we speak, the lab is being dismantled and mountains of evidence uncovered. Enough that the Doctor will never see the light of day again.”

“His victims will finally get justice.” Aizawa said as his expression hardened, “All of those people he tormented, all of the unwilling victims who were turned into Nomu... they can all rest easy knowing that he’s finally been put away.”

Amamiya flinched. Mona looked at him in concern as Amamiya’s hands threaded through the not-cat’s fur.

“... Are you alright, Ren?” Gentle Criminal asked softly, “You haven’t spoken a single word about this.”

“I...” Amamiya cleared his throat as a small smile appeared on his lips, “I’m proud of you two, actually.”

Mr. Compress and Spinner straightened their spines, with Spinner’s eyes going wide.

Amamiya continued, “You gathered allies to beat a monster; not only getting justice for his victims like Aizawa said, but also preventing anyone else from going through that torture, too. You took him down without help from Mona or I. You’ve proven that you can handle yourselves against anything that comes up in the future.” His eyes glittered gold again, and his smile grew, “Satanael and I both agree that you’ll all be just fine after... well, when the time comes.”

Aizawa’s brow furrowed in confusion and worry.

Spinner shot to his feet, Lady Stubbs jumping onto his shoulder, “BUDDY!!!”

Tears poured out of Spinner’s eyes as he rounded the table and wrapped his arms around Amamiya.

“H-hey, be careful!” Mona yowled as he was shunted onto Mr. Compress’ lap.

The boy grunted as Spinner lifted him up, still crying, “I’LL ALWAYS BE PROUD TO HAVE HAD YOU AS MY LEADER FOR THE REST OF MY DAYS!!!”

“I’ll toast to that.” Gentle Criminal said softly, with La Brava nodding.

“Here, here.” Mr. Compress stated, his voice shaky.

Amamiya chuckled, though it came out watery as he patted Spinner on the back, “Thank you for this. It means a lot.”

Spinner backed away and wiped away his tears with the back of his hands. Lady Stubbs rubbed against his face in support.

Thoroughly confused, Aizawa opened his mouth, but they were interrupted by another knock on the door.

“Come in!” Nezu said, warmed by the Thieves’ interactions.

The door opened again, and this time an Ectoplasm clone walked in with Eri and Kaito. The polaroid camera hung around Eri’s neck, and Kaito held a large stack of photos in his hand.

Eri immediately saw Amamiya and Spinner’s expressions and bolted over to them, brow furrowed, “Are you okay?” She asked as she tugged on their sleeves, “Who got hurt?”

“N-Nobody, Eri-chan!” Spinner said as he crouched down to her level, “These are happy tears, I promise!!”

“Oh... okay.” Eri kissed him on the nose, “If you say so.”

Spinner locked a happy shriek in his throat and frantically nodded.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Nezu asked, grinning.

Kaito sat down on the other side of Mr. Compress, “Eri wanted to show you her pictures. Isn’t that right, Eri?”

“Yes!” She took off the camera and set it on the coffee table, small increments of surprise flashing through everyone in the room. This was the first *real* excitement she had shown ever, “Uncle Kaito says I take really good pictures!”

“It’s true.” Kaito said with a smile. He fanned out the photos on the table for everyone to see, “She has a real eye for photography.”

Nezu and the others leaned forward. Fiery trees locked in the bright colors of fall, beautiful fountains with leaves floating serenely in them, streams of sunlight filtering through the bare branches of the

aspen grove Nezu favored in the forest he planted around the school. And all at quite pleasing angles that other amateur photographers wouldn't think of.

"My, my!" Nezu said, "You really do have a wonderful gift, Eri!"

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. She searched through the pile and held one up, "This one is my favorite."

It was a photo of the teachers' private gardens, containing both the fiery red maple and the golden ginkgo tree.

"It's beautiful." Mona said in awe, "Oh! We should put that one in our scrapbook!"

"Wonderful idea!" Mr. Compress reached into his pocket for a marble and tossed it on the table.

With a *snap*, a massive scrapbook appeared. He opened it to reveal many of the pictures they had taken over the past few weeks, mostly of individual members of their vigilante group, or all of them together in some form or another. Eri was in most of them, staring at the lens. Though there were none with her smile yet, her hidden joy could be seen through her eyes.

"May I?" Mr. Compress held out his hand like a knight would to a princess. Eri nodded and handed the photo to him, which he stuck into the first open pocket near the middle.

"What's that scrapbook for?" The Ectoplasm clone said as he and Aizawa stared at it.

"For treasured memories." Gentle Criminal said, his expression softening.

"Indeed!" Mr. Compress held up a finger, "This is just a rough draft version. I want to make copies of all of these photos for everyone in our group to have one."

“What a wonderful idea!” Nezu stated, “Just let me know when its ready, and I’ll help in that endeavor.”

“Much appreciated.” Mr. Compress replied.

“But if we are to take more pictures-” Kaito grabbed the polaroid camera and opened the bottom to take out the film, “Then we’ll need more.”

Kaito handed it to Nezu as he placed the camera next to him on the couch.

“I see.” Nezu grinned as he stuck the empty film in his pocket, “I know just where to order more! I can have them as early as tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you.” Kaito said, “It means a lot to us.”

“Ooh! Look at this one!!” Spinner shouted as he plucked another beautiful photo from the pile on the table.

They marveled at all of the pictures for several minutes more. Photos were passed around and Eri soaked in all of their praise with silent grace. Nezu made a mental note to add some photography lessons and to buy a heaping stockpile of film for it. Perhaps he could get her more modern cameras and lenses when she was a little older and more experienced.

“Not to interrupt,” Aizawa said after he looked at a text from his phone, “But Midnight is wondering when we’ll come back for dinner. She’s kindly asking for Amamiya to make more curry.”

“She’s addicted, isn’t she?” La Brava asked with a smug smirk.

“That’s one way to put it.” Aizawa grumbled.

“Ah, I suppose it is the time. Shall we take this photo session to the dorms then?” Nezu asked. “I’m sure the other teachers would love to see this, too!”

“We would have more room,” Kaito looked at Amamiya, “And you have more photos hanging up in your room, don’t you? We could add them to the scrapbook.”

“... Yeah.”

An odd look passed between Kaito and Amamiya.

“Right then!” Mr. Compress shot to his feet, “Let’s get going. I’m absolutely *famished* .”

“Me too!” Spinner rushed to clean up the spare photos and pushed them into Kaito’s hands, “Let’s go!!”

“Spinner-” Mona tried, but Spinner bolted out of the room first with Lady Stubbs.

“Well then...” Gentle Criminal chuckled, “He must really be starving if he’s in such a rush.”

Mona rolled his eyes, “We better go after him to make sure he doesn’t get himself into trouble.”

Mr. Compress trapped the scrapbook in a marble before he left, too, the others following after a moment.

They were down the hall when Kaito suddenly stopped and looked at Eri, “Did you forget something?”

Eri blinked, then looked down at herself, “The camera!”

Kaito snorted, then looked at Nezu, “Can we go get it quick?”

“Go ahead, the door is still unlocked.” Nezu said.

Kaito nodded, and held hands with Eri as they went back.

Amamiya and Mona watched them with strange expressions again.

“The rest of you go ahead.” Aizawa crossed his arms, hiding a scowl within his capture weapon, “I want a quick word with Nezu and Amamiya.”

Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged glances.

The Ectoplasm clone nodded, “We’ll meet you at the dorm.”

Mona sighed as he hopped down from Amamiya’s shoulder and onto Gentle Criminal’s, “Don’t be late! You know Spinner will complain nonstop until the food is done.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Amamiya said with a smirk.

Aizawa waited until they were a fair distance down the hall, before turning his scrutinizing eyes towards Nezu and Amamiya.

“What the hell happened back there.”

Amamiya blinked, “What?”

“You two, and the rest of the vigilantes, are obviously hiding something.” Aizawa crossed his arms, “Talking about building memories. Saying that you’re proud of them and that they will be fine as if you won’t always be here, Amamiya. You cut yourself off, but I knew where you were going with it. So, what are you not telling me?”

Nezu flicked his tail as he and Amamiya exchanged a long glance.

“I...” Amamiya’s eye went to the floor as he scratched the back of his neck.

Nezu sighed, “It’s a long story, Aizawa.”

“We have time.”

Amamiya flinched.

Nezu shook his head, "You'll just have to wait until after the Cultural Festival concludes. I promise that you and all of the other heroes will get Amamiya's full story then."

Aizawa's eyebrows shot up into his hairline, he set his jaw to argue more, but he knew Nezu wouldn't budge, "*Fine* . I'll wait until then, but you better have a good explanation for all of your weird behavior."

"I do." Amamiya's smile tightened, "But believe me, it's a hard pill to swallow."

Nezu chuckled, "I for one, cannot wait to hear it!"

That didn't settle Aizawa, but the man said nothing more.

They heard footsteps, and looked to see Kaito and Eri return. Eri hugged the camera to her chest as if it was her most valued possession.

"Why are you all standing around?' Kaito asked when they rejoined the group.

"No reason." Amamiya was the first to start walking, "Is there a certain type of curry you were hungry for, Kaito?"

"I was hoping for something sweet and salty." Kaito said, "Is there any room for that in curry?"

Amamiya laughed, his expression brightening, "I'll see what I can do, pal."

"Can I help make the curry again?" Eri asked.

"Of course! There's a new recipe I wanted to try that-"

Nezu smiled as he and Aizawa listened to them talk about curry all the way to the dorms.

“Kaito, you’re a damn lifesaver!” Spinner said from within their only safe meeting place: the Challenge room.

They sat around the middle of the room, passing around midnight snacks and drinks like there was no tomorrow.

“No kidding.” Joker scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, “I thought we were sunk. And you made *sure* to close the pop-up and log out of the computer? That’s how Sae got wind of us messing with her laptop back home.”

“I did. My quirk gives me photographic memory, so it was impossible for me to forget.” Kaito smirked, “Nezu will never know anything happened while he was away.”

“But how did you sneak it out?” Gentle Criminal asked as he passed some cookies to Spinner.

“Hid it in Eri’s camera. With the film out, there was enough room for it. I told her it was like hiding the treasure in the camera like Arsene Lupin did in that one chapter of *Gentleman Burglar* .” Kaito frowned, “I feel bad for dragging her into it like this.”

“We didn’t have a choice.” Morgana’s ears flattened and he sighed, “But at least this mission was a success. It could’ve been so much worse.”

“How are you feeling about everything, Ren?” Spinner asked, “I know we kinda went behind your back with the Doctor and all...”

“I meant what I said about being proud of you.” Joker said with confidence, “But I also feel relieved, honestly. I thought we wouldn’t be able to get him after we came to U.A. It’s been at the back of my mind since I faced Gigantomachia.”

Morgana curled his tail around himself and nodded, “I agree. I’ll feel much better going home knowing that there’s one less terrible monster in this world.”

“Giving you peace of mind is the least I could do after everything you did for me, Ren. We killed two birds with one stone because we all worked together to accomplish something amazing.” Mr. Compress said, then he turned towards La Brava, “How about it, La Brava? Think you can make a suitable virus from that treasure trove of knowledge?”

La Brava looked up from her laptop, “It’ll take a while to go through all of this, but you can leave it to me! I already have the basic template from the virus I used during the Sports Festival, only this one will be much more powerful when its finished.”

“Good.” Mr. Compress relaxed with a long sigh, “Now we can put our full focus towards the Cultural Festival and whatever lies beyond.”

“Well, there is one thing I want you to do, Compress.” Joker said with a sudden sense of seriousness.

Mr. Compress froze, “And that is?”

“I want you to take off your mask when we’re at the dorms.”

Mr. Compress sputtered, “You want me to- Why should I do that?”

“You and Spinner earned a hard-won victory with a majority of the teachers. No matter your opinion about them, that forges a bond you simply can’t ignore.” Joker said as he and Mr. Compress continued to stare at each other, “The teachers won’t, at least. If you want to put up an illusion of trust, then you’ll need to lower your guard around them.”

“He has a point, you know.” Morgana said.

“Yep! Plus, wearing your mask 24/7 can’t be good for you!” Spinner stated before he stuffed a whole cookie in his mouth.

“Have you even cleaned your mask since we got here?” La Brava asked, wrinkling her nose.

“I...” Mr. Compress held his masked face in his hands, “Fine. I’ll do it, but I won’t be happy about it!”

~*~ 8 Days Until the Festival ~*~

The next morning was business as usual.

Ren was helping Thirteen and Lunch Rush with breakfast as the other teachers nursed from the largest pot of coffee he’s ever made. Eri was munching away on a plate of fruit and toast next to Kaito and the others, with Morgana chatting happily away.

Except for Mr. Compress, who was the only one absent.

Another ten minutes passed before he walked in. Everyone turned to stare at him. He wore his usual dark orange undershirt, a black waistcoat and dress pants, with his gemmed bolo tie around his neck. He still wore his red gloves, but there wasn’t a hat, mask, or balaclava in sight.

He ran a gloved hand through his messy hair and glared at them, “Why is everyone staring at me?”

Midnight leaned forward with a teasing smirk, “I never thought such a good looking face would be under that scary mask.”

“Midnight!” Present Mic screeched, “You can’t just say that!”

“What? I’m just saying he looks good!! It’s a compliment!”

Aizawa and Cementoss both facepalmed at the same time.

Eri scooted out of her chair and ran up to Atsuhiro to throw her arms around his waist. His red face deepened in color when she looked up at him with her innocent doe eyes and stated plainly, “You finally showed your face! I’m so proud of you, Uncle Compress!”

Midnight squealed, "That's so cute!!"

Atsuhiro sputtered as his face continued to plunge deeper into the crimson shades, "I-It's not cute! I don't do cute!!"

"Oh, stop being so dramatic!" Spinner cackled.

"Besides, aren't you glad that Eri's proud of you?" Morgana asked.

"W-well, of course I am, but-"

"Who was the one who went out to get her cat-themed pajamas again?" Gentle Criminal smirked as he traced his facial hair, "And who spent a long time talking about such things with a few ladies who thought you were her father? I think it was rather adorable that you care so much for a little girl."

"Th-that's.... I-"

"WHAT!?" Present Mic yelled.

Midnight slammed her hands on the table and shot to her feet, "I need more details ASAP!"

Atsuhiro sighed in defeat and patted Eri's head, "My image is forever ruined now. Thank you, my dear."

"You're welcome." She whispered as she let go and headed back to her seat.

Kurose glanced back and forth between Ren and the bright red Atsuhiro, humming.

"What is it, Thirteen?" Ectoplasm asked.

"You two look so much alike. If I didn't know better, I would think that the two of you are related somehow."

Nezu's ears shot up and his black eyes sparkled.

Atsuhiro rolled his eyes, “Ren, can you please whip up the strongest brew you have? I can already tell it’s going to be a *long* day.”

“I’ll get right on that... *dad*. ” Ren said with a devilish grin.

Atsuhiro’s face fell in his hands while several of the teachers and vigilantes burst out into laughter.

Nezu continued to study the two of them throughout breakfast.

The door opened with wailing hinges, and the harsh lighting flickered at such a sudden entrance. Tsukauchi walked in with a mask of calm fury as he slapped the thick folders on the table, the one sitting on the other side didn’t even flinch as the metal table rattled.

“It seems a night in Tartarus helped calm you down.” Tsukauchi said as he pulled out the chair and sat down, “Are you ready to talk?”

The Doctor’s mustache puffed up, “Why bother? It’s not like you’d ever understand how brilliant my work was! It’s all for nothing because you heathens ruined everything!”

“You’re right, I don’t understand.” Tsukauchi stated, and the Doctor was about to say something snide when Tsukauchi interrupted, “I don’t understand how anyone could inflict such pain on so many people without showing a shred of remorse, including children and hundreds of innocent civilians. I don’t understand how one man like yourself had gone unchecked until now. I *don’t understand* how you came to serve All For One the way you have.”

“It was all for the sake of progress!”

“Progress.” Tsukauchi frowned, “Progress towards what?”

The Doctor huffed, turning his head away with a sneer.

Tsukauchi sighed, “Fine, be that way. But let me help you understand something. I have all the time in the world to interrogate you. We can do this song and dance for weeks, months, *years*. Maybe leaving you in isolation for a while will loosen your lips. I’ve heard many villains eventually go insane when left down there long enough.”

Sweat appeared on the Doctor’s bald forehead, and he slowly swiveled his face back to Tsukauchi.

“Let’s start with something simple. And you better tell the truth, my quirk knows when you’re lying.”

Tsukauchi took the top file off of the pile, opened it, and turned it around so that it faced the Doctor. One side showed an old student profile, while the other held information about the notorious villain Kurogiri. Tsukauchi laced his hands together and leaned forward, his expression was like stone, his next question laced with such coldness that Tartarus seemed warm and cozy in comparison.

“Tell me everything about what you did to Oboro Shirakumo and how you turned him into Kurogiri.”

So the Doctor has finally been taken down and the BNHA Thieves have everything they need to secure their future freedom from U.A.! The Cultural Festival is so close and you guys have no idea how EXCITED I am for it!

Update Schedule:

Improvised Song Dedicated To The Next Prime Minister's Ship -
March 25th

Voracious Waltz - April 15th

May 6th

May 20th

I'm keeping the May chapter titles hidden for now because I want genuine reactions to the titles themselves ;)

Improvised Song Dedicated To The Next Prime Min...

Chapter 89: Improvised Song Dedicated To The Next Prime Minister's Ship

Aizawa turned to Joker, "I thought you said nothing happened."

"No, I said we were fine. There's a difference!"

Aaahhhh we've reached some pretty sweet milestones!! 10k kudos, 2k bookmarks, and over 700k hits??? That's so crazy and I can't even comprehend it sometimes, thank you guys so much! It means a lot that you've been patient and have stuck with me this long as we close in towards the end. Literally we may only have around 10 chapters left....

In other news, if any of you noticed the word count of the fic going down within the past week or so, I've been really editing the chapters of the fic starting from the beginning! I've currently edited up to chapter 23 and will slowly continue through this whole fic. They flow so much more smoothly in my current style, and it's been really cool to look back to nearly 3 years ago and just see how much I've improved since then.

There's small additions too, like another few lines between Joker and Yaldy in chapter 2, more Brotherhood lore in chapter 7, making Silver Falcon simultaneously worse than before but making his ass kicking all the more satisfying... among others.

Anywho, here's the last chapter before the festival starts!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

~*~ 4 Days Until The Festival ~*~

Jagged ice spires would've hit their mark if not for the spirals of wind thrown at the same time, colliding in a harmless arctic breeze that left Margaret unharmed.

"Hey!" The blue skinned woman snarled, her onyx hair and the pale rings floating around her quivering, "If you interrupt my attack *one more time*, I'll skin you alive!"

"Ohoho!" A voluptuous woman dressed in flowing silks with an elaborate veil, sat upon a scarlet dragon with seven heads and ten horns. Kings and misers would beg for her hand in marriage, but all would scream in terror if they ever looked directly upon her, as her face was a skull. She raised her golden goblet, stinking with the abominations of her acts, "Perhaps... the mother goddess of the earth is simply no match for the impure queen."

Cybele raised her twin swords, the pommels of which were decorated with the heads of bulls, "How *dare* you!"

"How dare I *what*, darling? Speak the truth of me being better than you?"

"Enough!" Odin slammed his spear into the ground, golden lightning striking around him, "Such ceaseless bickering is an insult to the Trickster!"

"My, my..." Gabriel hovered nearby, focused on another battle entirely, "Isn't this nostalgic, Fafnir?"

"Like father, like daughter, ho!" Black Frost yelled beside Gabriel.

Kohryu sighed as he circled overhead, "Should I be proud or weary for having such feisty grandchildren?"

Fafnir cackled, “Obviously proud! We’re unafraid to speak our minds and can back up our threats with real power!!”

“Stop yelling!” Alice stomped her foot, “We’re making it hard for Big Brother to concentrate!”

The eight Personas looked to the Trickster, who sat in the center of the Challenge Room in the lotus position. His eyes were closed, his sweaty brow hardened.

Margaret was on one side of the Challenge Room, facing Cybele, Mother Harlot, Fafnir, and Odin.

On the other was Theodore vs. Alice, Gabriel, Black Frost, and Kohryu.

Joker and the Attendants spent the last week increasing the amount of Personas Joker could have out at once, in preparation for the upcoming Festival. Several rounds of intense battles lasting 5 minutes each, and Joker would lose the round if either Attendant reached him.

He clawed his way up to eight. *Eight Personas*. Only half the way through the stock and Joker felt the strain. It was as if he sat at the darkest and most crushing depths of the ocean, only to look over and see another chasm plunging deeper into the untapped potential in his soul.

“Being distracted will spell your doom.” Margaret said with her calm smile, “Megidolaon.”

“No!” Fafnir howled while the other Personas reared back.

A second of panic allowed Margaret to jump between the gaps in their defence, and Joker felt her hand softly brush the top of his head.

Joker opened his eyes, calling Gabriel's team back into the mindscape.

"You did well," Theodore said, "But this round is ours."

"He won three rounds out of seven." Margaret ruffled Joker's hair, "We should be proud that he came so far in such a short time. Holding such immense power at once is no small matter."

Theodore matched her smile, "Indeed. Take a moment to catch your breath, Joker."

Cybele sighed as she lowered her twin swords, "Was my acting so terrible?"

"No darling, you were superb." Mother Harlot's teeth chattered as she turned her terrifying visage towards Odin, the heads of her scarlet beast growling, "It was this oaf that ruined the illusion of our bad teamwork."

"You're right." Cybele sliced her sword towards Odin, a gale ruffling his hair and long white cape, "That's for ruining our fun, you idiot. Maybe I should skin *you* alive instead."

Odin scowled and returned to Joker without a retort.

Cybele grinned at Mother Harlot, "Oh, I think we upset him."

"Poor child." Mother Harlot raised her foul goblet, "If we can tease the All-Father to such a degree, then imagine what atrocities we could release upon Shadows together. I look forward to such a delicious rapture."

"So do I."

All Personas returned to Joker, who sighed in relief as he took a second to reflect on what's happened this week.

They've been on their toes since they stole from Nezu's office, as if waiting to be dragged away because they somehow fumbled and got found out. La Brava poured over the precious data every moment she could in the safety of the Velvet Room and, with time, had every confidence to make her new virus work.

Meanwhile, when Joker wasn't perfecting his Festival performance, he spent time in the Velvet Room. Training, fusing, meditating to master new bonds for the Compendium, and Itemization for their rapidly expanding armory.

Rinse and repeat.

"I am Bishamonten. Your foes are nothing before my might. I shall become a mask and grant you new power..."

"I am Raphael. I shall become a mask and provide support for your health, both mentally and physically."

"I am Thor-"

"I am Belial-"

"I am Kali-"

"I am Vishnu-"

"I am Uriel-"

"I am Dionysus-"

"Me Byakhee. If you so desire, me will fight with soul you have!"

"... I am Michael. In the name of the light within you, I shall become your mask!"

One by one, all of these new voices *and more* sang within his soul as they found their new home in the Compendium.

Except for what happened just yesterday.

"I am Siegfried. Your soul shall act as a tool to transform my dauntless might into-"

Fafnir ripped himself out of the mindscape and assaulted the Velvet Room with a roar that shook the chains overhead. Fafnir launched himself at Siegfried, who raised his mighty blade to strike in return. The Attendants acted. Chains snapped around either of them to restrain their movements, and Joker ordered them both to be Itemized.

Spinner got the physical attack accessory he wanted from Siegfried, who wasn't around long enough to be saved in the Compendium.

Satanael severely scolded Fafnir when he was brought back, but the dragon kept his smug amusement burning in his heart.

In the end, Cybele, the Ultimate Priestess Persona who dominated over wind, took Baal's place. Mother Harlot was the Ultimate Empress Persona embodying ice in both personality and magic to permanently replace Byakko. Michael and the rest stayed in the Compendium for fusion and to give Lavenza more options for battle.

Hitoshi sat, slack-jawed, "Your Personas terrify me."

"Join the club!" Shuichi remarked, visibly shaken.

"Merp!"

Atsuhiro placed his empty dishes in a marble and stuck it in his pocket, "Have I ever said how happy I am that they're on our side?"

Tobita chuckled, "About three times now."

"And every time it becomes more true."

Joker laughed as Margaret helped him to his feet, "It's not all that bad... is it?"

“Are you kidding me?” Hitoshi gestured to the Challenge Room’s giant guillotine, the barred walls, and the Attendants, “I understand why you introduced me to Lavenza before the rest of this place.”

“Moon!” Elizabeth lurched at Hitoshi so fast he staggered backwards, “I demand to know where you got these cookies. They taste so much better than the ones in the flimsy plastic packaging!”

Lavenza held a jam-filled cookie between her thumb and pointer finger, smiling at Joker, “I told you she would like him.”

“Elizabeth,” Theodore he pinched the bridge of his nose, “You’re scaring him.”

“Uh...” Hitoshi avoided looking at Elizabeth’s savage grin, “Because they’re homemade. My parents make desserts like these for a living.”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled, “So you can bring more?”

“I guess so? I can bring a cake or brownies, too. It doesn’t just have to be cookies.”

“Yes! I call first dibs!”

“Elizabeth, that’s enough.” Margaret pulled her sister away, “If you continue to frighten him then he won’t share anything with you.”

Elizabeth pouted, but finally backed off.

“Are we going to watch Ren-nii fight some more?” Eri sat between Kaito and Lavenza, sipping from a carton of apple juice.

“You’re not scared?” Hitoshi asked.

Eri shook her head, “Why would I be? This is a safe place.”

“Oh.” The last of Hitoshi’s nerves fell away with Eri’s honesty, “I guess... whoever is singing has a really nice voice.”

Theodore smiled, "I'm sure Belladonna appreciates the comment."

Joker blinked, "Who's Belladonna?"

"You didn't think the song came from nowhere, did you?" Elizabeth asked, "They haven't shown their faces for years, but Belladonna and Nameless have been an integral part of the Velvet Room before any of us were even born."

"We also had the Demon Painter." Theodore added. "But he left the Velvet Room years ago."

Joker tilted his head, "Interesting."

At that moment, a timer dinged. Manami picked up the watch and silenced it.

"That marks the end of our lunch." Morgana said as he stretched beside Atsuhiro, "We should get back."

"Ugh, we're going to be watching a bunch of brats set up for the Festival. How boring." Atsuhiro muttered, "No offence to Ren or Hitoshi."

"Hey, my classmates and I are putting up the final touches on our totally badass haunted house today." Hitoshi said as the others packed away leftovers. Elizabeth almost looked distraught when they took the cookie container away and gave it to Hitoshi, "I don't want to be late."

Ren smiled as he let his costume vanish, "The closest exit is my dorm room. We better hurry."

The permanent doors in Ground Beta and the supply closet were no longer needed, so the only active ones were at the USJ and in Ren's room. The Attendants waved them off as they went through the wall of light, and the vigilantes flooded out into Ren's dorm from his open closet.

Atsuhiro chuckled as Ren closed his closet, "You know, this reminds me of an old story where children went through a wardrobe to enter another world."

"Can you tell it to me sometime?" Eri asked.

"Of course, my dear." Atsuhiro said with a soft smile, "I'll see if Nezu can scrounge up a copy somehow."

Hitoshi snorted as he tucked the container under his arm, "See you later."

The rest of the vigilantes said their goodbyes and left, leaving Ren, Morgana, Kaito, and Eri.

Kaito looked at Ren, "Any plans for the rest of the day? You've been working non-stop for days and could use a break."

Eri gave Ren and Morgana the puppy dog eyes. "We could take pictures together?"

"I can't say no to that." Ren said as he patted Eri's head, "I need to stop by the teacher's lounge first."

Kaito raised a brow, "For what?"

Ren walked over to his desk and grabbed a folder, "Nezu wanted a list of everything my Personas and I are doing for the Cultural Festival. Something about handing out copies to the heroes coming in for security so they don't freak out."

Morgana stared at him, "You spent hours last night doing a single list?"

"Not just that." He cracked open the folder for Morgana to see the rest of the contents..

Morgana winced, "Oh... I see."

Ren closed the folder, "Let's go."

They left the dorm and headed towards the main building, but they didn't get far before they faced a problem. The Cultural Festival was days away and students were *everywhere*, setting up signs and posters and stands, brightening up most surfaces with streamers and balloons of every color.

"We should ask Aizawa to come get us." Morgana huddled against Ren's shoulder, "We're going to be surrounded as soon as someone spots us."

"Nezu must've known it would be this busy and yet he didn't order any of the teachers to be at the dorms." Ren smirked, "We're going to prove that we don't need constant babysitters doing everything for us."

Kaito held up a hand, "You think this is some test from Nezu?"

"Would you put it past him?" Ren countered.

"...No."

"Uh... what are we gonna do?" Morgana said, his tail flicking.

Ren smirked, "We go through the crowd in style."

"You're not going to change your mind, are you." Morgana said with a soft chuckle. "Let's do this, then."

Ren snapped his fingers, donning his costume with blue embers.

Kaito blinked at the two Personas who rose beside Joker, both kneeling down as if expecting to be ridden. "You can't be serious."

"C'mon, it'll be fun!" Joker said, grinning from ear to ear.

Cerberus wagged his tail, "Can the Aeon and Hermit ride me? We'd all be matching!"

Kaito deadpanned, but Eri looked up at him and tugged on his sleeve, "Please?"

His expression softened, "... Alright."

Cerberus wiggled in excitement as Joker set Eri between Cerberus' shoulders while Kaito rolled his eyes and jumped on without help.

"Ohoho, this will be entertaining." Mother Harlot said as three of her beast heads nudged Joker's shoulders or back.

Joker hopped up behind Mother Harlot, copying how she rode side-saddle with his legs crossed and a smirk on his face. The folder was tucked safely under his arm.

"Does Mercurius want to join in?" Joker said as Morgana sat beside him, "This could be his time to shine!"

"I-" Morgana blinked rapidly, "Yes, he does."

With another swirl of blue fire, Mercurius joined the entourage with his staff held high. Morgana smiled as his Persona twirled in the air.

Mother Harlot patted her beast when they were settled and stepped out of the shade together. The effect was immediate. Students froze and dozens of eyes fell on them within seconds. Boxes and jaws were dropped. The bobbing beast heads, with their jutting fangs or low guttural growls, cleared the path in front of them.

Joker waved at students as phones were taken out.

Kaito kept his head low as they passed, but Eri watched in muted wonder as she was high enough to stare over their heads.

"I don't see my green child." Cerberus whispered.

"He's probably elsewhere." Joker replied, *"I don't see anybody from 1-A around."*

"To think that this is just a small fraction of the students in this school." Satanael said as they neared the end of the crowd, *"It boggles the mind."*

The front doors were already propped open. Instead of dismounting and continuing through the school on foot like Joker planned, Mother Harlot shamelessly walked right in. Two students carrying boxes stumbled back into the wall at their sudden entrance.

Ibara stared in shock before the thorny vines that were her hair wriggled like angry serpents.

Kendo grabbed her arm and they fled outside.

"You need not worry about her." Mother Harlot's chuckle snapped Joker out of his confusion, "Such jealousy and hatred over one so free of inhibitions.... I almost feel sorry for that pious girl."

Morgana and Joker exchanged bewildered glances, and Joker shrugged.

Thankfully the school hallways were wide enough for their entourage to continue without trouble as students watched them pass with unfiltered awe. At long last, they reached the teacher's dorm.

Morgana sighed in relief when Joker's feet landed on the floor, making sure to give each beast head a good scratch under the chin. Cerberus knelt down and Kaito got off first before he lifted Eri down. However, instead of returning to Joker, the Personas chose to lay down on either side of the door. Mercurius didn't go back, either.

"Such a grand entrance requires a grand exit, correct?" Mother Harlot asked.

Cerberus wagged his tail in agreement.

Morgana made a face as if he regretted getting up this morning.

With a smirk, Joker stepped inside the teacher's lounge. Kaito and Eri followed. Six people looked up: Aizawa, Nezu, Hound Dog, Snipe, and most surprising, Risumi and Ayumu. Nezu gave Joker a praising look. Joker and Morgana saw that Nezu had his laptop open to certain camera feeds.

Aizawa was on his feet, concerned, "Why are you in costume? Did something happen?"

"We're fine, Eraser." Joker said as he waltzed up to Nezu's desk and placed the folder on it, "I put everything together like you asked, and then some."

"Excellent!" Nezu flipped it open to read through it. He froze when he reached the part that made Ren's hand cramp last night, "Hmm, I see. Yes, this will do just fine."

Joker nodded and turned to Risumi and Ayumu, "What are you two doing here?"

Risumi smiled as she nursed a cup of tea, "We've gotten permission to set up our own stand during the Festival. We just finished working out the final details with Nezu."

"As a fundraiser to help us get back on our feet." Ayumu said next to her, lazily smiling at Joker, "We were thinking you could help us pick out a menu. Maybe cook if you had time during the Festival?"

"I'd love to help out! I'll have plenty of time to kill before my performance." Joker smiled, "How about we use the recipes in that one notebook I gave you?"

Risumi looked down in her lap, "That was destroyed with the Blue Lotus."

Joker's heart sank, "Oh..."

"You could just write everything down again." Kaito suggested.

“But it could get destroyed again, couldn’t it?” Ayumu asked.

“Power Loader has special notebooks in his lab.” Hound Dog said, “The paper actually made out of stone. It’s nearly indestructible, water-proof, and can last for several years without wear and tear. Perfect for someone who deals with students like Hatsume on a regular basis.”

Risumi and Ayumu glanced at Joker in eagerness, “Consider it done. I’ll add some new recipes, too. I’ve been learning a lot from Lunch Rush.”

“Thank you, Ren. We appreciate it.” Risumi said gently before her eyes trailed to Eri, “Is this the little girl Hitoshi keeps talking about?”

Eri huddled behind Joker’s coat tails.

“Yeah,” Joker placed a gentle hand on Eri’s head, “Eri, these are Hitoshi’s parents, Risumi and Ayumu.”

Eri stepped out of Joker’s shadow, her hands fidgeting together, “Hitoshi is really nice. Are they nice, too?”

“They are.” Joker knelt down next to her, “Along with Kaito, they were some of the first people to help me out.”

Aizawa and the other teachers winced in regret.

Ayumu snorted, “Please. We helped you? You’re the one who saved our bacon from Silver Falcon.”

“And improved our business, became like a brother to Hitoshi, became our favorite hero, saved our lives *again* after what happened to the Blue Lotus.” Risumi counted on her fingers, “Just to name a few.”

Joker felt his face heat up.

“Would you like to come take pictures with us?” Kaito asked, “I’m sure Eri would love to get to know you two better.”

Eri nodded.

Risumi exchanged a warm look with Ayumu, “Of course we would, sweetie.”

“Before you do,” Nezu interjected as he safely tucked the folder in his desk, “There’s something I’d like to show Joker and Mona.”

“What is it?” Joker asked.

Nezu grinned, “Cementoss has finished your stadium! Well, most of it - Power Loader is working on the final touch as we speak!”

“It’s done already!?” Morgana cried.

“Wow. So he wasn’t lying when he said he could do it.” Joker said.

Nezu beamed as he hopped down from his chair.

Aizawa sighed, “I’ll go with. I don’t trust any of you to stay out of trouble.”

Hound Dog gave a pointed look to Snipe, who sunk down in his chair as Joker and the others turned to leave. A growl was all it took for Snipe to jump out of his seat.

“I-I’ll tag along too!”

They stopped in the hallway, all adults except Kaito freezing at the Personas staring innocently at them.

Aizawa turned to Joker, “I thought you said nothing happened.”

“No, I said we were *fine* . There’s a difference!”

The heads of Mother Harlot's beast nuzzled Joker as he went to pet its side, "We had to make a dramatic entrance into the school so the students wouldn't swarm us."

"Wait, is *that* why Nezu was suddenly attached to the cameras?" Snipe asked incredulously.

Nezu cackled, "The students' reactions were gold!"

Aizawa face-palmed, "They can go back now."

"Not yet!" Nezu skittered towards Mother Harlot with the widest grin, "We can ride to the stadium!"

"Nezu, *no* ." Aizawa snapped.

"Nezu, yes!" Nezu beamed up at Mother Harlot, "May I?"

One of Mother Harlot's beast heads lowered to the ground, "You may, Devil." She said.

Nezu hopped aboard, grabbing the single horn to keep himself balanced. The head rose above the others to offer him the highest perspective like the little overlord he was. Joker shook his head with a good-natured smile as he jumped up next to Mother Harlot again with Morgana.

Eri and Kaito climbed on Cerberus, the Persona glancing at the others, "You want to ride on me too? I have plenty of room!"

"Er... no thanks." Snipe backed away with his hands up, "I like my feet firm on the ground."

"I'll walk." Aizawa muttered.

"Hmph, suit yourselves." Mother Harlot looked at Risumi and Ayumu, "What of you, Strength?"

“Sure.” Ayumu said, “I’d feel better if Risumi didn’t have to walk in her condition.”

“Ayumu!” She playfully smacked his shoulder, “I’ll be fine. I’m not even showing yet!”

“Still...”

“It’ll be awkward for me to carry you.” Mercurius said.

Fafnir pulled himself into reality, bowing so low that his nose touched the ground, “Allow me to be your steed, Strength. Let me repent by also being your guardian during the Festival.”

Risumi and Ayumu exchanged surprised glances before Ayumu placed his hand on Fafnir’s head, “You don’t need to repent for anything, pal. You protected Risumi and our unborn child when they needed you the most, and I could never repay you for that.”

Fafnir lifted his head, “But-”

“No buts.” Ayumu said with a hardened brow, “Let’s just call it even and move on, alright?”

Fafnir snorted, “... If that’s what you wish. Now, shall we?”

Ayumu helped Risumi up before climbing on himself, Fafnir kept low like a lizard to not knock them off his back.

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?” Joker teased as he stared at Aizawa.

“No.” Aizawa stormed past.

Snipe scrambled after him.

Nezu cackled as he pointed down the hall, “Onwards!”

Mother Harlot raised her foul goblet as the beast trailed after Aizawa and Snipe, followed by Cerberus, Fafnir, and Mercurius last, "A royal procession worthy of the Trickster! Why did this not happen the moment you stepped in the school?"

Morgana sighed, "We had other things to worry about!"

"Relax, Morgana." Joker said as he pet him, "Why are you so tense?"

"I-I know. Sorry." Morgana sank into his partner's side in mutual comfort, "It's just with the Festival so close.... you know what this could mean for us."

"Of course I do, but there's no reason to be." Joker kept his eyes forward as they reached the school entrance, "Look at Eri. She still hasn't smiled yet, but we're so close to a breakthrough. We can't risk her feeling worse if she sees that we're tense."

Morgana's eyes softened, "So you're keeping a cool head for her?"

Joker smiled at him, eyes twinkling.

Cybele suddenly appeared in their entourage. She grabbed Mercurius and the both of them twirled through the air in a graceful dance that called the wind. Students cheered when confetti and streamers were swept up and over the Personas. The pair ended their dance with a deep bow.

Morgana looked back at Cerberus. Eri's crimson eyes held more wonder than ever, and yet the rest of her face never showed the happiness bursting within.

"I... suppose you're right." Morgana whispered, "But even so, when are we going to tell Eri the truth? We can't keep lying to her forever."

"It depends how our mission during the Festival goes." Joker waved at a few students taking a pictures, "For now, let her be as happy as

she can be. Call me selfish, but I want to see her smile just once before we have to break her heart.”

Morgana looked like he wanted to say something, but held his tongue.

They spent the rest of the way in a contemplative silence, not knowing that their conversation was heard by Nezu’s keen ears.

Hitoshi finished putting up drapes. He grabbed another box of Halloween supplies and went through one of the dark passageways they built inside their classroom. He came upon his class rep and two of his classmates huddled together, whispering over their phones.

“Hey, I finished with the windows. Where do you want these?”

“Shinsou! Why didn’t you tell us!?” His class rep said with a ferocious grin, but she had nothing on Elizabeth’s intensity.

“Uh... tell you what?”

“That Joker was going to do a parade today!”

“A *what* ?”

The class rep showed him her phone, open to a pictures of Joker on social media. He was waving and smiling from Mother Harlot’s back, and other pictures revealed Eri and Kaito on Cerberus, along with-

“Why are my parents on Fafnir!?”

“You didn’t know?” The class rep asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

“No!”

“Ugh, my sister in 3-E just texted me saying those small asshole robots cut them off from the students. So we can’t go see them now!”

“Where were they headed?” Hitoshi asked.

“Towards that huge stadium Cementoss-sensei’s been building.”

Hitoshi turned away. Their whispers went ignored as he set the box down and whipped out his phone.

[The Moon]

Really, Ren?

I leave you alone for twenty minutes

TWENTY MINUTES

And you’re all over social media WITH MY PARENTS

I feel so betrayed

How could my own brother do this D:

It took several minutes for Ren to reply.

[The World]

I’ll make it up to you with curry and movies? Your parents offered for all of us to spend the night at their apartment tonight.

Oh, and Alice is looking forward to the haunted house.

[The Moon]

Fine. I forgive you.

He shoved his phone in his pocket and turned towards his class rep, "Joker said Alice is excited for our haunted house."

"Yes!" She pumped her fist, "We'll be the best class that beats all other classes!!"

The other classmates cheered, and Hitoshi couldn't help but smirk.

"Wow!" Morgana's jaw dropped, "I never thought it would be this huge!"

They stood in the center of the massive stadium, high walls filled with stands which rose several hundred feet all around them. The stage they stood on was large and circular with a variety of different platforms scattered about.

Kohryu floated around the vast stadium, speckling it with golden sunbursts from the light pouring in from the open ceiling.

"Well, Kohryu?" Joker said as he looked up.

Kohryu descended to the main stage, "There is enough room for me to maneuver around comfortably. Quite impressive."

"Thank you!" Nezu stood beside Joker, paws tucked behind his back, "This stadium is 43% larger than those of the Sports Festival! I'm glad you find it agreeable."

Kohryu bowed before returning to Joker.

"Now we just need the final touch." Joker said.

"That will go on tomorrow." Nezu beamed, "Meanwhile, the smaller ones have already been built around campus, and the cards will be ready by the morning of the Festival. All that is left is for you to manage them as you see fit."

“Good. Do you think it’ll be enough?” Joker whispered as he looked to the others marveling at the sheer size of the stadium, “If it isn’t...”

“We’ll do our best,” Nezu leveled Joker with a curious glance, “But we cannot discount a few stragglers being out on the grounds. If we play our cards right, then nobody outside of those in the know will suspect anything heinous.”

“That’s the best outcome we can hope for.” Morgana whispered, “And if not... well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Nezu nodded, “There is one other reason why I wanted to bring you here... away from certain ears.”

Joker glanced towards Eri, who was currently distracting everyone else on the opposite side of the open stage, “And that is?”

“I want to have a meeting with the heroes who will guard the USJ tomorrow.” Nezu smiled as Joker and Morgana gave him skewed glances, so he continued, “Usually, I do love seeing their reactions whenever I drop something substantial on them out of the blue. However, if what you’ve explained about the unexpected Persona accessories is true, then they’ll need a few days to train with them.”

“We’re not telling them the full truth until *after* the Cultural Festival ends.” Joker said, frowning.

“I agree that would be best.” Nezu said, “This meeting tomorrow is to explain what will happen, what Shadows are, and to train with their new gear to help prepare them for their roles to the best of their abilities. The drawing you gave me earlier will greatly help in that regard!”

Joker sighed, but he nodded, “It’s only fair.”

Morgana grimaced, “How do you think they’ll take it? We’re practically shoving all of this on them with no warning.”

“They’re pro heroes who’re used to daring missions being dropped in their laps with little to no warning. They’ll do just fine.” Nezu studied the duo with an intense gaze, “But are you ready to share your story after the Festival is over? We only have a handful of days left before they know the truth. Everything may change at the drop of a hat.”

Joker stuck his hands in his pockets. “I convinced someone that the Metaverse existed while I was drugged and beaten within an inch of my life, and they ended up saving me from assassination.” Joker stared off into the distance, Morgana looked heartbroken while Nezu flinched, “When we told La Brava, Gentle Criminal, Kaito, and Hitoshi our story... the only one who believed us was Kaito. They all came around eventually, but seeing the *pity* on their faces, thinking we were just crazy or confused, hurt more than I like to admit.”

“Amamiya...” Nezu murmured.

“Thankfully, Spinner and Mr. Compress believed us because they were the first see the Velvet Room.” Joker sighed, “I don’t know how I’ll manage if the heroes do the same thing as La Brava and the others.”

Morgana puffed up, “It won’t be the same, Ren! We’ll get our proof no matter what!”

“I hope you’re right.”

Nezu patted Joker’s leg, bringing his gaze down to meet the rat’s, “You’ll have my support no matter what. The staff already care deeply for you and your team. Please believe in them as I do.”

A smile cracked through Joker’s melancholy, and he firmly nodded.

“Ren-nii!” Eri ran over to them and latched onto Joker’s arm, “Can we take a picture of all of us here?”

Joker grinned at her, “Sure, Eri.”

They left the stadium after getting the picture and spent an afternoon of leisure walking around the school grounds, their photo collection growing with additional pictures of Risumi and Ayumu as well as any Personas who joined at random.

Hitoshi and the other vigilantes rejoined them at the end of the day, and Risumi and Ayumu beamed when they said they'd join in on the movie night. Their dorm looked more like a comfortable little cottage rather than the apartment style dorms of the students and teachers, complete with their own private yard and garden.

The group scattered to get what they needed for a movie night, but Aizawa suddenly grabbed Snipe and shoved him in Ren's direction with a stern look.

Ren raised a brow as they stood in front of Ren's dorm.

"Uh, so..." Snipe cleared his throat and floundered for words.

"What is it?" Morgana asked, "Cat got your tongue?"

"N-no, it's just.... I..." Snipe deflated. He took another minute to gather himself before speaking again, "I'm having a training session with Shinsou tomorrow morning, the last one before the Cultural Festival. Would you... like to join?"

"Training for what?" Ren asked.

"Handling firearms. I'm really impressed with how you taught him the basics, and he's improved so much since we first started!"

Ren smiled, "I'd love to."

"Okay, great. Fantastic!" Snipe slowly backed away, "I'll... uh... see you tomorrow then."

Snipe all but fled down the hall.

"That was weird." Morgana said as they went into Ren's room.

“I’ve heard he feels bad for shooting me at the USJ.”

“Oh. How do you feel about it, Ren?”

“It was months ago.” Ren shrugged. “I’ve gotten over it by now.”

“Apparently, he doesn’t feel the same way.” Morgana said as his expression brightened, “Maybe we could use this to our advantage. It’ll be easier for us to get him on our side if he feels he has to make it up to you.”

“That’s a mildly devious way to put it.”

Morgana flicked his tail, “At this point, do we really have a choice?”

Ren didn’t say anything as he grabbed blankets and pillows. It was odd to see the infamous vigilantes, plus two cats and a little girl, rushing towards another dorm with their arms full of fluffy pillows.

Risumi and Ayumu swept them inside.

Their cottage was open concept, with the living room, dining area, and kitchen only separated by sleek counters. There was another hallway that led to the bathroom and bedroom, while a pair of patio doors let in plenty of sunlight.

Hitoshi was already setting out blankets and rearranging the furniture in the living room, the television prepped and ready.

But there was something white lounging on the back of the couch, blinking at them.

“When did you guys get a cat?” Ren asked.

“Oh, she’s not ours.” Hitoshi said as he finished arranging pillows, “Her name is Marshmallow. She’s Aizawa-sensei’s cat.”

“Why is she here and not in the teacher’s dorm?” Morgana asked as Marshmallow sniffed curiously when Ren held out his hand to her.

“He didn’t know how Lady Stubbs and Morgana would react to her, so we offered to look after her until you settled in. She was originally with Hitoshi, but after what happened with us...” Ayumu trailed off.

“I’ve been so busy with training anyway.” Hitoshi said, “She’s better off with you guys.”

“It’s been nice having a cat around.” Risumi gave Marshmallow an affectionate pet, “Maybe we’ll get a cat or two after the Blue Lotus is rebuilt.”

Hitoshi snorted, “I wouldn’t object.”

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs jumped onto the back of the couch. They tensed as the two felines sniffed one another, but there wasn’t so much as a hiss or a growl, and they ended up rubbing their faces together with loud purrs.

“I don’t think we’ll have any problems, should Marshmallow decide to come back to the teacher’s dorm.” Tobita said with a warm smile.

“Does anyone want curry?” Ren asked as the living room became an explosion of warmth and comfort. “I should get started on it soon.”

“As if you really have to ask.” Ayumu smirked. “It’s been so long since Risumi or I have had any.”

Risumi smiled, “We baked a batch of brownies this morning. We can have those for dessert.”

“One huge pot of curry, coming right up.”

They spent the rest of the night nestled close together, eating curry and brownies as they were enraptured by the collection of movies gifted to the Shinsou family by Nezu. Eri was surrounded by all of the cats, and she ended up falling asleep with Marshmallow splayed out on top of her like a dutiful protector.

It felt like old times at the Blue Lotus or the Raven's Nest... or other memories of Leblanc.

Just for one night, Ren could forget about the impending Festival.

~*~ **3 Days Until The Festival** ~*~

"I'm blaming you if we're late." Hitoshi deadpanned.

"You needed the extra sleep." Ren said as they walked out of the small cottage the next morning, "You were so comfortable all snuggled up in those blankets."

"Ha ha, very funny." Hitoshi playfully glared at him, "Let's just hurry up."

Ren smirked as they headed towards the school. They paused at the threshold between the early morning crowd of students already continuing their work on the Festival.

Hitoshi blinked at Ren, "Don't tell me you plan on doing another parade. I've been getting messages about it since yesterday."

Ren laughed, "Don't think that's necessary."

He felt Mother Harlot's disappointment as he continued walking. Some students stopped and stared, some smiling and taking pictures, others waving. One or two frowned or scowled and turned away from him.

But nobody crowded them like Ren feared.

A few students were brave enough to come up and ask for a picture with him or an autograph. One girl happily showed off a 'Hee Ho!' charm hanging on her phone, and another boy had a mask pin on his uniform, but compared to the massive swell of students that

eerily stared at him every morning he went to Ground Beta, this was... nice. Strange, but nice. The complete opposite of the treatment he got at the start of his year at Shujin.

He got the feeling the students wouldn't be as respectful without Kohryu's show or the 'Persona Parade' yesterday, lest they risk angering beings of myth and legend.

They made it into the building fifteen minutes later.

"You're going to have your own fan club." Hitoshi said with a smirk, "If you don't already."

"No thanks," Ren replied as they walked through the school, nearing a corner, "Maybe I'll ask Nezu to prevent something like that."

Hitoshi shrugged, "I don't think it'll stop people even if Nezu doesn't let them form an official club."

Ren collided with someone when they turned the corner. He staggered back as a box dropped to the floor, costumes and fake jewelry spilling everywhere. The student was flat on their backside, staring up at him with shock, which turned into venom.

"Sorry." Ren helped place everything back into the box with Hitoshi.

The student was frozen, glaring at them.

Hitoshi picked up the box as Ren stood and held out his hand for Ibara.

"Don't touch me, snake." She bat his hand away and stood up by herself.

Hitoshi glared, "Hey, chill out. It was just an accident."

She reached into her pocket, still glaring at Ren as her hair wriggled, "If you've come to taint this school with your sins, then you have another thing coming."

Ren blinked slowly, "... Excuse me?"

"I've kept my reservations all throughout your illegal ventures. I had hope for your soul after you saved my classmates at the Summer Camp, but then Kamino happened and you summoned down demonic forces to murder somebody in cold blood. Yesterday was the final nail in your coffin." She took a threatening step closer, but Ren didn't move, "You proudly rode into the school on the beast with seven heads and ten horns with the Whore Of Babylon beside you. If what the news says is true, and you are the Demon Lord destined to end our world, then I will stop you here and now."

Ren staggered as she threw a small container towards him, its lid open to splash him with cold water. He blinked and wiped water away from his eyes, his hair dripping and his shirt damp, and gave her a deadpanned look. A long moment of silence stretched awkwardly between them, Ibara and Ren stared at one another while Hitoshi's jaw dropped.

Her eyes widened when he didn't spontaneously combust like some evil demon from an exorcist movie.

"The audacity of this bitch." Cybele snarled, *"Let me out, and I'll gift you her head."*

Mother Harlot laughed heartily.

"What the hell is your problem!?" Hitoshi yelled.

"I... I just..." Ibara sputtered as she lowered her arm, a few drops of water plopping on the floor, "I thought..."

Ren sighed, "Thought that I was the incarnation of evil because of Mother Harlot?"

Ibara pursed her lips.

“Yes, I have Mother Harlot as one of my companions,” He muttered as a chill came through the hallway, “But that’s not all I am. I have Cerberus and Cu Chulainn. Ishtar and Fafnir. Kohryu, Alice, and Vasuki. Odin and Cybele. I am not the sum of a single one of them, but the sum of *all* of them put together. Am I making myself clear?”

“I... I...” Ibara gaped like a fish, her eyes falling to the ground.

“Trickster, allow me to settle her inner turmoil.” Gabriel offered.

“Fine.”

Gabriel appeared between him and Ibara in a burst of blue flame. Ibara gasped and the small container fell from her grasp.

“An angel with a bundle of lilies...” Her eyes went impossibly wide, “Archangel Gabriel?”

“Yes, it is I.” Gabriel nodded serenely, “Allow me to clear the air between you and Joker, so that this grave misconduct never happens again.”

“Leave this girl to Gabriel.” Satanael said.

Ren walked around Gabriel and Hitoshi shoved the box in her arms with a scowl.

“Just so you know, those ‘news articles’ are all bullshit. Next time, why don’t you grow a brain and actually get to know a person first before you judge them.”

Ren couldn’t help the trickle of warm pride as Hitoshi walked onwards. He took one glance at Ren and led them down another hall and into a bathroom.

“What the hell is wrong with people.” Hitoshi muttered darkly as Ren took several paper towels and started to dry himself off.

“I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt.” Ren stated, “It’s not like we ever met in person for her to get to know me first. I doubt it’ll happen again.”

“It still doesn’t make it right, what she did.” Hitoshi said as he gave Ren a disbelieving look.

Ren couldn’t say anything before his phone chimed in his pocket.

[Rat Devil]

I saw what happened on the cameras.

I’ll be calling Ibara to my office.

[World-Hopping Trickster]

Don’t punish her.

It was just a mistake, that’s all.

[Rat Devil]

Hmm, very well. If that’s what you want.

I’ll give her a stern talking to and a warning, but nothing more.

Though I will have the staff firmly remind students that any attack on your character will result in immediate detention. I’ll not allow it to happen again.

Ren internally groaned as he put his phone away.

“What’s up?” Hitoshi asked.

“Nezu saw, but I asked him to be nice.” Ren threw the damp towels in the garbage, “Let’s get to Snipe before anything else happens.”

They reached their destination without another incident. Heavy duty lockers lined one wall, and the other half of the room was taken over by an impressive range.

Snipe was leaning at the counter, an unloaded gun and extra ammo clips already set out, “Nezu told me what happened. You two okay?”

“We’re fine.” Ren said.

Hitoshi nodded, “Can we get started?”

Snipe nodded after a moment. He pulled himself away from the counter and gestured to the gear on the counter.

“Both of you put in ear plugs first. Then you can show Joker what you got, Shinsou.”

They followed Snipe’s directions, and then Hitoshi expertly loaded the gun. Hitoshi took aim while Ren leaned against the wall behind him with a critical eye. Snipe chuckled as he went and pressed a red button on the wall.

A buzzer sounded, and human shaped paper targets appeared on the range.

Hitoshi wasted no time.

Bang. Bang! BANG!

A single gunshot went through each target that appeared, close to the center with a few hitting the bullseye. A screen above the counter showed the number of targets he hit. Ren held a hint of unadulterated pride when Hitoshi reloaded it nearly as fast as Ren would.

The targets stopped appearing when the buzzer sounded again after one minute.

Hitoshi unloaded the clip and set all of the equipment on the counter. He looked up to the screen and broke out into a wide smile.

“Congrats, Shinsou!” Snipe said as he threw his hands up, “That’s three more than your previous personal best!”

“41 targets in one minute?” Ren whistled, “That’s pretty impressive, Hitoshi.”

“Thanks. Wait a minute,” He blinked at Ren, “What’s *your* personal best? I’ve never seen you go all out.”

“Dunno. I’ve never been to a gun range before.”

He’d never tell them how he’d gotten his butt kicked by Shinya at the arcade countless times.

Snipe hummed, “Would you like to try it out?”

Ren nodded, “It can’t hurt.”

He walked up to the counter and picked up the gun. It was slightly heavier than what he was used to, and the lack of any power emanating from it felt wrong. He frowned at the dead piece of equipment, but reloaded it and nodded at Snipe.

The buzzer sounded, and Ren fired before the first target was fully visible. Targets appeared and disappeared in a flurry. The buzzer sounded too quickly. With a sigh he unloaded the gun and placed it on the counter.

Hitoshi and Snipe gawked at the number on the screen.

“A little more than one target per second.” Snipe said, “I’m impressed.”

“What’s *your* best, Snipe-sensei?” Hitoshi asked, “Does Joker have you beat?”

A sudden idea popped into Ren’s head. He grinned as he faced Snipe, “Why don’t we see who’s the better shot? Best two out of three rounds?”

Snipe’s hand went to his masked chin, “I’d hate for you to lose confidence when I beat you.”

“How about this,” Joker donned his costume with wisps of blue embers. He unsheathed the Nataraja and the Tyrant Pistol in either hand, feeling relief at the wells of power inside each, “Both of us at our best, no holds barred, and whoever wins gets to decide what kind of curry we’ll have for dinner tonight.”

Hitoshi glanced back and forth between Joker and Snipe, excitement plain on his expression.

“Alright. You’re on, partner.” Snipe grabbed two guns from his belt and held them up in the same position as Joker, “Shinsou, come stand by the button.”

“Sure.”

Joker went to one end of the range, Snipe on the other.

“Okay, Shinsou, see those dials on the settings next to the button?” Snipe said, “Turn rows 1 and 7 up to the hardest difficulty.”

Hitoshi nodded and did just that.

Joker and Snipe held their breath in anticipation as Hitoshi’s hand hovered over the red button. Hitoshi slammed his hand down, and the buzzer sounded for a third time.

Hitoshi's jaw dropped at the chorus of gunshots. The hardest difficulty set up multiple targets at once, but they all fell under the mastery these two had of their trusty weapons. The buzzer sounded, halting the deafening sounds of gunshots.

127 to 119 in Joker's favor.

Snipe squawked, "Were you holding back earlier?"

"I was using a dead weapon before, and a model I wasn't wholly familiar with at that." Joker said, twirling the Nataraja around his finger, "Plus we both have two guns now."

"... Dead weapon?" Snipe shook his head, "Well, I'm not going to hold back on Round 2, so you better be ready!"

"Wouldn't dream of holding back for the sake of your pride."

Snipe actually chuckled at that.

They reloaded their weapons before they returned to their stances. Hitoshi pressed the button. The buzzer didn't sound properly before the gunshots overwhelmed it.

Hitoshi watched in awe as the deadly duo put their all into it, going so far as to throw in fancy movements between rapid fire shots. He bit his lip as the targets were mercilessly slaughtered at near maximum capacity.

This time the score was 143 to 138 in Snipe's favor.

The both of them were nearly out of breath as their guns smoked.

"Not bad!" Joker said with a bright grin.

Snipe nodded, "I'm still full of surprises."

"Why don't we make our bet a little more interesting?"

“What do you have in mind?”

Joker’s grin turned devilish, “The winner gets to decide what kind of curry the other will eat for a whole week, on top of something else. It could be anything.”

“Okay. So, I’ll decide what kind of curry you’ll eat for a week *and* I get first dibs on you when you start your TA duties! You’ll be grading all the homework, by the way.”

Joker laughed, “Alright, if that’s how you want to play it. If I win, I decide what curry you’ll eat for the whole week *and*...” His smirk widened even more, “You have to put a glitter bomb in Aizawa’s room tonight.”

Snipe choked on air, “What!? I picked something relatively harmless! You want to kill me!”

“So you’re afraid you’re afraid of losing then?”

“No way, partner!” Snipe faced the range like a feral animal, “I’m going to tell my students that they have extra homework because of you! I hope you like grading essays!”

“Bring it on, *hero!* ”

Hitoshi was almost afraid to push the button again, but he was too excited to see the outcome to back out now. The buzzer sounded, and both of them went *wild*. Hitoshi couldn’t keep track of how many bullets whizzed through the range, and so many gunshots sounded that he’d be hearing them hours later despite having ear protection. Instead, he kept his eyes on the screens.

The numbers were neck and neck until Snipe called out one of his ultimate moves to put him in the lead. Sweat broke out on Joker’s brow as he realized he was falling behind, but he wouldn’t let that stop him. He still had an ace up his sleeve.

He hadn't used this move yet in this world, and he'd never tried it with *two* guns before either.

Joker was a blur as he jumped to the side, bullets flying out of his guns. He heard Hitoshi gasp as he leapt into a mid-air flip next, his Down Shot claiming the last of his ammo at break-neck speed.

Joker landed just as the buzzer sounded.

Both contestants panted as they stared up at the screens.

161 to 160....

In Joker's favor.

"I'm dead." Snipe whispered in the sudden and dizzying silence.

Snipe's phone chimed. He numbly put his guns on the counter and reached into his pockets for it. A high pitched whine escaped his throat.

"Nezu just texted me saying he'll write a eulogy for me."

Joker sheathed his guns and walked over, smiling as he held out his hand, "Good competition, Snipe. I had fun!"

Snipe glanced at his hand, then up at Joker's face, "Yeah, yeah. You won fair and square, Joker."

They shook once before they let go.

"Holy shit."

"Language, Shinsou." Snipe said half-heartily.

"Sorry." Hitoshi deadpanned, "That was one of the coolest things I've ever seen."

“Thanks,” Snipe said, “You’ll catch up in no time as long as you put in the work!”

Joker winked at Hitoshi, “I’ll teach you how to do that move sometime, too.”

“Sweeeet.”

“Oh, there’s *two* of them.” Snipe put a hand over his heart, “We’re all doomed.”

Joker and Hitoshi grinned at one another. An alarm went off, and Snipe sighed as he silenced his phone.

“Our time is up. It’s not how I expected to spend this training session, but I’m definitely not disappointed.” Snipe shivered, “And more than a little terrified.”

“My classmates will be wondering where I am, anyway.” Hitoshi stated.

“I’ll come with you to drop off Alice. She’s excited to meet everyone.” Joker said as he let his costume vanish.

“Before you go...” Snipe hesitated before he sighed, “I have to be honest, Amamiya. I invited you here to apologize for what happened at the USJ. I shouldn’t have done that to you.”

Ren smiled wistfully, “After Kamino, Mr. Compress taught me the value of the phrase ‘Ces’t la vie.’ I accept your apology, Snipe.”

Snipe deflated in relief, “That’s great! That was... easy. I can’t believe I was so worried over nothing!”

Ren patted Snipe on the shoulder as he started to walk out, “I’ll give you the glitter bomb at lunch. Don’t back out now.”

Snipe sputtered, and would spend a long time in the gun range wallowing in dread.

Hitoshi did the two finger salute at Snipe before following Ren out. He inevitably took the lead to show Ren to the 1-C classroom. They walked in silence for a long while, and Ren grew concerned at the contemplation on Hitoshi's face.

"What's on your mind?"

"Hmm? Oh." Hitoshi scratched the back of his neck, "It's just... seeing you and Snipe reminds me of how far behind I am compared to everyone else. I still have a long way to go."

"You can't compare yourself to Snipe. He's a pro hero who has years of experience."

Hitoshi raised a brow at him, "And you? You're only a little older than I am, but you're way better than most pro heroes combined."

"I was a beginner too, once, and it's not like I had to learn everything by myself," Ren replied, "You've come pretty far in just a few months, Hitoshi, and you'll go a lot farther if you keep up the good work."

"... Thanks, Ren." Hitoshi looked away to hide his red face, "That.... really means a lot. I've never shared my hero name with you, have I?"

"You haven't."

"I'll be the Jack-Of-All-Trades Hero: Wildcard."

Ren stopped in his tracks, staring at Hitoshi with a wide-eyed expression.

Hitoshi froze, "You know, s-since Aizawa-sensei is showing me how to use his capture weapon as well as hand to hand combat, my hacking skills have gotten a lot better, firearms too with Snipe. Mei's teaching me how to make all kinds of stuff... and I have your original knife in a locker, but nobody knows how to use one as good as you, so..."

Hitoshi's rambling trailed off as Ren continued to stare.

"I'll train you on how to use a dagger."

"Really?"

"I've heard Aizawa talk about your morning sessions before class. I'll join those sessions when I can." Ren smiled as he grasped Hitoshi's shoulder, "You're going to be an *amazing* hero, Hitoshi, I just know it."

Hitoshi looked at Ren as if he had just hung the Moon, both of their hearts basking in the cozy warmth of a brotherly bond deepened.

Ren smirked as he held out his fist, to which Hitoshi bumped with his own.

Hitoshi cleared his throat, "Right. So, my classroom is uh... this way."

They reached the classroom and Hitoshi opened the door, but it was dark inside. Ren didn't need Third Eye to sense someone stalking closer.

"Boo!"

Ren and Hitoshi deadpanned at a girl dressed like a zombie who had jumped out at them.

"Zombies don't say boo, Class Rep." Hitoshi deadpanned.

"Oh, dangit! Maybe I should try groaning or grumbling-" Her eyes landed on Ren, and she froze like a deer in the headlights, "Oh my GOSH!! It's Joker!!"

Several heads popped up out of the darkness, dressed in a variety of different halloween-esque costumes.

“Unfortunately, I can’t stay long,” Ren put on a charismatic smile, “I’m just here to drop off Alice. I have my own Festival preparations to make.”

Alice appeared next to Ren, and several cries of shock accompanied the familiar blue blaze in which she summoned herself.

Alice curtsied with an unsettling smirk, an aura of dread smothering the whole haunted house, “I’m here to play! Won’t you play with me, big sis?”

The zombie girl squealed, “SHE’S PERFECT!!”

Hitoshi sighed, “Better run while you can, Ren.”

Ren patted Alice’s head, “Be good and have fun.”

“I will, Big Brother!”

Ren walked away. He had just stepped outside when Gabriel finally returned to him, completely satisfied.

“What took you so long?” He asked.

“I set the girl straight.” Gabriel stated.

“Meaning?” Satanael urged.

“I escorted her to Nezu’s office as he wanted, and she no longer views you as the one who will destroy the world. She changed her mind rather quickly when I explained that the ‘demon’ who came down during Kamino was not Lucifer, but Satanael in his truest form. Nezu took over after that.”

“I... am not going to ask.” Ren stated, to which Gabriel gave him a smug smile in return.

He brushed those thoughts aside to focus on the many red and black tents that have popped up around the Festival Grounds. He had a lot

of work to do.

...

Later that night, after Aizawa retired to his room, Nezu and Ren had made a huge bowl of popcorn and pushed a big plush chair in front of Aizawa's door.

"Uh... what are you two up to?" Shuichi asked, drawing the eyes of the rest of the staff and vigilante.

Except for Snipe, who had not shown his face for the rest of the day.

Ren had a mouthful of popcorn, so Nezu, sitting on the chair arm, answered jovially, "Watching the show!"

They had a moment of confusion before there was a booming *pop* coming from inside Aizawa's room. A shout of startled rage reached their ears before the door burst open, and Aizawa stepped out covered head to toe in red glitter. A shower of it spilled out of his room and into the common area.

Aizawa begrudgingly held his tongue when he spotted Eri sitting on a couch, instead giving Ren and Nezu a death glare. Ren just gave him a cheeky grin.

"It was Snipe!" Nezu stated mercilessly.

Aizawa stalked off to find his prey, leaving a trail of sparkling glitter in his wake. The others split up after that, and Hound Dog said in no way, shape, or form that they were just hiding from Aizawa for the rest of the night.

He and Nezu cackled as they finished off the popcorn.

It was a few hours later when Ren and Morgana saw something strange outside their balcony window. They found Snipe stuck high up in the private garden's ginko tree, wrapped up in Aizawa's capture weapon like a fly in a spider's cocoon.

Snipe saw Ren smirking under him, "I hate you."

"No you don't. I'm going to choose your favorite curry for the rest of the week as an apology."

Snipe sagged in his scarf prison, "Okay, I don't hate you. But this is your fault. Mind helping a guy out?"

Ren had enough decency to agree. It only took a swing of Gabriel's sword to cut Snipe down.

They didn't say anything when Snipe's feet touched the ground, sprinkles of glitter stuck to both of them as they called it a night.

~*~ **2 Days Before The Festival** ~*~

"Are you nervous?" Nezu asked as he walked beside Ren the next morning, glitter-fest forgotten.

"A little." Ren said honestly. "But I'll be fine."

"I'll have your back!" Morgana nodded as he perched comfortably on Ren's shoulder.

They entered the hallway where the meeting room was located, but Ren blinked when he saw the pair of Arcana ahead: the *Upright Justice* and *Upright Fortune*.

Tsukauchi looked exhausted, with deep eye bags that would beat Hitoshi's any day. He looked as if he'd lost a little weight, his iconic detective's jacket hanging off of his shoulders.

Tsukauchi's eyes brightened when they landed on Ren, "Hey, kid. Long time no see."

"Joker!" Tensei's warm hug was unexpected, but not unwelcome as Ren hugged back. They parted and Tensei gave Morgana a good scratch behind the ears, "I'm so happy to see you guys again!"

"Likewise." Morgana said, satisfied.

"Nice to see you again, too." Ren frowned at the detective, "You look tired, Tsukauchi."

He waved off Ren's concern, "Work has been a nonstop grind since... since Kamino, but it's nothing I can't handle."

"I'll give you a little pick-me-up. This meeting won't exactly be... gentle."

Tensei nudged Tsukauchi, "I'm going to say yes for this poor man because he needs it. Joker's healing is like nothing else. I'd know from experience!"

Tsukauchi pouted, "I can handle myself just fine-"

Ren snapped his fingers. Ishtar sighed like a disappointed mother when the Salvation breathed new life into Tsukauchi, his general health improving by leaps and bounds.

Tsukauchi blinked in astonishment while Ren glared, "Ishtar wants you to take better care of yourself detective, otherwise she *will* come after you and I won't be able to stop her."

Tsukauchi's ears turned red, "My quirk is registering that as 'true', so... I'll try. Sansa has been on my case about it for months."

Tensei laughed, "This is proof that you should listen to him more often."

"... You're right."

Nezu cleared his throat, "Is everyone inside already?"

The pair sobered, and Tsukauchi nodded, "Yes, although everyone's wondering why we're having this meeting in Ground Beta."

Nezu grinned, "All will be explained. Come along now, our whole world could change if we waste any more time!"

Tsukauchi paled, "Why does my quirk say you're telling the truth?"

"Let's not keep everyone waiting." Ren said as he followed Nezu inside.

The room was bigger than he imagined, but despite its size the sheer number of pro heroes were squished around the long table.

He met Nighteye's severe gaze before anyone else's. The man scanned Ren from head to toe, but oddly enough his features softened. Weird. Maybe Mirio was right with Nighteye's change of heart.

"Joker!!" Miruko marched over and threw her arms around him, "Man I missed you so much!"

"Don't suffocate him." Gang Orca chuckled warmly as he ruffled Ren's hair, "But I'm glad to see you, too."

Ryukyu and Hawks smiled fondly as they joined the group. Best Jeanist too, his smile hidden by his collar.

The *Councilors*, *Star*, *High Priestess*, and strangely enough, Best Jeanist's *Adjustment* Arcanas shown brightly with their hearts. Ren smiled honestly as their support bolstered him.

"I hate to interrupt your reunion," Nighteye steepled his fingers, "But I'd like to know why we're having this meeting."

"Agreed." Vlad King said, "It doesn't paint a good picture of whatever we're going to have to do."

Nezu hopped onto the chair at the head of the table, “We’ll get started when everyone is seated.”

Gang Orca ruffled Ren’s hair one more time before he and the others went back to their chairs. Ren took the open seat between Aizawa and Mr. Compress, the latter planted a firm hand on his shoulder in support.

Tsukauchi and Tensei claimed the last remaining seats.

Nezu placed his interlaced paws on the table with a grave seriousness, “Before we get started, there’s something I want everyone to understand. We *must* have the cooperation of every single person here, as any discordance may lead to the destruction of our entire world.”

“Way to start off easy, Devil.” Satanael said.

A thick silence drowned the whole room as faces drained of blood. Only the vigilantes traded determined looks between one another.

Tsukauchi pursed his lips, “He’s telling the truth.”

“What!?” Present Mic grasped his head with both hands, “Nezu, what the heck did you get us into this time!?”

Well, if Nezu wasn’t sugar coating things, then Ren wouldn’t either.

“Nezu didn’t get you into this mess, *I* did.”

Ren suddenly stood up, all chatter ceased when he donned his costume with a flash of bright cerulean. His footsteps were extraordinarily loud as everyone watched him walk around the table to stand beside Nezu’s chair.

Morgana, still perched on Joker’s shoulder, held his head high and stared the heroes down.

“First and foremost, this meeting is about how you’ll guard the USJ on the day of the Festival.”

“... Guard?” Hawks raised a brow, “From what?”

“What else?” Nezu stated coolly, “From intruders, of course.”

“*Intruders* ?” Aizawa sat ram-rod straight, “You’re implying that there will be an *attack* during the Cultural Festival?”

“Quite so.”

“Why aren’t you canceling it?” Nighteye straightened his glasses, “You’re putting the lives of students and innocent civilians at risk!”

Nezu fearlessly met Nighteye’s gaze, “Because, whether you like it or not, an attack is inevitable regardless of the timing. These intruders are the cause of the ‘Red Rain’ that fell over U.A. recently.”

Several teachers stiffened, eyes blown wide in disbelief.

“Explain, Nezu.” Midnight leaned forward, her demeanor as smart as the crack of a whip, “If you knew about this, then why weren’t we informed before now?”

Nezu reached into his pocket for his phone. With the taps of a few keys, every phone in the room went off. Joker retrieved his from his pocket, as did everyone, to see pictures of a certain graph.

“These are the strange readings from the USJ I’ve gathered since the League’s attack.” Nezu said, “I didn’t know what was causing them for a long time, the facility itself seemed to show no change or evidence of anything heinous. However, with a recent investigation, I’ve discovered the unlikely source.”

“The USJ...” Thirteen’s eyes widened, “You went in there alone with Joker and the other vigilantes.”

“Indeed. Canceling the Cultural Festival gives the enemy the advantage, which would only doom us going forward.” Nezu glanced at Joker, “We must take the initiative in order to prevent a world-wide disaster. The Cultural Festival will only be the first step in gaining the upper hand.”

The heroes traded a variety of glances, ranging from unease to disbelief. A few stared at Joker with confusion or concern.

“You say this attack is completely unavoidable,” Tsukauchi said uneasily, “But you haven’t explained who this threat is or where they come from. Do you have confirmation that a new villain group will attack the school? And why at the USJ and not the school entrance or festival grounds?”

“These aren’t villains. Hell, they’re not even *human* .” Joker stated, his hammering heart only eased by a brush of Satanael's wings against his mind, “They’ll come through a tear in reality that cannot be seen by the naked eye.”

The heroes turned to look at Tsukauchi in an awkward silence.

Joker kept eye contact with the detective, putting his faith in the Upright Justice to have his back.

Tsukauchi swallowed, “... Truth.”

“Mr. Compress,” Nezu turned to the vigilante, “The files, if you will?”

Mr. Compress tipped his hat. He grabbed a handful of marbles from his coat pocket and snapped, revealing a large pile of folders. He slid one to each hero. Inside lay a photocopy of Joker’s rough sketch of the angelic Shadows in the Qlipoth World.

Joker was no Yusuke, but he got the likeness well enough after a couple of tries.

Ryukyu's brow furrowed at the word on the top of the page, "Shadows?"

"Why do they look like freaky angels?" Miruko asked. "And we have to *rip off* their faces!? That sounds badass!"

"Wait, it says here that... that our quirks and normal attacks might be useless!?" Snipe looked up from his file, "How in the world do you expect us to fight them?"

"Calm down." Morgana leapt from Joker's shoulder and, with an agile flip, turned into his Metaverse Form. He nimbly landed in the middle of the table, "Just because certain quirks and regular attacks won't work, doesn't mean they're invincible or you'll be helpless! These are enemies that Joker and I have fought countless times before. As long as you listen to us there shouldn't be any problems!"

Mona unsheathed his shining jewel-encrusted scimitar and raised it into the air. It gleamed dramatically in the light.

"Normally, you'd need powers like Joker and I have, but we found a work around. You may not have Personas, but you'll have special arms in place of them!"

Everyone stared at him as he continued to pose.

Mona glared at Mr. Compress, "That was your cue!"

"Apologies," Mr. Compress stated as he dug through his pockets once more, "But you looked so adorable like that."

"Now's not the time for messing around!" Mona cried.

Mr. Compress rolled several marbles on the table, and everyone jumped back when he snapped his fingers and trunks full of mythical weapons and armor appeared. Several got to their feet to peer into them.

Power Loader whipped around to Nezu, “*That’s* why you needed all that extra storage space in my lab? For all of this... stuff?”

“Indeed!” Nezu stated.

“They look fancy,” Midnight’s eyes widened when she spotted the Dainaraka Whip, “But what makes these weapons any different than our support gear?”

“Take that whip and find out, Midnight.” Joker said with a subtle smirk.

She did, and her reaction was instant. Midnight gasped and dropped it, the weapon clattering loudly on the table.

“Midnight, what’s wrong?” Aizawa asked.

“I... It’s...” Midnight’s hands trembled as she picked it up again, glancing up and down the length of the glowing whip with a brow hardened in concentration, “This weapon... it almost feels as if I’m holding something that’s *alive* .”

“A ‘dead weapon’...” Snipe glanced at Joker before he reached into one of the trunks and touched the Megido Blaster. He shivered as he retracted it, “Is that what you meant yesterday, Joker?”

Joker nodded.

Other heroes traded uneasy glances, but took the weapons Mona handed out.

Tsukauchi held Judge of the Dead in one hand, pupils like pinpricks, “Th-this is...”

“Awesome! I feel so much more powerful just holding these things!” Miruko clenched her fists as she wore the Gordios from Cybele, the platinum blades on the knuckles singing as she threw a few practice punches through the air, “Is this how you feel all the time, Joker!?”

Joker smirked, "Pretty much."

"Don't forget about the armor!" Mona said as he held up the first Black Winged Robe, "These are just as important!"

Gang Orca set Mjolnir on the table and accepted it from Mona, frowning deeply, "How will these help? They don't look like effective armor..."

"What happened when you suffered a punch from one of the Nomu in Jakku, Gang Orca?" Nezu asked.

Gang Orca blinked, and looked down to the scarring on his arm, "My arm and shoulder bones nearly shattered to dust. It's any wonder that I didn't lose them in that battle. If Recovery Girl wasn't there..."

Joker's eyes widened in horror, but Nezu continued.

"And what happened to Spinner when he was punched by that very same Nomu?"

Spinner flinched as he became the center of attention, "I got a few bruises and cracked scales, but that's it!" He thumped his chest with a fist, "That's because Joker gave me some pretty sweet armor ages ago!"

"These robes are slightly weaker than what Spinner and the others have," Mona said, "But they'll still provide a good amount of protection regardless. You shouldn't be hampered by wearing them under your hero costumes either."

"The armor does fit rather nicely, no matter your body shape." Gentle Criminal said with a nod, "They've saved our hides several times in the past."

"Especially during the Summer Camp!" Spinner added.

"Merp!" Lady Stubbs trumpeted from Spinner's shoulder.

“I want everyone to put them on and replace your current weapons with the ones Mona gave you,” Joker said, “Then meet us outside.”

“... Why?” Vlad King asked, although he seemed to regret it.

“There’s one more thing we need to hammer out. Specifically, accessories and other items I’ve made.” Joker unlatched the Crystal Skull hanging from his belt and held it up. It struck a deep, frigid chill into any who looked into its hollow eyes, “They’re a completely different ball game. You’ll see why when we do the demonstration outside.”

“Is this why we’re in Ground Beta, rather than in the school proper? For *training* ?” Cementoss asked.

Joker nodded once more.

Nezu waved the heroes off, “We’ll be waiting in the front of the building! There are designated changing rooms just down the hall, enough for each one of you. Don’t take too long!”

Joker, Mona, Nezu, and the other vigilantes left the other adults drowning in questions. Thankfully, they adjusted their new equipment within a few minutes and filed outside to ogle at Satanael hovering ominously over the road. Mr. Compress had set down the last trunk by Joker’s feet.

“You were right.” Ryukyu said as she stared down the front of her costume, “You can’t even tell that there’s another robe underneath.”

“Right!?” Miruko hopped between her feet, “I didn’t think anything like this was possible!”

“I don’t even *feel* the weight at all.” Hawks muttered.

“It shouldn’t be impossible.” Best Jeanist said as he ran his fingers down his sleeve, almost reverently, “Something like this could be groundbreaking.”

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves.” Aizawa gravely warned.

Joker idly wondered if this is how the teachers felt when facing their students. He thought of Kawakami as the role reversal settled oddly in Joker’s chest, looking at Gentle Criminal and the closeness of the Temperance Arcana, but he pushed it down as he plucked a white ribbon out of the accessory trunk. Alice smirked within the mindscape as he glanced over the teachers, who stared back in trepidation.

“Midnight, would you step forward?” Joker asked.

She bravely went to his side. Nezu and the other vigilantes stood aside, just leaving her, Joker, and Satanael in the street.

He held out the long white ribbon waving beautifully in the breeze.

She swallowed as she took it, another round of shivers coursing through her body at its dark power.

“... What is this?” Midnight said as she clenched the ribbon, “I feel.... there’s some sort of energy in this...”

“It’s magic.” Joker smiled when she gaped at him, and he waved his arm towards Satanael, “I want you to use the magic in that ribbon to attack Satanael.”

“What!? But I-” She frantically shook her head and held out the ribbon to him, “I can’t hurt him!”

“You don’t need to worry, Miss Midnight.” Satanael’s voice carried down the whole street, “I am immune to the magic in that ribbon. You will not hurt me. This is solely for your benefit.”

She pursed her lips and studied Joker, who gave her an encouraging nod, “Okay.” She gently wrapped the ribbon around her hand, “How do I use it?”

“Magic is instinctual for Joker and I by now.” Mona said as he crossed his arms.

“It’s rather simple.” Mr. Compress took the diamond lily out of his coat pocket and held it up, frost accumulating around him, “Feel that energy within you, Midnight, and channel it as if you were about to activate your quirk.”

He brushed his fingers against the closest surface, small spears of ice encasing the side of the building.

“Indeed,” Gentle Criminal smiled encouragingly as the heroes openly gaped at the sparkling ice, “That’s also how I envisioned using the magic, too.”

“It’s a bit different for me, having a mutant quirk,” Spinner said as he tapped his new Brave Belt at his waist, “But having a physical power over a magical one works a lot better for me.”

“My quirk...” Midnight focused on the ribbon as she held it up, then looked at Satanael.

A black, scraggly tree and several ancient graves rose up around Satanael. Heroes gasped as a blood red moon hovered over the Persona, and without a moment more a giant scythe rose out of the ground and swung its blade across Satanael’s body.

If he were a normal human, that scythe would have split him cleanly in half.

The terrifying scenery faded as if it were never there. The heroes were dead silent, and Midnight stood frozen, bone white as she gaped at Satanael. The Persona tilted his head with a smirk, completely unharmed.

“Each Shadow could have any number of strengths and weaknesses to them; Physical and gun attacks from your new gear, along with fire, ice, electricity, wind, nuclear, psy, bless, and curse. Striking a

Shadow's weakness is the key to winning." Joker announced when six more Personas appeared in writhing twisters of blue flame. He tempered his soul so as not to tremble under the weight of holding seven Personas, "Your goal for today is to practice with these new abilities. Any questions?"

Present Mic stared at Nezu, "Are you sure you shouldn't give Joker his own class? He's a great teacher!"

Aizawa punched Mic in the ribs, the man wheezed as he rubbed the spot.

"Where did you get all of this?" Thirteen raised their hand like a dutiful student, "It's not like anything we've ever heard of before, near *sentient* equipment that gives out Quirks..."

"Not Quirks. Magic. Every piece is made from the bodies of my Personas. In essence, each weapon, armor, or accessory you hold was a piece of my soul, once. It's why these arms 'feel alive', and are the only way for you to fight Shadows without a Persona."

A wave of alarm pervaded Ground Beta.

"I have one question." Nighteye was the first to regain his wits, "You say that you and Mona have some history and even *battle experience* from these... Shadows. What is your relation to them, and why won't you give us the full explanation right now?"

Joker sighed, "All of you need to witness what the Shadows are and where they come from first."

Nighteye was about to protest, but Joker cut him off.

"I promise that after the Cultural Festival, I'll tell you *everything*. " Joker's eyes hardened as golden fire flooded them, his Personas rallying in support with snarls and growls, a flood of power soaking Ground Beta. He stared at Tsukauchi, the detective matching his gaze, "Where Mona and I came from, our past and why we appeared

at the USJ, what these Shadows are and who they work for. No detail will be spared, but it's imperative that you face these Shadows yourself before you can comprehend the full truth of our situation."

"Once again, he's telling the truth." Tsukauchi said gravely, "He hasn't lied once."

"Okay." Ectoplasm stepped up, but there was already a knowing gleam in his ghostly white eyes. It's likely that the name 'The God Of Control, Yaldabaoth' never left his mind since Joker's talk with Bakugo, "I'll follow your lead, Joker. I promised I'd help you out whenever I am able. I will not back down now."

"Me too!" Present Mic threw up his hands, "Let's get this show on the road, Listeners!"

Joker would be lying if he said he didn't feel some relief as the other heroes came around. No other questions were asked.

"Before you continue," Nezu piped up, "There aren't enough Personas for everyone to practice at once! Wouldn't you like to show off your assistants, Joker?"

"I'll help too!" Mona cried as he summoned Mercurius at his side.

"Very well." Joker smirked, ironically sending another shiver down the heroes' spines, "Since you asked..."

He figured he'd blown their minds so much within the past hour to where the appearance of the Velvet Room Door and the Attendants made them gape, unable to form words as the last frayed strings of their sanity were being mercilessly pulled. A few of them like Aizawa, Nighteye, and Joker's squad were already familiar of course, but Joker could hear the others' internal screaming from here. Present Mic jabbed a finger at Lavenza, a screeching whine locked in his throat as he and the remaining staff recognized her.

Joker sharply clapped his hands to snap them out of it, “Once you get your accessory and bundle of practice items, I’ll assign you to either one of the Personas, Mona, or an Attendant. We’ll be here for the rest of the day and most of tomorrow, so I don’t want to see anybody slacking off! If you have any questions about using your new gear or items, then please ask me or any of my teammates for help.”

“Oh my *god* it’s really like being in school all over again...” Miruko said with dread.

Hawks’ wings shuddered, “So this is what a real heroics class feels like? Damn...”

“Joker is going to make a *terrifying* TA.” Vlad King muttered.

“I can’t wait to scare my students.” Aizawa stated as a cheshire grin crept across his face.

“Aizawa!” Present Mic cried, “Don’t scar the poor kids for life!!”

Joker smiled in such a devilish way that it would put even Nezu’s deviousness to shame, “Let’s get started.”

Nezu’s toothy grin stretched from ear to ear as the adults were put under Joker’s strict tutelage.

~*~ **The Night Before The Festival** ~*~

Ren spotted a familiar arrangement of seven sparkling diamonds overhead.

The school was far enough away to escape a majority of the light pollution in Musutafu, so it was a small blessing to see them from the roof of the teacher’s dorm.

The past two days had been such a weird experience, between training grown adults how to use Persona gear and finalizing the security details with them, to putting down the very last touches to his own Festival routines. His original phone had been repaired and waited in the Velvet Room.

Everything was in place.

Everyone was armed and ready to take on Shadows.

And yet, he couldn't help his roiling stomach. Their first step to finally finding a way home was hours away, and his mind drifted to all of the worst possible scenarios: Heroes getting slaughtered, Shadows not appearing and making him look like an insane liar, Shadows escaping the USJ to attack the Festival grounds, Yaldabaoth himself tearing open the rift and consuming this world.

... Him being powerless to stop it again.

Morgana was beside him in a comfortable silence. They sat in gentle solitude for a while, just absorbing the other's companionship. At least, until they heard footsteps.

Ren looked over his shoulder, "Oh, Yagi-san."

The man smiled sheepishly, "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"Not at all." Ren gestured next to him.

Yagi took the offered spot, staring up at the stars. "I've always lived in big cities, so I've never seen many stars."

Ren chuckled, "You should really get out in the country. Especially up in the mountains, the stars are really beautiful there."

"I didn't know you enjoyed the stars so much."

Ren idly pet Morgana, "They were a source of comfort back home."

“Ah...” Yagi frowned, “Your home-”

Ren’s hand stilled over Morgana, the not-cat also tensing-

Yagi looked Ren in the eye, his cerulean gaze sharp, “It’s very far away, isn’t it?”

“... Something like that.”

“I’ll be honest, young Amamiya, I didn’t know what to think when All For One said you weren’t of this world.” Yagi stared up at the stars, “Nezu figured it out right away, of course. But evidence stating otherwise keeps piling up. Your and Mona’s unique powers, the Red Rain, some sort of tear in reality at the USJ, enemies that can’t be touched by quirks or normal support gear. You yourself turned pieces of your very soul into equipment for others to use.”

Morgana’s fur bristled while Ren and his Personas hung off of Yagi’s words.

“Is your home in trouble?” The man asked quietly, “Is that why these Shadows are such a threat?”

Ren opened and closed his mouth, but the words died in his throat.

“Yes.” Morgana answered with a sudden swell of bravado, “The leader of the Shadows rules over our home. He... he separated us from our friends and trapped us here. We don’t know if anyone we love is even still alive, either under the Holy Grail’s tyranny or in the other places our friends are trapped.”

Horror laced Yagi’s expression.

Ren expected the worst. He waited for Yagi to turn on them or call them insane, maybe summon the other teachers to lock them up in an insane asylum far from U.A.

But then Yagi did something unexpected. He pulled his legs from the side of the building, faced Ren and Morgana as he sat on his knees,

and bowed deeply in the dogeza position.

Ren inhaled sharply, “Yagi-san, what are you doing?”

“Please accept my deepest apologies and my greatest thanks.” Yagi stated fervently.

Ren’s hands hovered over the man’s shoulders, “You really don’t need to do this...”

“Yes, I do. Please, let me continue.”

Ren was struck speechless, as was Morgana.

“You ended a centuries long feud with my arch nemesis, healed me to where I could enjoy life again, protected my students and civilians from all sorts of villains... and you’ve done so while not only suffering greatly in silence, but while also being at the mercy of constant hero and police onslaught. Myself included.”

Yagi bowed deeper, his forehead digging into the gravel.

“Whatever we need to do to make things right, whatever I need to do to help you defeat your nemesis and find your friends and home again... I’ll gladly do it. It’s the very least I could do to repay you both for how much you’ve given *my* home and those I love.”

Silence became their fourth companion.

Ren and Morgana absorbed the man’s honest words. The *Judgement Arcana* expunged the fear and doubt he held just minutes ago. Strength and new power born from Yagi’s oath empowered Ren as the *Judgement’s* light radiated within his soul like a burning sun.

“Please lift your head.” Ren said, willing his voice not to tremble.

Yagi did so, staring at Ren and Morgana in anticipation.

“I... I don’t know what to say.” Ren rubbed the back of his neck, “It means the world that you believe in us in the first place. Thank you.”

Morgana nodded, eyes brightening, “The more friends we have, the easier this whole ordeal will be.” Morgana bowed his head to Yagi, “I’ll also thank you for believing in us and offering to help.”

“So...?”

Ren held out his hand, “Let’s fight together, Yagi-san. We’ll be counting on you!”

Yagi grinned as he sat up and firmly shook Ren’s hand.

The three of them stayed on the roof for a long while, looking at the stars.

I did a video of Mother Harlot, Cybele, and Odin's builds for DTESH! Its an unlisted video as to not spoil other people watching earlier videos, so I'll share it here as well as update chapter 9 of the Thieves Den!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsA4DpjnZrw&ab_channel=BukuBuku

Also, the Adjustment arcana for Best Jeanist is the Thoth version of Justice.

Voracious Waltz

Chapter 90: Voracious Waltz

“N-no, it’s not that! But I... It’s just...”

“You can tell me.” Ren urged gently.

Midoriya’s grip tightened on the plastic bag holding the rope, “I... know.”

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Plates and mugs clinked in the otherwise silent kitchen. Although *heavenly* aromas attracted early risers, those who came for breakfast felt their blood freeze with horror and fascination.

Their chef this morning was Ren’s newest Persona - The darkest void giving shape to a half man, half writhing mass of tentacles tipped with neon blue claws. Their hypnotic dance pulled seductively at the mind and made it hard to tear their eyes away. The Unspeakable One floated around as if the concept of gravity didn’t apply to him like the rest of these mere mortals.

“Thanks, Hastur.” Ren smiled as a black tendril slid the first plate of steaming omurice to him.

‘My pleasure, Trickster.’

Hastur didn’t have a mouth to speak in the traditional sense, so Hastur’s voice crawled within the dark spaces of their minds, the ineffable imitation of several voices woven together in shadow. Many of the heroes paled, others clutched their temples at the strangeness of it.

Hawks drummed his fingers on the kitchen island, “You know, when you offered to make us breakfast on our big day, I never expected-”

A plate of crispy waffles topped with fried chicken and maple syrup was set gingerly under his nose.

The hero swallowed as the delectable scents hit him, “... This.”

Hastur swept up several plates per tentacle next and floated away to deliver them, looking more like the heart of a black hole slicing through space and time.

“I’m surprised you have a new one, considering the timing.” Ryukyu grimaced when Hastur placed her plate and a cup of coffee in front of her. She stared into them as if they contained some unspeakable monstrosity within.

“Wouldn’t you have to redo your Festival Routine?” Best Jeanist asked when his breakfast was set down next.

‘We art thou, thou art us.’ Hastur’s voice slithered around their gray matter, *‘I already know everything, and more besides.’*

“He has his own part in the performance.” Ren nodded, “And he’s easier to see from the stands than Pixie, too.”

“Oh, he certainly attracts attention...” Miruko muttered.

Morgana chuckled from his chair beside Eri, he and Lady Stubbs sharing plates of fatty tuna courtesy of Hawks, “Our Leader did this a lot in the past.”

Spinner shivered, “What, make new Personas in a pinch?”

“Pretty much.”

“Once I got a whole new stock right before we fought a powerful Shadow ruling over a casino.” Ren shook his head as the room

became tense, “Let’s just say Ishtar and the others really saved our bacon during that fight.”

Tsukauchi sat in silence, lips pursed so hard they turned white.

“Right...” Hawks murmured.

Present Mic walked into the room, yawning. He froze mid-yawn, took one bug-eyed look at Hastur and turned right around. Other teachers filed in after, equally unsettled as Ren urged them to take a seat.

Hastur finished the next plate by then; several apple carvings of lotus flowers so beautiful they were a masterwork of art. Panic creased the heroes’ faces when the Great Old One hovered over Eri.

Her eyes sparkled at the plate, her gaze trailing up to Hastur’s wriggling mass, “Thank you, Hastur!”

Hastur patted her head and returned to continue cooking.

“I gotta say...” Spinner said, “Does anyone feel something weird with that one?”

“What, as if he’s not weird enough?” Ryukyu asked.

“No, something... different.”

“What do you mean?” Ren asked.

“I dunno! I just...” Spinner squinted as the Persona worked at several sizzling or boiling pots and pans, “Something about him just draws me in for some reason.”

“Maybe because he’s an Apostle Persona.” Ren suggested.

“Oh?” Spinner sat up in his chair, “Have there been any others?”

“Lavenza said there are only two spots for Apostle in the Compendium. Hastur took one, and Byakhee the other.”

“Is the other one as weird as Hastur?” Hawks asked.

Ren chuckled, “He’s a humanoid demon wasp with bat wings, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Mr. Compress patted Spinner’s shoulder, “Figures your Arcana would get the more... *distinguished* looking ones.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!? Which Personas are the Faith Arcana!?”

“Cu Chulainn is both Faith and Star.” Ren said.

Hawks perked up at that.

“See?” Mr. Compress said with a smirk, “Cu Chulainn is a rather handsome Persona.”

“Why I outta-”

“Boys,” La Brava rolled her eyes, “Stop arguing.”

“It’s not arguing!” Mr. Compress wagged a finger at her, “Just some light teasing to lighten this dreary atmosphere! I mean no harm by it.”

Spinner rolled his eyes and jabbed at his rice with his chopsticks.

Lady Stubbs slurped up her last piece of tuna, turning her giant lamp-like eyes to scathe Mr. Compress. The man gulped and scooted away from her for his own safety. Spinner smirked and scratched her behind her ears.

Ren shook his head and scooped up the first bite of his breakfast. He paused when he didn’t hear any other silverware. He looked around, and most eyes were on him, the gourmet-levels of food untouched by the heroes.

Kaito noticed too, “Is there something wrong with your food?”

“There shouldn’t be.” Ren said as he devoured his first bite. The spices and textures worked wonders for the exquisite flavor.

The heroes exchanged glances, but one by one they tucked in.

Miruko slammed her fist on the table, “Holy shit, these pancakes are next level!! Hey, Bird Brain! I bet mine are better than yours!”

Hawks whirled around to her, crumbs on his lips, “I doubt it. Waffles are, and always will be, *superior* ! Topped with this amazing fried chicken and maple syrup, it can’t be beat!”

Ryukyu face-palmed over her sirloin steak, a strange breakfast choice, but maybe it had to do with her being part dragon, “Not this argument again.”

“Always the same song and dance.” Gang Orca muttered over his platters of fried fish, “Why don’t you two call a truce?”

“No way!” Hawks and Miruko shouted in unison.

Best Jeanist sighed, “Adult heroes who act like children...”

“I think it’s endearing.” Cementoss said as he nursed a cup of coffee, “Such playful spirits are rare in this day and age.”

“We could certainly use more light-hearted heroes.” Ectoplasm agreed.

A few more teachers trickled in, but it was easier to convince them to eat a meal made a Great Old One when their coworkers inhaled their food. A few were still missing, but two in particular had yet to show their faces.

“Has anyone seen Tensei?” Ren asked after he finished eating, “Or Nighteye?”

Hawks shrugged, “Tensei left before anyone else was up. Nighteye went to pick up Mirio.”

Ren frowned. "Ah."

Mirio would escort Kaito and Eri around the Festival, but Tensei suddenly leaving made him confused.

He put his spoon down and his plate was scooped up by one of Hastur's sinuous limbs, "*Something troubles you?*" Hastur's eternal voice asked from the mindscape.

"It's nothing."

"Don't worry Trickster." Ishtar stated. *"I have faith in Tensei."*

"He wouldn't run off on us, especially with the Persona gear."
Satanael said, *"The Upright Fortune is better than that."*

Ren felt a brush on his shoulder, and looked to see Aizawa at his side.

"Come with me."

"Do you want a cup of coffee first?"

Aizawa blinked at Hastur's dark mass, "... I'll wait."

Ren nodded and glanced at Morgana, "Stay with Eri?"

"Sure thing, Leader!" Morgana chirped over his tuna.

Aizawa led him from the common area and into the entry way.

"What's up?"

"One of my students needs to buy something last minute for their concert." Aizawa leveled him with a careful look, "I was wondering if you would go along with them."

Ren frowned. He reached into his pocket for his phone. Nezu had turned his USJ readings into an app so they could keep tabs on its

progress. The current readings were already a bit higher than they were last night.

“The store is only fifteen minutes away.” Aizawa said as he sensed Ren’s hesitance, “You’d both be back before the gates open for the public. Besides, you haven’t left U.A. *once* since you got here about a month ago, some fresh air would do you good before... whatever happens at the USJ.”

“And you already got Nezu’s permission?”

Aizawa nodded, “He encouraged it, actually.”

“Okay.” He said as he put his phone back, “Who’s the student?”

“Midoriya.”

“Oh.”

Aizawa sighed, “There’s another reason I’m asking. Do you think you can work out whatever it is that’s bothering Midoriya? He’s been acting off since the Overhaul Raid, but he hasn’t said a word to me and when I do ask he says he’s fine. It’s okay for you to say no, I’ll figure something else out if that’s the case.”

Ren gave him a reassuring smile, “I’ve been wanting to talk with him for a while.”

“Thank you.” Aizawa nodded. “Here, you’ll need this to let yourself back in the school.”

Ren blinked.

In Aizawa’s hand was Ren’s official U.A. Teacher’s Assistant ID, it had his photo, real name, and alias as Joker. Ren forgot about the ten minutes they spent taking the pictures for these weeks ago. Ren took it in both hands, but something else brushed against his fingers on the back.

He stared in astonishment at the familiar wad of 5,000 yen. Some of the bills were crumpled from being in the clip for so long, but it was obvious they were well cared for.

Ren looked up at Aizawa, shocked, “You *kept* it this entire time?”

Aizawa shrugged, a small smile hidden under his scarf, “I almost didn’t after Kamino, but Tsukauchi convinced me to keep it just in case. Get yourself something while you’re out.”

This time, Ren accepted it with a genuine smile, “... Thanks, Eraser.”

“Don’t mention it. Midoriya should be waiting for you at the school’s back entrance.”

Ren smirked as Aizawa turned towards the kitchen, “Make sure to get some coffee, Eraser. Hastur made plenty for everyone!”

Aizawa grumbled as Ren walked outside, tucking his new ID and the bills safely in his pocket.

It was a crisp morning, the sky a pleasing shade of blue that spoke of fair weather. Students rushed past the dorms to make their final preparations, hardly giving him a second glance as he stood in the teacher’s yard.

“Hmm, if the students are already out and about then why don’t we do the same?” Satanael said, *“It would be good to make our own final checks before civilians pour into the school.”*

“We’ll do it while you’re away, Trickster.” Vasuki whispered, *“To save time.”*

Technically, nobody said he couldn’t...

So he released the Personas.

Kohryu and Gabriel shot off into the sky. Vasuki, Black Frost, and Alice scampered in difference directions, students jumping out of

their path. Cybele followed, kicking off into the air with a burst of wind.

Fafnir appeared next, bowing low as his claws kneaded the grass, “May I go to the Strength?”

Ren nodded, and the dragon bounded off with a flash of silver scales.

Hastur returned to him seconds later, cooking duties done. Still, even with seven Personas active, the strain wasn’t as bad as before. Perhaps training the heroes and deepening the Judgement Arcana strengthened his soul more than he thought.

He held out his arm, and Yatagarasu appeared. The strain increased, but not by much.

“Can you keep watch while Midoriya and I are out?” Ren asked.

“Ah, just like old times.” Yatagarasu shuffled his feathers, “Leave it to me!”

Yatagarasu launched into the sky, the forever faithful shadow at Ren’s back. Ren took another deep breath as eight parts of his soul wandered around the school, settling like the foundations of a new log cabin. Yeah, he could handle it.

It took him a few minutes to reach the school’s back gate, and waiting for him was Midoriya.

He looked up when Ren approached, stiffening.

“Hey.” Ren said, wearing his best smile, “Aizawa said you needed to get something for your class?”

“Y-yes! Just some rope, the last one snapped while we were practicing...” They stared at one another as silence stretched between them.

Ren smirked, “I don’t know where this store is, so you’ll have to lead the way.”

“Oh, r-right!”

Midoriya walked out of the school’s gate first. Ren followed, but stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. A persistent fog cleared from his mind and the constant ringing in his soul went silent. He had gotten so used to it that the sudden lack of it almost made him dizzy.

“Are you okay, Amamiya?”

Ren winced, “Yeah. It just feels weird to be out of U.A. now.”

Midoriya reciprocated a shaky smile, and they continued in silence. Thankfully, the streets were empty, but that worsened the quiet atmosphere between them. Midoriya kept watching Ren from the corner of his eye. Ren thought this would be like the talk with Bakugo, so he allowed Midoriya to gather his thoughts to be the one to breach the unnatural awkwardness. But as the minutes strolled by and the store came into view, neither of them spoke a word.

They went inside and were out within minutes with the bundle of rope. It looked as if there would be nothing but more silence on the whole journey back, so Ren made the decision.

Ren stopped on the sidewalk, “Midoriya.”

Midoriya flinched, “Y-yes?”

“You haven’t spoken since we left the school and you won’t even look at me. What’s wrong?” Ren said, not unkindly as Midoriya paled, “Was it what happened at the Overhaul Raid?”

“N-no, it’s not that! But I... It’s just...”

“You can tell me.” Ren urged gently.

Midoriya's grip tightened on the plastic bag holding the rope, "I... know."

"Know what?"

"That you... you're..." Midoriya's bright green eyes stared into Ren's soul, "That you're actually Quirkless. That... that you don't even *have* a Quirk Factor."

Ren's eyes widened, "Where did you hear that?"

"I-I... overheard it by accident."

"I see." Ren crossed his arms, "What do you intend to do with this information?"

"Nothing! I wasn't going to tell anybody, I swear!" He threw up his arms, but they fell to his sides in dismay. "But... I just want to know *how* . How do you have such awesome powers when you don't even have a Quirk Factor?"

Judging by the way Midoriya's fists shook, it'd been eating at him for a while. It's not as though Ren could spill everything freely, however... something about Midoriya himself had been bothering Ren for some time.

"How about an exchange?" Ren said after a solid minute of silence.

"What?"

The gold in Ren's eyes glimmered like liquid drops of sunlight. "I think it's only fair, trading one secret for another." He activated Third Eye, the rainbow of colors surged around Midoriya and the Chariot card over his head, "You want my secret, but in exchange you'll tell me why you have the fragments of eight other souls attached to yours."

Midoriya gasped. The colors around Midoriya's soul undulated and took the vague shape of several people, their eyes staring wide in

shock. The golden one looked so familiar.

Satanael's presence flooded Ren's soul, the other Personas back at U.A. wincing. The other souls stood firm in the wake of Satanael's power, none bowing to the other until both nodded in equal respect.

"You..." Midoriya gaped as he seemed to feel the change in the souls, "You can see them?"

"Yes, when you did the final attack on Overhaul, but I can tell they've been with you a lot longer than that. They're too intertwined with you to be a fresh connection." Ren looked around as Third Eye faded. There was a quaint little tea shop next to the store, but there might be people there. Instead, he turned towards an empty construction site across the street, "Let's go somewhere private."

He walked across the barren street.

Midoriya scrambled after him when the shock wore off.

Ren ignored the No Trespassers!' sign and slipped into an opening in the wall surrounding the site. Metal beams and pillars rose high above them in the bare skeleton of a building, with construction equipment littered here and there.

Midoriya slipped in, but startled when Joker donned his costume. "What are you doing?"

Joker looked over his shoulder with a cheeky grin, "We'll have the best privacy on that platform up there. It shouldn't be hard for us to get to. Nobody ever looks up anyway."

"But I can't use my Quirk outside the school!"

"You have your Provisional Licence, don't you?" Joker shot his grapple towards the beams, "Where's your sense of adventure, Midoriya?"

Joker shot through the air, he could barely hear Midoriya sputter as he landed on the first beam with the natural grace of an acrobat. His coat tails fluttered with the wind, and stared down as Midoriya gaped at him from the ground.

“Are you coming or what?” Joker puffed out his chest and placed his fists on his hips in a hero’s pose, “Don’t tell me a hero-in-training is afraid of heights!?”

It did the trick, as seconds later green sparks danced around Midoriya’s body and he jumped up along the beams. Joker grinned as he continued his climb, eventually landing on the platform halfway up the unfinished building.

The cityscape stretched all around them, with U.A. being the closest landmark by miles. Strange, how the school looked so normal from the outside, the dark truth hidden from the public by its shining splendor. The breeze was slightly stronger up here, but it wouldn’t really pose a danger. Midoriya landed next to Joker, not even winded by the climb.

Ren let his costume disappear and sat at the edge of the platform, his legs dangling over the edge.

After a moment of shuffling on his feet, Midoriya sat next to him. He was a good foot or so away, and his nerves radiated off of him. Even without Third Eye, Ren could feel the curiosity of the other souls within Midoriya.

Ren leaned back on his hands and enjoyed the wind on his face. “So, should we flip a coin to see whose secret spills first?”

“I will.” Midoriya hunched in on himself, “Since I wasn’t supposed to hear about you not having a Quirk Factor in the first place.”

“Go ahead.”

Midoriya took a breath, “You might not believe me though.”

Ren tilted his head and tried not to let his amusement show, “Try me. My story might be the more unbelievable one.”

Midoriya pursed his lips, “Do you remember when I first gave you my number and said that I understood what you’ve been through? With being Quirkless, that is.”

Ren thought back. It must’ve been his first day working at the Blue Lotus. That felt like a lifetime ago. Ren nodded.

Midoriya smiled sadly, “This Quirk I have isn’t mine.”

“What do you mean?”

Midoriya took a deep breath, as if braving deeper waters he wasn’t quite prepared for, “It’s called One For All, and it’s been passed down like a sacred torch from one person to the next. I’ve only seen the Vestiges... er, the ‘souls’ as you called them, once.”

“Ah, so they’re connected to you through the Quirk.” Ren said thoughtfully, “Is one of them All Might?”

“How did you know?”

“The gold Vestige looks way too similar to be a coincidence.”

Midoriya chuckled, “He’s the one who gave it to me before I took the exam to get into U.A.!”

“He gave you a new power *right* before your exam?”

“Yeah...” Midoriya rubbed the back of his neck, “We spent 10 months cleaning mountains of trash from Dogabah Beach as training, and the morning of the exam-” Midoriya’s face shifted into a scarily accurate depiction of All Might’s iconic smile, “He was like ‘Eat this!’ and gave me one of his hairs to transfer the Quirk. I didn’t use it until the last minute of the exam, breaking both legs and my arm to save Uraraka from the Zero Pointer.”

Ren stared at him in disbelief. "During Overhaul's battle before Mona healed you... is *that* what this power does to you on a regular basis?"

"It did, but not anymore!" Midoriya waved his hands, "I've gotten to the point where I can safely control 20% without hurting myself!"

"What percentage did you use on Overhaul?"

Midoriya cleared his throat, "Uh... 100%? Well, technically more than that since your abilities boosted it even more." Midoriya turned red as Ren continued to gape at him, "It's fine, really! I've gotten a good handle on it by now, so you don't need to worry about it."

Ren released a long sigh and decided to move to the next point, "Quirks getting passed down this way aren't common, are they?"

"Quirks are supposed to be genetic." Midoriya shook his head, "This one has to be given to the next person willingly, and through DNA. Hence why I had to eat one of All Might's hairs."

Ren wrinkled his nose.

Midoriya rubbed his throat, "The past users have all kept it secret. I've never heard of any other Quirk getting passed down like this, well... except maybe through All For One."

Ren grimaced, "One For All and All For One. The names are too coincidental to be an accident, and I know All Might and All For One had some sort of vendetta. It's because of this Quirk, isn't it?"

"Y-yeah. This Quirk was born because All For One forced a Quirk onto his younger brother, who in turn wanted to stop All For One's tyranny and ended up passing it down. Each user tried to fight All For One, but they were never successful until All Might injured him."

"All For One was old... no wonder why the Quirk had to be passed down through so many people. And you're the ninth user?"

Midoriya nodded, and glanced at him with guilt weighing heavy on his shoulders, "I... I was supposed to be the one who... you know. I'm sorry that got forced on you."

"It's okay." Ren gave Midoriya an apologetic look when the other boy winced, "All Might apologized and took responsibility for what happened. I... It took a considerable amount of time and encouragement from my friends, but I've learned to forgive myself for what happened at Kamino. You shouldn't blame yourself, either."

Midoriya grimly nodded.

"Does anyone else know about your Quirk?"

"The only person aside from All Might is Kacchan."

"Kacchan?"

"Bakugo."

"You haven't even told Aizawa? Any of the other teachers?"

"No..."

"That's both detrimental to your health and limits how your teachers could help you properly, more so since you were breaking yourself trying to use it."

Midoriya gave him a shaky smile, "But I don't break my bones anymore? Mostly?"

Ren deadpanned, "Can I offer some advice?"

"Sure?"

"Tell the people you trust about your Quirk. You could learn a lot from them and improve with it rather than going at it alone." Ren tentatively reached out for Midoriya's shoulder, the other boy smiling softly, "Believe me, I speak from experience."

“Okay.” Midoriya bit his lip, his eyes turning thoughtful, “I’ll talk to All Might about it.”

Ren raised a brow, “You didn’t ask his permission to tell me. It’s *your* Quirk now, isn’t it?”

“I... You have a point.” Midoriya smiled sheepishly. “I’ll think about what you said, Amamiya.”

It wasn’t his power, so Ren wouldn’t push it any further. A short silence lingered as they looked out into the city. Ren knew it was his turn and Midoriya was patiently waiting to hear it.

“Arsene came to me when someone, who would eventually become one of my best friends, was about to be killed before my eyes.” Ren stared into the distance as Midoriya inhaled sharply, “We made a vow and I ripped off the mask over my heart to summon Arsene and save him.”

“A vow?”

“‘I am thou, thou art I.’”

Midoriya’s eyes lit up, “Where do Personas come from then, if not a Quirk Factor?”

“From the Sea Of Souls.”

“Sea of Souls?” Midoriya put the plastic bag with the rope aside and... whipped out a notebook and pen from somewhere. Ren gaped as Midoriya opened it and flipped through several pages of neat scrawling, “You said something like that back at the live interview before Hosu.”

“You remember that?”

“Yeah! Ever since I learned about you not having a Quirk Factor, I’ve been going over any footage and audio about you I could find! I-” Midoriya froze, “That doesn’t sound creepy, does it?”

Ren snorted, “You were only trying to find answers, I’d have done the same. Can I see your notebook?”

Midoriya handed it over.

Pages of theories and well-thought out paragraphs filled the notebook, complete with Persona names and their list of possible strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, down to scary accuracy. Ren froze at one particular page with his ‘Quirk’ name at the top, although the word Quirk had been crossed out.

“Wildcard, huh?” He smiled as he handed the notebook back, “You’re not too far off the mark. ‘Wildcards’ can hold multiple Personas, whereas most people can only hold one. Mona can only use Mercurius.”

Midoriya wrote that down, then closed the notebook and hugged it to his chest, “So... has the Sea Of Souls always been here? Could I... could I have awakened a Persona? Like you, I... there was a slime villain a while ago. He held Kacchan hostage and the heroes were just standing around watching, and Kacchan would’ve suffocated if nobody did anything! So I rushed forward to help...” Midoriya’s face hardened, “If Arsene came to you the way he did, then why don’t Personas come to people like me? Does it have to do with you lacking a Quirk Factor?”

“The Sea of Souls is as it sounds, a sea filled with human souls linked directly to the collective unconscious. It’s why Personas appear as gods and other beings from human mythologies and stories. But, as for you awakening to a Persona...” Ren’s stomach sank, “No, you wouldn’t have. Nobody in this entire world would be able to, if certain powers didn’t meddle where they weren’t supposed to...”

Midoriya looked at him strangely, “Why? What aren’t you telling me? There’s some greater secret than just your lack of a Quirk Factor, isn’t there?”

Ren stared at him in surprise. Midoriya's calculating gaze would tear apart any holes in Ren's story, so what else was there but to tell the truth?

"These powers, the Sea of Souls, Personas, my bond with people through the Arcanas... they're not natural to this world." Like Midoriya, Ren steeled himself to take a plunge he wasn't fully prepared for, "Mona and I were *never* supposed to be here, Midoriya."

The city faded away as Midoriya's eyes widened. The gears turned behind Midoriya's eyes as he digested the information at a speed Futaba would be impressed with.

"You weren't supposed to be here..." Midoriya started off slow, "How you dropped so suddenly into the USJ as if from *nowhere*, how nobody has ever heard of or seen you before. Your completely unique powers that pretty much break our reality. Oh, and Mona having the same sort of power... that never made much sense to me considering Quirks are supposed to be genetic... and I figure it would be extremely difficult to get animals with such a powerful Quirk like that anyway."

Ren opened his mouth, but Midoriya continued.

"Oh, but I suppose Mona doesn't have a Quirk Factor either." Midoriya cocked his head to the side as he strung more clues together, "Saying you were Quirkless that day at the Blue Lotus was so convincing because you've never had a Quirk Factor to begin with... but the only explanation I could think of is that you came from *before* Quirk Factors even changed the human brain... which would mean-" He lost all color in his face, and Ren feared the boy might get sick, "Time travel?"

Ren slowly nodded, "That's a step in the right direction. The year was 2016 when Mona and I were thrown into Kurogiri's portal."

"2016!?" Midoriya exclaimed, "B-but that's over 200 years ago!"

“202 years to be exact. You can imagine how Mona and I reacted when we found out.”

“But... b-but how?” Midoriya ran a hand through his hair, gripping the back of his neck, “Th-that’s shouldn’t even be possible, considering Quirks didn’t appear until much later!”

“I don’t know. My friends and I were fighting our last battle when a bunch of portals appeared and we were... banished, for the lack of a better term. And yes, I mean portals *plural*. My other teammates were sent through three others in pairs.” Ren swallowed as he felt his throat tighten, “I can only imagine what other kinds of worlds they’re trapped in, like Mona and I are here.”

They stared at each other, the rest of the world completely fading out of their awareness.

“‘Worlds.’ You said time travel was a *step* in the right direction, but not the correct answer. Does that mean that you’re from a *different* world altogether?”

“Not completely different. I’m still from Japan, *my* version of Japan.” Ren smiled sadly as Midoriya gaped like a fish, “I hesitated for *one* second during our last battle in Shibuya, but it was enough for our adversary to gain the upper hand. I don’t even know how he got a power like that in the first place.”

“Then... there must be some presence at the USJ where you came in, is that the cause of the Red Rain? When it happened, I noticed that the center of it was towards the facility.”

Ren smirked, “You’re a smart cookie, Midoriya. The USJ is the center of the storm, but its been leeching outwards because the worlds are all slowly bleeding together and changing the rules of these realities. For example, I may not have a Quirk Factor, but Aizawa’s Quirk still works on me because my world has something to suppress Personas... with nasty side affects.”

Midoriya flinched, “After the Musutafu Raid when you said you were really sick, was that because of Aizawa-sensei’s Quirk?”

“Yeah. It basically cripples me.” Ren nodded, “I know he still feels terrible about it.”

Midoriya let out a shaky breath, “I-I... this is...”

“I told you my story would be the more unbelievable one.”

Midoriya swallowed, “But it... it makes sense.”

Ren’s eyes widened, “It *does* ?”

“There have been multiverse theories for centuries, although there’s never been concrete proof, but if I line up all of the evidence-”

“Midoriya-”

“It would make sense because you’ve lived in a world without Quirks. You’ve even said the word ‘magic’ during that interview instead of Quirk too, and now with new information on the Sea Of Souls and Personas, a-and those portals, I-” He paused as he stared Ren in the eye, “A world without Quirks...”

Ren swallowed thickly, “I’m surprised you’re not calling me a liar.”

“Well, there was always something mysterious about you.” Midoriya studied Ren carefully as he hugged the notebook tighter to his chest, “You always seemed so sad and distant, even if you tried to hide it. And at the USJ I could tell you were lost and confused. This world isn’t... isn’t your real home, and you’ve been torn away from your real friends and family. Now I finally understand *why* you did everything the way you did.”

Ren’s heart twisted as Midoriya stared at him with such a longing expression, “What was it like? Living in a Quirkless world, I mean.”

“Normal, I guess?” Ren waved towards the city, suddenly remembering its existence, “Nobody had any Quirks, and anything related to superheroes or villains stayed in comic books or TV shows.”

Midoriya looked up into the sky, narrowing his eyes as if he tried to pierce past the blue veil and into the void beyond, “You know, if our technology didn’t stagnate so much because of the appearance of Quirks, we’d be taking interstellar holidays by now.” Midoriya turned back to Ren, “What about Personas, then? Did everyone have them?”

“No. They were mostly kept secret.” Ren frowned, “But I’m told there were Persona users before me that saved the world in silence, and others who used theirs for their own selfish reasons.”

“... And you? You said you were fighting something before you were ‘banished’ here.”

Ren rubbed the back of his neck, “The Red Rain.”

“What about it?”

“That’s what the skies over my home look like right now.” Ren said, “A thing pretending to be a god took over our reality and distorted it like that, you only got a small taste of its power.”

“That’s... that’s terrifying. And it’s the reason you surrendered to U.A.?” Midoriya’s expression softened, “Because you’re trying to find a way home and save it, right?”

“Pretty much. If things stay as they are now, then he’ll take over this world, and all the others my friends are stuck in, too. Maybe more beyond.” Ren stood up and looked towards U.A., a breeze kicked up and ruffled his hair and clothes, “I can’t allow that to happen.”

“If that’s the case, when you defeat this god...” Midoriya stood up with him, notebook tucked under one arm while the other held the

bag, "We'll have to say goodbye, won't we?"

Ren smiled sadly, "Most likely, the boundaries between the worlds need to heal for things to return to normal."

Midoriya's eyes flooded with tears, but he quickly rubbed them away with his sleeve before Ren could reach out to him. Midoriya sniffled and squared his shoulders, and although his eyes were still watery, he held Ren's gaze with powerful conviction.

"You and Mona aren't doing this alone, are you?"

"No. A few people know the truth." Ren stated, "However, something's going to happen at the USJ today when I do the finale. People will be safe in my stadium while it goes down, but afterwards I'm going to tell the other heroes everything. I hope they'll believe my story in the first place."

Midoriya took a step forward, his whole being blazing with fierce tenacity, "I-I'll have your back if they don't!"

Ren's blinked rapidly, mouth dropping.

"If they don't believe you then I'll stick up for you! If they won't fight alongside you, then I will!" Midoriya placed his fist over his heart, the bag in his grasp crinkling, "S-so many events would've happened way differently if it wasn't for you. At the USJ you healed Aizawa-sensei, at Hosu you helped us fight Stain, how you stuck up for the Quirkless people in Sapporo, the Summer Camp, Kamino, what happened with Eri... It's the least I could do for everything you've done for us!"

Ren wetly chuckled, his heart warmed by Midoriya's earnestness, "Are you related to All Might or something?"

"Wha-" A whine screeched out of Midoriya's throat as he turned beet red, "Wh-wh-where did that come from!?"

“He made the same promise last night.” Ren grinned as he ruffled Midoriya’s hair, “If things go to plan, then the teachers *should* believe me. Tsukauchi will be there to confirm everything.”

“Oh...” Midoriya deflated.

“We have the Festival covered, but I won’t hesitate to ask for your help after. We might need all the extra hands we can get.”

Midoriya broke out into a bright smile and nodded.

Ren let his hand drop. Only a moment passed before a familiar presence prickled his mind, jitterbugging in pride.

“Can I have a moment with my green child, too? I’ve been waiting so long!”

Midoriya noticed Ren’s expression, “What’s wrong?”

Ren laughed, “Cerberus wants to have a few words with you.”

“He... he does?”

Ren allowed Yatagarasu to return to him, and in his place Cerberus rose up from the blue ashes.

Midoriya gasped as the great hound sat in front of him, wagging his metal tail, “I want to say that I’m very proud of my green child for believing in the Trickster! We could not have had a better Chariot to help drive him forward towards his goals.” Cerberus bowed his head to Midoriya, “Thank you so much!”

“The Chariot, huh?” Midoriya slowly reached out to pet Cerberus, fingers scratched behind the hound’s ears as his smile grew, “I have a lot to thank you for, too. You saved me from the USJ Nomu and helped out during the Summer Camp.”

Cerberus’ eyes sparkled, “Trickster! The Chariot is thanking me!”

Ren laughed at the surge of joy in Cerberus, “I don’t know if you remember, Midoriya, but there was one time at the beach when you saw me around a bunch of displace sand?”

“Y-yeah.” Midoriya paused in his scratching of Cerberus, “I... I thought someone had bullied you because you were covered head to toe in it.”

Ren patted Cerberus’ side, “I was actually playing fetch with Cerberus. He’s the one who covered me in sand, and he had to *dig* me out once.”

Midoriya gave Cerberus a bug-eyed look, “I never thought I’d hear about how you were *playing fetch with the guard dog of hell* .”

Cerberus chuckled, “It was so fun playing with Master!”

Suddenly, the platform groaned under Cerberus’ weight. They all froze at it.

Ren sighed, “We should get back, preferably before we break something.”

Cerberus whined as he put his forehead against Midoriya’s, while Midoriya gave Cerberus one last scratch behind the ears. The guard dog of hell switched seamlessly with Yatagarasu, who took to the sky once more.

Midoriya watched Yatagarasu circle them as Joker donned his costume. Joker rappelled down with his grapple, while Midoriya dropped with the aid of his quirk. They left the construction site behind, but Ren looked at the small tea shop.

He stopped Midoriya, “I’ll be right back.”

Midoriya blinked as Ren went inside. He chose a couple of freshly baked chocolate croissants and a few boxes of tea to take back, and payed the lovely old couple running the place with the 5,000 yen clip.

He met Midoriya outside and handed one of the giant croissants over to him.

“A little pick-me-up is needed, I think.” Ren said. “We talked about some heavy topics up there.”

Midoriya nodded and took the first bite, his eyes lighting up as he chewed. They were halfway back to the school and through their treats, when Midoriya spoke again, crumbs peppering his lips.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.” Ren said over a mouthful of delicious chocolate.

“Why did you start with vigilantism? Why not go to U.A. for help?”

“What do you think would happen if we said we were from another world with absolutely no evidence?” Ren countered.

“O-oh. Right...”

“The first friends we made here didn’t even believe us at first.” Midoriya winced, but Ren continued, “But to answer your first question, we started vigilantism to spread our name around so our friends would be able to reach out if they made it here. It didn’t... pan out the way we planned, and I think it got a little out of hand there for a while. Even so, I don’t regret it.”

Midoriya hummed, staring thoughtfully at his croissant.

“But sometimes I wonder if they wouldn’t have agreed with our plan at all.”

Midoriya blinked at him, “What do you mean?”

“After Kamino, when I—” *When I died*, Ren almost said, “-when I wasn’t well, I had a dream with one of my friends from back home, at the cafe I lived in.” Ren shook his head as the croissant suddenly tasted of ash, “He said I was an idiot to interfere with this world’s

history so much, that I should've let people deal with their own problems because he thought I was abandoning our people back home."

"He's wrong." Midoriya stated without missing a beat.

Ren smirked as he imagined Akechi's reaction. Would it be the awkward laughter from the Detective Prince politely brushing it off, or would Akechi reveal his true colors and glare holes through Midoriya's head? Judging by how Akechi acted in his dream, or *whatever* that encounter was, he figured it would be the latter.

"You really think so?"

"Of course I do!" Midoriya cried, "I've been told the essence of a true hero is meddling when you don't need to! It doesn't matter where people are from, whether in this world or others, if people are suffering then we can't just turn our backs to them. I think... we're alike in that way, Ren."

Ren's eyes widened at the use of his given name.

Midoriya continued, eyes forward in confidence, "All Might chose me for his successor because I tried to save Kacchan despite being powerless. You've saved people like that too, right?"

"Yeah, I have." Ren grinned, "... Thanks, Midoriya."

Midoriya beamed like the ray of sunshine he was.

By that point, they had finished their treats and approached the school's back gate. Midoriya reached into his pocket for his school ID, but Ren stopped him.

"Can I do it?" Ren asked as he got out his own official Teacher's Assistant ID, "It'd be the first time I've ever done this."

Midoriya laughed and let Ren scan them in. They walked through the gate with bright smiles, but Ren tensed when the foul air hit him like

a ton of bricks and made his soul ring out again. Yatagarasu's feathers bristled overhead.

It emboldened him for his mission today.

"One more thing before we split off," Ren said as they stopped at the edge of the Festival grounds, "Why were you so embarrassed when I asked if you were related to All Might?"

Midoriya turned red again, "You're not the first person to say something like that."

"Really? Who else?"

"Todoroki." Midoriya suddenly wouldn't meet Ren's eyes, "He... he once asked me if I was All Might's secret love child."

Ren burst out in laughter.

Midoriya floundered, "I-It's not funny!"

"No, no, you're right. It's not funny." Ren wiped his eyes, "It's downright *hilarious* . I'm giving Peppermint a free milkshake for this."

"Ren!!"

They parted ways in much higher spirits than when they'd left. That invisible wall between them was completely demolished while the Chariot Arcana flooded with new confidence and strength.

Unbeknownst to them, the spirits of One For All were drawn to it with flames rekindled.

Yatagarasu floated down and landed in Ren's floofy hair, peering at his Trickster upside down, "You know what I noticed, Trickster?"

Ren blinked at him, "What?"

Yatagarasu tilted his head in amusement, "Thanks to the Chariot's new strength, you're not straining to hold eight of us at once."

He stopped dead in his tracks, "Oh. You're right. But let's not push our luck too early."

"Understood!"

Aizawa gave Ren a deadpanned glare when he finally emerged from the bushes.

"You were almost late." Aizawa said as Ren wiped the foliage off of his clothes, "The others are already gathered."

Ren chuckled, "Sorry. The outing with Midoriya lasted longer than I thought."

Aizawa plucked a leaf out of Ren's hair and tossed it away, "It went well, then?"

Ren smiled, "It did."

"... Good. Thank you."

"Don't mention it." Ren stuck his hands in his pockets as Aizawa led him down a small path.

They entered a specific clearing set away from the Festival, paved with a road towards the USJ and a bus waiting.

"Well, well, fashionably late, as always!" Mr. Compress said with a hearty chuckle, "Just the way we like to do things."

Miruko cackled, "Geez, talk about waiting for the very last minute!"

"Did your adventure with Midoriya go well?" Nezu asked.

"Yep." Ren said, "I ended up telling him the truth."

The Thieves exchanged wild glances. The teachers and other heroes looked worried. Yagi especially had wide eyes. Nezu, however, clapped his paws together.

“Oh? And he believed you?”

Ren nodded, “He did, and he offered to help us if we needed it.”

Nezu’s eyes sparkled, “Wonderful!”

Yagi chuckled softly, “That’s Young Midoriya for you, he’s always been so smart and has a heart of gold.”

“Um...”

Ren looked over as Tensei raised his hand, eyes widening. Tensei had donned his full Ingenium hero outfit, the pouches around his hips filled with Metaverse Items. The Goddess Horn from Ishtar was tied securely to his belt, too.

“Why did you tell another student before us?” Tensei asked. “I’m just curious.”

“He figured some things out on his own.” Ren replied with a shrug, “Lying to him would be an insult.”

“I see...”

“I’m surprised you have your hero costume.” Ren said, “Is that what you went off this morning for?”

“Yeah, I wanted it to be a surprise.” Tensei sheepishly grinned, “Of course, my sidekicks and the rest of the public don’t know about this. I’m not coming out of retirement as a front-line pro either, but I need to be at my absolute best if I’m going to help you! These Shadows won’t know what hit them!”

“Damn straight!” Miruko yelled.

Nezu clapped his paws together, "The gate will open soon, and we must be off before then! Does everyone remember the plan?"

La Brava held up her camera, "Gentle Criminal and I will hype up the public with a stream of the Festival!"

Gentle Criminal beamed with excitement, "Oh, to be on the air again!" Gentle gained a sudden seriousness, his left hand tracing his facial hair, "We'll end it before Joker's finale, and protect the stadium after."

"Meanwhile, all of us will be at the USJ with the Attendants." Cementoss said, "Waiting for Shadows to appear."

"Lavenza will be on stand-by with me." Ren said with a confident nod, "Kohryu and Gabriel will patrol the outskirts of the Festival Grounds, changing the weather and sky color to cover for us, in case anyone is outside during the Red Rain."

"How will you get to the USJ?" Hawks asked.

"You haven't told us that part of your plan." Nighteye said as he adjusted his glasses, "Kohryu giving you a ride isn't exactly subtle."

"Don't worry." Ren stated with a mysterious smirk, "When it happens, I'll pull a disappearing act and be at the USJ faster than you can say 'Cultural Festival!'"

Nezu gave him a critical look, as if he knew more than he was letting on, "Hmm, I'll put my trust in you, Amamiya. Everything seems to be in order so far." Nezu looked around to everyone, "We must not dally any longer."

The heroes and vigilantes going to the USJ filed into the bus.

Nighteye glanced at Ren, "Mona went with Eri and Kaito, and will meet up with you before the Finale. I promise Mirio will take good care of them."

“Don’t worry. I trust Mirio.”

Nighteye gave him a curt nod before he boarded the bus.

“We’ll be off, too!” Gentle Criminal straightened his vest and pulled on his gloves, “Our audience awaits!”

Ren chuckled, “Have fun, you two.”

La Brava beamed at him as she opened her camera screen, “We will!”

They went their separate ways. Ren in one, Gentle Criminal and La Brava in another, and the bus took off towards the USJ.

By the time Ren reached Risumi and Ayumu’s location, the gates to the public were beginning to open.

“MIDORIYA, FINALLY!!!” Raccoon Eyes screeched as she snatched the extra rope away from him, “GO GET CHANGED ASAP MISTER!!”

“You were almost late, Deku!” Bakugo snapped from the drum set on the stage, “Hurry the hell up or we’ll start without you!”

“G-got it!”

Deku rushed off backstage to change into the bright yellow costumes.

Ponytail stared after him, stopping her own final checks on the keyboard.

Bakugo frowned at her, “What?”

“Ah, nothing. It just...” She glanced around, the other extras were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, “Something was different with Midoriya. Like... he *knows* ? I just saw that same

spark in him that we saw in each other weeks ago... after we talked with Joker.”

Bakugo’s lips curled as if he had just sucked on a lemon, “I noticed too. We can’t talk to him here.”

Ponytail nodded, “After our concert then.”

“After.” Bakugo agreed.

IcyHot, who was arranging some cables nearby, frowned at them.

“G-guys!!” Rock Face burst in with a harried pigeon on his shoulder, “Th-the gates have opened!”

The excitement and nerves within the room shot up so much Bakugo could taste the raw emotions, like metal coating his whole mouth. He wasn’t sure if it was just his mind playing tricks on him, or if the precedent of the ‘Red Rain’ had already begun.

“... Already a small spike.” Ren muttered to himself as he checked the readings.

“Ren, sweetie, can you get those brownies and bring them to the front display case?” Risumi called.

Ren shoved his phone in his apron pocket, “Right away!”

Ayumu smirked as he handed Ren the scrumptious plate of brownies, which Ayumu had cut into small squares and arranged into a pyramid on the plate. A new notebook was open on the counter, filled cover to cover of recipes new and old in Ren’s own handwriting.

A tall blue canvas ceiling stretched high overhead, courtesy of the enormous tent-like structure that served as the temporary Blue

Lotus. They'd already started his next batch of delicious goods the moment Ren whisked the plate away.

The front counter was similar in nature to its predecessor, and in truth there was little difference between the set-up from inside this tent and how it looked within the original Blue Lotus. The one stark difference was the seating. Completely open to the air, and surrounded by beautiful cobblestone pathways and trees burning in the peak of fall, were several tables and benches, enough to seat a few hundred people at once.

Ren made it to the front and arranged the brownies with the other delicious food.

"Are you nervous, Risumi?" Ren asked as he shut the display case.

"Not really." She rubbed her palms together, "I'm excited. So many new people are going to try our food!"

Ren chuckled, "I'm glad Lunch Rush is helping out."

"Same here." She smiled softly at Ren, "And you, too."

"The chocolate cookies are done cooling!" Ayumu called from the kitchen.

"Coming!"

It was back and forth from there. Just by the sheer quantity of cookies, brownies, sliced cakes and tarts, varieties of coffee and hot chocolate, quiches and pies, multiple pots of curry bubbling with different flavors... they must've been at this for several hours already.

Fafnir watched Ren work as he lay between the kitchen and the front counter. A pile of crates were stacked behind him, and sitting at the top was Lavenza, idly flipping the pages of the Compendium stuffed to the brim with bookmarks,

“My, my,” Lavenza said as Ren rushed past them for the sixth time, arms full of platters for the display case, “They’re so busy and no humans have come to try their food yet.”

Fafnir snorted, “It’s a necessity to have so much prepared. According to the Trickster’s memories, there’ll be so many hungry humans that there won’t be anything left.”

“Ah.” Lavenza longingly stared at the display case, “I bet Elizabeth would do anything to have it all to herself.”

The tip of Fafnir’s tail bobbed back and forth, “Hmph, her sweet tooth knows no bounds.”

It was the tenth time Ren passed that he stopped in front of them, smiling, “I haven’t forgotten you two, you know.”

“What is this?” Lavenza put the Compendium aside to grab the plate he offered in both hands, marveling at the beautiful slice of cake with whipped cream frosting and a perfect strawberry on top, glistening like a ruby.

“Strawberry shortcake.” Ren said with a smirk, “I think you’ll like it.”

She delicately took the tiny fork off the plate, cut a tiny piece, and put it in her mouth. Her expression radiated happiness, a pleased hum in her throat as she bobbed back and forth and kicked out her legs.

“Oh, it is delightful, Trickster!”

Ren chuckled and looked down to Fafnir, holding out the curry bun in his other hand.

Fafnir crunched it down in one bite, licking his lips, “Hmmm, not bad! A bit spicy, but not enough.”

“Well, it’s the spiciest curry bun we’ve ever made and most people probably wouldn’t be able to eat it normally. You’ve got a strong stomach, pal.”

Fafnir preened at Ren's praise.

"Ren!" Risumi cried from the front, "Our first customers are coming!"

Ren rushed to the front counter, surprised at the familiar group walking up to their tent.

Kagome, Tokaji, and Yuuto - The first people he'd met when was captured and sent to the Sapporo lab. They looked healthy, recovered from their ordeal at Sapporo, at least physically. They broke out in smiles when they saw him.

"What are you guys doing here?" Ren asked, eyes wide.

"Well that's a fine 'how do you do' after vanishing on us like you did!" Tokaji cried, "Do you know how worried we've been!? For MONTHS!? Were you ever gonna tell us that you were a badass vigilante in disguise!?"

Yuuto placed a hand on Tokaji's shoulder, and stated in a much calmer manner, "What he *means* is, it's good to see you again after so long."

Kagome smiled as she held up the card hanging around each of their necks, "Hawks was kind enough to buy VIP passes for every person who was in that lab. They let us in early!"

"... He did?" Ren asked, "He didn't tell me."

"He wanted it to be a surprise." Tokaji crossed his arms and huffed, "I'm not surprised that puffed up chicken kept it a secret."

"Is Kaien here too?" Ren asked.

"Yep, with his sister." Kagome looked behind them, "They went off to one of your fancy tents, Joker. They'll probably get here eventually."

"Joker..."

A fourth person stepped up to the counter. She was a tall woman, with bright pink hair wrapped in twin messy buns, extra strands flowing around her face and neck. Her eyes were the same color. Her clothes were some sort of leather gray dress that doubled as armor, with a stripe of vibrant orange on the ankle-length skirt. Another long-sleeved coat was over the dress in the same harsh gray color.

“Who are you?” Risumi asked.

“You wouldn’t know me,” The woman smiled as she kept staring at Ren, “But you saved one of my comrades when he was trapped with these people. He’s completely recovered now and has returned home to us, thanks to you.”

Ren’s eyes widened, his eyes trailed to the stark black tattoo under the woman’s clavicle, of a demon’s jaws roaring with jagged sound waves. For some reason, it spoke to Ren of inhuman power.

She reached into her jacket pocket and produced a small envelope, to which she deeply bowed and held out to Risumi with both hands, “Please, take this token of thanks from my family... from Embryon, for saving Gale.”

Risumi traded a glance with Ren before taking it. She opened it and gasped, her hand covering her mouth as she stared at the check.

Ren gawked at the amount written out, “That’s a lot of zeroes.”

“But this is... this is too much!” Risumi cried.

“No amount is ever too much for having him back, safe and sound.” The woman said softly, “Please accept it.”

Risumi teared up before she called for her husband, who came rushing to the front wielding a ladle like a mighty sword. Fafnir snorted in amusement not 10 feet away. Even Lunch Rush popped his head out at the commotion.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Ayumu asked.

“We got our first donation!” Risumi handed him the check, his face paling as he stared at it.

“What do you want?” Ayumu said lamely as he stared at the group, “You get free food for life.”

“I... can’t stay.” The woman turned away, “But thank you for the offer.”

“Wait! At least tell us your name!” Risumi said.

The woman had a kind smile as she looked back at them, “Argilla.”

Argilla walked away, disappearing into the trees in the direction of the school entrance.

After a moment, Tokaji huffed, “Well, I’m starving! Whatcha guys got to eat?”

Kagome face palmed, “Tokaji...”

Ren smirked as he gestured to the chalk menu hanging over them, “We have all sort of cakes, curries, and other dishes, but we are running a challenge to see who can handle the most spicy curry bun we’ve ever made. Want to try it?”

“What do I get if I win?”

“Bragging rights.”

“Fine, then.” Tokaji grinned, “Give me your worst, Joker! I bet my Quirk will beat it out of the park!”

“Does Light Pain Resistance even work on spicy foods?” Yuuto asked.

“It does!” Tokaji cracked his knuckles as an excited glint sparked in his eyes, “That’s why this’ll be easy!”

Ren turned around to retrieve one of the spicy curry buns, “It’s your funeral, pal.”

Kagome and Yuuto stared at each other, and shrugged. Ten minutes later Tokaji was bent over their table in pain because one bite of the curry bun had knocked him on his ass.

Fafnir scoffed as he watched from the tent, “It wasn’t that spicy to me…”

“Your tolerance is far above a normal human’s, Fafnir.” Lavenza said as she gingerly placed her empty plate aside, “You must give him some credit for trying.”

“If you say so.” Fafnir stretched out like a languid cat, watching the Trickster and this world’s Strength happily work together as people began to flood the area.

“You ready?” Hitoshi asked, “Our first victims will be here any minute.”

“Of course!” Alice’s eerie smile showed too many teeth, and was about as comforting as a poisonous centipede crawling over his skin, “You better hide before its too late.”

Hitoshi smirked and gently ruffled her hair. With the flexibility and strength he’d gained in the past few months of training, crawling up to his hiding spot in the ceiling was as easy as cake. The pair waited for their prey.

Screams, followed by frightened laughter, grew louder until a pair of shuffling footsteps finally made it to their hallway. Hitoshi watched as two people, a man and a woman linking arms, slowly traipsed under

him, unaware of the teenager dressed like a spooky phantom just feet above them.

Alice's back was to the pair, who just took notice of her.

"Dear, look!" The woman pointed at Alice as she untangled herself from her companion and stepped closer.

"What's a little girl doing here?" The man asked and, judging by the quiver in his voice, he was terrified.

"Honey, did you get separated from your parents?"

Alice turned around, that eerie smile splitting her face, "Can you do something for me...?" She whispered in a quiet and innocent voice.

The woman recoiled, and though Hitoshi couldn't see their faces, he imagined them losing all color.

"Wh-what is it, sweetie?"

The shadows came to life around them, undulating as a smothering purple aura flooded the hallway. Alice's pale hair wriggled like worms and her eyes gleamed a manic red.

"Would you please die for me?"

The woman backpedaled so hard she bumped into her companion, the both of them shaking like leaves, "Wh-what!?"

That was Hitoshi's cue. He hung from the ceiling by his legs, completely upside-down. He was as silent as an owl's wing beat until he situated himself *right* behind the couple.

"Boo."

It was a whisper, a mere weak puff of breath, but that was enough.

The woman shrieked with bloody murder and the man's scream was higher pitched than a teenage girl's. They scrambled away in a blind terror, Alice stepping aside as they rushed passed her to the exit.

Hitoshi laughed and held down his hand to Alice, "Great job, little sis."

Her aura faded away, her hair went still, but her smile stayed. She high-fived him.

They heard more screams nearby, and Hitoshi's smile almost matched hers, "Ready for our next victims?"

Alice eagerly nodded. Hitoshi situated himself in the ceiling as the next group of brave adrenaline junkies walked into their trap, their frantic screams adding to the din of fear tainting their haunted house.

"It has been quite some time, dear viewers," The camera was angled at Gentle Criminal framed by an enormous red and black tent as big as a mountain. In his hand he held a porcelain cup of hot tea and a matching kettle, "Worry not, for La Brava and I have returned for our finest venture yet! But this is not an ordinary video, no! This is... our first ever live stream!"

He held out his arms as a dramatic wind kicked up around them.

"And what is behind me, you may ask?" Gentle Criminal whirled around, splashing tea onto the grass.

The tent's entrance was sealed with a mighty black gate, and that itself was tied in bright silver chains. A large sign hung from the chains, midnight black with silver letters flowing across as if etched from the stars themselves.

"Why, this will house the Grand Finale of the Festival, orchestrated by none other than Joker himself!"

La Brava smiled fondly as he leaned in and whispered to the viewers.

“However, such a wondrous show would not do justice from watching it on your screen! No, if you want to witness the true majesty of Joker’s performance yourself, it’s best that you come see it in person!”

The sky suddenly changed as Kohryu and Gabriel flew overhead. La Brava panned the camera up when Megidolaon Stars rained down and showered them in a river of rainbows.

Gentle Criminal’s laughter brought the camera on him once more, his body bathed in prismatic shades, “Such beauty and splendor is second to none! There is still time to witness this once in a life-time event! Come to the U.A. Cultural Festival while you still can, dear viewers! I promise you won’t regret it! Join us...”

The wind picked up as Kohryu’s musical roar sang into the ears of those tuning in to the stream.

“As we go around the wonders and beauties of U.A.’s Cultural Festival!!”

People all across Japan wondered how Joker’s *Cirque Des Dieux* could compare to the rest of the school’s festivities. Hours later, when word spread about the mind-blowing splendor of the Cultural Festival Finale, those who didn’t attend could only listen to the enchanting stories with forlorn regret.

Joker is literally the whole damn circus. What are all the other personas doing, you may ask? You'll find out more next chapter :) And honestly Joker's Finale has been one of the most amazing things to write for this story. I love it so much.

I'm so excited for next chapter you guys. SHITE GOES DOWN and it goes down hard. I think even the chapter title alone will have you

guys hyped.

But with that said, I'm going to take a break after the next chapter. My health seems to be swinging between extremes and unable to settle on a stable middle, and I desperately need time to recharge so we can do the last portion of this story properly. We only have 9 chapters left(plus the epilogue) and I want to do them justice. Besides, next chapter leaves off on the *perfect* point for that. And we're almost at the 3rd anniversary of this story! I can't believe how time flies. I may do a stream or something to celebrate it, but not entirely sure what I'll do yet.

Next chapter will be on May 6th, and I'm planning to return either July 1st or July 8th.

ALSO!!! There's a part 3 of the Thieves Den now! If you want to see Joker and Seth(Yes, SETH!!) romp around the apocalyptic world of Nier Automata, then please check it out!

Rivers In The Desert

Chapter 91: Rivers In The Desert

When a cool drop of water's all I need

Gotta clear my head of anger and greed

A place to refresh heart and mind

Can I find some time in

Rivers in a dry land

The last ace in a lost hand

When the hope of new beginnings burned our feet

Now we need it

A heartbeat for a tin man

An oasis in a singed land

Remind us what we're here for

Creating new life

Creating rivers in the desert

HAPPY 3RD DTESH ANNIVERSARY EVERYBODY! :D Let's
celebrate with an early chapter release!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Fanart!

[fanart on Twitter!](#)

Drapes of rich violet cascaded over every surface like velvet waterfalls. Smokey veils of incense swirled through the air, the curling wisps glowing from the light of the crystal chandelier hanging over the table.

The curtains were parted by the milky hand of a woman, her face equally moon-white as he commanded the beauty of Japanese empresses of times past. Layers of vibrant crimson and white of her junihitoe were like fresh blood speckled on white lilies. She stepped in, her kimono parting to reveal eight inky black legs of a spider.

“My, my.” She studied the tent until her eyes landed on the Persona rising over the table, “To what mighty deity do I have the pleasure of meeting today?”

“I am Vasuki.” The Persona’s raspy voice scraped through the tent, “I who churned the Sea of Milk for the Devas and Asuras. What is your name, miss?”

“Arachne, darling. Just Arachne, no ‘miss.’”

“Arachne.” Vasuki gestured one of his arms across the table. “Have a seat.”

Arachne was careful not to rip any of the cushions with her sharp legs as she settled herself at the table, legs folding in on themselves. She adjusted the layers of her kimono to cover them.

Vasuki reached for the deck at the center of the table. The hypnotic movements of his six arms spread the deck between his hands, holding the cards like splayed fans of black and red.

“Choose three.” Vasuki held his arms out to her, “See what the past, present, and future hold for you.”

Arachne didn't take any two cards from the same hand.

Vasuki folded the deck with a flourish and set it aside, then took the three cards to spread them in front of Arachne.

“Your past...” Vasuki flipped over the first with a wry smile. “The Chariot. You have a tumultuous past, but through hard work and ambition, you have been victorious in your pursuits.”

“Yes.” Arachne crossed her arms, “As you can see, my Quirk makes me appear as a demon and a vile temptress. Not only that, I started my business after my daughter's death to deal with the grief.”

Vasuki dipped his head and flipped the second card, “The Queen of Cups. Despite all of the harshness you've been dealt, you choose to remain compassionate and loving towards others. Is this correct?”

“Yes.” Arachne's expression softened, and Vasuki saw the remains of the loving mother she once was, “My business helps those who share my misfortune in not looking... entirely human. I make them clothes to suit their unique needs which most other stores will not provide. I've put smiles on the faces of those who have been called monsters and freaks, and their happiness has been a humbling reward.”

“And now, for your future-” Vasuki flipped over the final card, his hand hovering over it in reverence. “Ah... The World.”

Arachne raised a delicate brow, “Is there some great significance in The World?”

Vasuki chuckled, “You will gain closure and completion at the end of your journey. Your accomplishments and goals are all fulfilled, and you will be able to evolve into the next significant part of your life, to whatever new horizons expand before you.”

Arachne's face fell into shock, "I see. I'm glad I came here for such good tidings. But you yourself seem taken aback by The World. May I ask why?"

"The one I treasure most is connected to The World, too. He was forced into a harsh journey not unlike yourself, but all troubles will resolve soon." Vasuki placed all of his hands together in prayer positions and bowed to her, "Thank you for coming to my abode. I did not expect such a heartening first reading."

"It was my pleasure." Arachne stood, "I shouldn't hold up the line. It's quite the madhouse out there."

"Wait a moment." Vasuki reached under the table for another hidden stack of cards, taking one from the pile of red and black. He handed it to Arachne.

She read aloud, "'To the citizens of Japan, take heart and accept this invitation to the most wondrous show in the world, the *Cirque Des Dieux!* This invitation is from yours truly -Joker, Leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts.'" She turned it over in her hand to see a time and location, "What is this?"

"The Finale of the Cultural Festival. Joker will be the star of the show. You won't want to miss it."

"Sounds exciting." She tucked the card into her kimono, "I'll be there."

Arachne walked out, her black spider legs clacking on the ground like metal. Vasuki had enough time to shuffle the Tarot cards before the next person walked in, and so the cycle began again.

Hero too, I am a hero too

My heart is set and I won't back down

Hero too, strength doesn't make a hero

True heroes stand up for what they believe

Yeah I'll be

Hero too, I am a hero too

My heart is set and I won't back down

Hero too, strength doesn't make a hero

True heroes stand up for what they believe

So wait and see

I have met so many heroes in my life

Gave me the strength and courage to survive

Gave me the power to smile everyday

Now it's my turn to be the one to make you smile!

Kaien cackled as he stared at the frozen mirror, "Sis, check this one out!"

The wavy mirror warped her arms and legs into long spaghetti noodles, while her torso and her wild strawberry hair condensed into big blobs. Kaori giggled at it.

"This one's my favorite." Kaien declared.

"Really?" Kaori squinted at the mirror, "What about the one that made us look like bendy straws? I liked that one!"

“Weeeeeell...” Kaien smirked, “I suppose it could be a close second. But only because you like it so much.”

Kaori stuck her tongue out at him.

So far, this tent had been the siblings’ favorite. This frozen wonderland contained a forest of glistening crystal trees along with a small frozen lake that doubled as an ice skating rink, to the white carousel made of diamond that actually *worked*, and now to the final portion which was a long hallway of frosty mirrors.

It was chilly, as was expected for a mystical frozen wonderland constructed within a tent, but somehow it wasn’t cold enough to make them freeze to the bone.

Another laugh caught their attention a few mirrors down. An older man with a fox-like grin, dressed in traditional monk’s robes, stared at himself in the mirrors. That frozen mirror made him look like a squat pill-bug.

“I think this one is my favorite.” The old man said.

Kaien’s smile matched the old man’s laughter in genuine compassion, “Come try this one!”

The old man walked to the mirror Kaien pointed to, another bout of laughter escaping him, “You’re right. I do like this one.”

Kaori puffed up her cheeks and threw a playful glare at her brother. The three of them continued down the last few mirrors before reaching the exit, stepping into the sunlit Festival Grounds. There was a table outside, manned by one of the small robots they’ve seen zooming around. It shoved three of the red and black cards in their hands and waved them away.

“We already have a few.” Kaori said as she read it over again, “They’re all the same.”

The monk hummed, "Are you two going?"

"Of course we are!" Kaien stated, "There's no way we're going to miss out! Right, Kaori?"

Kaori smiled, her eyes lighting up, "Yes. I wouldn't miss it for the world after everything Joker's done for us."

"I'll go too." The monk tucked the card into his robe, "Joker's Finale must be something special if they're advertising it so much."

"Right?" Kaori's gaze was drawn down the path, "What's that?"

It looked to be another of Joker's tents, though it was a simple striped awning. The big sign said 'Black Frost's Mythology Mania!' In the raised stage, surrounded by people, was a tall black spirit with red eyes and purple clothes. It held a microphone in its large hands and a basket by its feet.

"Next one, ho!" Black Frost said, "This deity is a feathered serpent related to wind, knowledge, arts, merchants, and learning! It was also one of the top patron gods of Aztecs, ho!"

One girl raised her hand, and Black Frost pointed to her, "Quetzalcoatl?"

"Heeeeeee ho!!! That's the correct answer!" Black frost grabbed a gacha as big as a volley ball from the basket and tossed it at her. She opened it, the crowd watching eagerly, and pulled out a small statue of Kohryu.

"Oh," An older woman, perhaps the girl's grandmother, smiled brightly, "We can put this in the shrine of our bakery!"

The other older gentlemen nodded and as he patted his granddaughter's back, the girl smiling.

"Next!" Black Frost cackled, "This could be a head-scratcher, ho! This Shinto deity pacified Ashihara no Nakatsukuni and is the

personification of a sword itself!”

“Any idea, sis?” Kaien whispered.

She sighed, “Nope.”

The crowd murmured. It took a minute for someone to raise their hand.

“Is it... Futsunushi?”

“Hee ho, correct!” Black Frost tossed the man a gacha, which was opened to reveal a high quality set of Phantom Thief themed tarot cards and posters.

“Dangit.” Kaori muttered under her breath.

The monk beside her hummed as Black Frost did a twirl.

“Next question, ho! She is the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, and beauty. The mother of Kama and close consort of Vishnu-”

The monk raised his hand, “Lakshmi.”

Black Frost threw up his fists, “Hee ho, correct! Wowie, how are all of you this smart, ho!?”

Laughter filtered through the crowd as Black Frost tossed a gacha towards the monk, who caught it easily. The monk’s fox-like smile widened as he offered it to Kaori.

Her mouth dropped, “A-are you sure?”

“I insist.”

She took it and popped it open, eyes going wide at the large Byakko plush inside. It had a silver chain around its neck with a bag of Joker charms and pins.

Kaori beamed, "Thank you so much!"

The old man laughed as they turned away from Black Frost's growing crowd, "It's no trouble. What are you two going to do until the finale?"

"Let's see..." Kaien whipped out a colorful map of the Festival Grounds from his back pocket, "There are plenty of Joker's tents to visit yet, or we could... no, 1-A's concert would be over by now. Uh, there's 1-B's play, 1-C's haunted house, or there's a beauty pageant later. Oh! The business and support courses are working together to show off the gear they made?"

Kaori sighed as she hugged the massive Byakko plush, "I kinda want to wander around until we get hungry enough to find the Blue Lotus."

Kaien shrugged, "Works for me!"

"Do you want to continue together?" The monk asked, "I find myself enjoying your company."

Kaori grinned as she pointed in a random direction, "Let's all go together!!"

Kaien and the monk laughed as they followed her lead.

"Thanks, Joker."

"No problem." Ren smirked as he set down a plate of curry and a cup of coffee in front of a familiar police officer, "Though you could just call me Ren at this point. Right, Haru-san?"

Haru-san beamed from the other side of the table, "Of course, Ren dear."

Kaname chuckled, "Alright, thanks Ren."

“Did you want to go in the back of the tent? I'm sure Risumi and Ayumu would love to talk to you more.”

“They're busy.” Kaname smiled at the line cutting through the clearing, “And... I wouldn't want to upset them.”

Haru-san frowned as she held the cup of tea Ren offered her, “Oh, they wouldn't be upset.”

Ren exchanged a look with Haru-san, “You tried to save their lives when Overhaul and Shigaraki took them, and you were a regular long before that. Why would they be upset?”

“I don't want them feeling guilty.” Kaname scooted back in his chair and rapped his knuckles on his left leg, sounding of plastic and metal instead of flesh. “It'll be a few months before I can get back to work in my condition.”

“Oh, dear...” Haru-san patted Kaname's arm, “They wouldn't feel guilty. They were so happy to see you here.”

“I could heal you?” Ren stated, eyes wide in horror, “You wouldn't have to wear the prosthetic and could get back to your normal life.”

Kaname shook his head, “I appreciate the offer, but I'll have to turn you down.”

“But-”

“No buts.” He pinned Ren with a stern look, “I'm a grown man who can handle the consequences of his own choices. Don't put it on yourself to try and fix it, okay?”

Ren grimly nodded.

Kaname grinned and waved him away, “Go on, then.”

Haru-san clutched his sleeve with the warmest expression to melt Ren's lingering horror, “I'll keep an eye on this one. Don't you worry,

dear.”

“Thanks, Haru-san.”

Ren left them in peace to rejoin the chaos in the tent.

“Oh, you’re back!” Risumi placed the overstuffed tip-jar in his hands, “Can you empty this out?”

“Again? How many does this make?”

“Eighteen!” The woman was giddy as she fanned herself, “Eighteen times the tip jar was filled! Can you believe it? The donations online are crazy high, too!”

Ren smirked, “I’ll sort it out in the back.”

Risumi continued the battle at the front counter while Ren took the tip jar into the kitchen. Ayumu and Lunch Rush didn’t notice him as they worked like whirlwinds around the stoves and ovens to create culinary masterpieces for their guests.

Fafnir moved his tail to reveal the safe hidden behind it, “I’m bored, Trickster! I thought there would be more action!”

“I admit the same. I’ve memorized everything I need in the Compendium, Trickster.” Lavenza said as she watched Ren open the safe, “It’s dizzying watching the other Strength work so hard.”

“If you’re bored, Lavenza, you could help me do this.”

“Very well.” Lavenza hopped down from the crates and straightened her dress.

Fafnir yawned as Ren showed her how to sort the bills and store them safely away in the small vault. The fortune inside grew into tens of thousands of yen already, and Ren had no idea how much they’d make by the end of it.

“How long until your finale, Trickster?” Lavenza asked as he closed the safe, “The Metaverse presence continues to strengthen.”

Ren set the empty jar aside and reached into his apron pockets for his phone, “A few hours yet. If the readings keep going up like they are now, then our plan should go off without a hitch.”

He checked Gentle Criminal and La Brava’s stream. They were currently free-falling from the magical wind tunnels in Cybele’s tent. Somehow, Gentle Criminal sat cross-legged and floated serenely with a porcelain cup in hand, looking much like a distinguished gentleman having a calm afternoon tea. Other people in the background weren’t so lucky, though laughter and excited yells echoed as they spun around and flapped their arms like frantic birds.

Cybele’s amusement trickled through their bond as she floated up behind Gentle Criminal to wave at the camera, directed at him.

Fafnir shot up, drawing his eyes away from the stream.

Ren frowned, “What’s wrong?”

“Someone troubles the Strength.” Fafnir rolled his shoulders and languidly stretched, “Finally, my time to shine!”

Fafnir crawled out the back of the tent, the tip of his tail disappearing under the fabric.

Ren looked at Lavenza, “Stay here.”

Lavenza watched as he went to the front, where Risumi was being hounded by a blue skinned woman shoving a recording device in her personal bubble.

“Is it true you’ve known Joker’s secret identity long before anyone else!?”

Risumi remained stone-faced, “Please get down from the counter, miss.”

“What’s he like in his day-to-day life? Is he really as kind and generous as people claim, or is that just a front? You’ve must’ve seen his powers when he rescued you from Overhaul, so what was it like seeing it in person!?”

Ren pulled Risumi behind him. The blue woman gasped and sprawled fully over the counter to get closer, her long purple hair spilling over their side of the counter. The recording device was inches from Ren’s face.

“Joker, what’s it like being in U.A.? Do students and teachers treat you well despite your past crimes? Has anybody called you a murderer to your face? What made you turn yourself in? Do you have any plans to get your hero license and protect the people of this country as you did when you were a vigilante!?”

Ren smiled courteously, “Take your order or leave, miss. You’re holding up the line.”

“The line can wait when millions have been *dying* to hear your story! You’ve only dangled bits and pieces, but we need the whole thing!” Her black eyes turned feral, “I’ve never backed down from getting a good story, Joker, and you’ll be no different!”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Ren sighed, “This is your last chance, miss-”

“Kizuki Chitose.”

“Miss Kizuki.” Silver scales flickered nearby as other people backed away from the counter, “This is your last warning. Get off the counter, *calmly* take your order, or leave. I won’t ask again before I have you removed.”

“You can’t remove me!” She cried, “I’m doing a service for the people of Japan!”

“Fafnir.”

Kizuki blinked as a large shadow fell over her. She looked over her shoulder as Fafnir stared down at her with his hollow black eyes, throat rumbling in a growl.

“Oh. My. GOSH!” Kizuki nearly put the recorder up Fafnir’s nose, “Which demon are you? Wait, you’re a new one, aren’t you? How does Joker get new demons with his quirk!? Does he have to do some creepy ritual like the rumors online say or-”

Fafnir lifted her off the counter by the back of her coat. Apparently, she wasn’t alone. Several men rushed from the crowd and tackled Fafnir, but he didn’t budge an inch.

“Escort them to the front gate and make sure they can’t get back inside.” Ren smoothly stated, loud enough for everyone to hear.

People leapt out of Fafnir’s way as he carried Kizuki by the scruff of her coat like a troublesome kitten who yowled all the way. Her cohorts refused to let Fafnir’s limbs go, so they were dragged along in the dirt. One man even dangled from Fafnir’s tail.

Ren placed his hands on the counter and leaned forward, his eyes turning to molten gold pools, “Does anyone else want to be disrespectful, or can we all be civil and get back in an orderly line?”

Having sensed the trouble, Kohryu swept over the clearing in all of his glory. The gentle sunlight suffocated in his shadow, the trees bent under the wind generated by him, and his ruby-red eyes narrowed dangerously at the crowd below. Gabriel’s wings fluttered as she descended from the dragon’s side and onto the tent canopy, her smile patient but wrathful.

Ren’s never seen such a large crowd form a neat line in less than 30 seconds. Nobody dared to argue or shove others when their spots were lost.

Ren nodded up to the pair of Personas, who took off to continue their duties. The relief was palpable as sunlight flooded the clearing and

the trees returned to a normal rustle.

Risumi smiled at him, "Thanks for having my back, Ren. That woman was... persistent."

"We're a team, it's only natural. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I hope that's the last we've seen of her."

Ren smirked, "Fafnir just tossed them out on their backsides and told security not to let them in. They won't be coming back."

Her eyes twinkled and she brought up her hand for a high-five, which he reciprocated.

They continued working through the line in synchronized harmony.

"Kacchan! Where are you taking me?"

"Shut it, nerd." Bakugo scowled as dragged Midoriya by the wrist, "We just want to talk to you."

Midoriya sighed, but allowed his childhood friend to pull him behind the building they used for their concert. His eyes widened as he saw Yaoyorozu leaning on the wall, smiling when she heard their footsteps.

Bakugo let go and planted himself beside Yaoyorozu, arms crossed.

Midoriya looked between them, boggled, "Uh, what's this about?"

The odd duo nodded to one another.

"We know about the Red Rain happening today." Yaoyorozu said dutifully.

"You... you *know* ?"

“Yeah, we know!” Bakugo snapped, “Joker gave Ponytail and I individual ‘talks’ weeks ago. He must’ve talked with you when you went out to get that rope, right?”

Midoriya nodded. “How did you know?”

“We just... did. It seems there’s a certain spark in people who know the truth, for whatever reason.” Yaoyorozu clutched her chin, “Why don’t we share information so we can all get a clearer picture of what’s going on?”

“I... I guess?” Midoriya said.

Bakugo curtly nodded.

“We all know about the Red Rain, how about the mysterious blue door he can summon and the weapons he’s been making?”

“What?” Midoriya gaped.

Bakugo looked at her strangely too.

“Oh, did he... not share that bit with you?”

“Obviously not.” Bakugo rolled his eyes, “I was the first one he talked with. He told me about the Red Rain and the *thing* that’s causing this whole mess.”

Midoriya paled, “What is it? I... he told me about the Red Rain a-and some... other things.”

Bakugo stared into Midoriya’s eyes, “‘Yaldabaoth, God of Control’, said that he and his friends were fighting against it when it *banished* them here. Whatever the hell that means.”

A sour wind kicked up around them. They broke out in goosebumps as the breeze felt like the edges of razor blades caressing their skin.

“The Red Rain, a God Of Control, and... weapons?” Midoriya looked at Yaoyorozu, “Why was he making *weapons* ?”

“Apparently normal quirks and support gear wouldn’t work against the enemies that will appear in the USJ this time. He took copies of the base materials I made into the blue door and emerged with weapons forged from... his companions. A whip from Black Frost, a gun from Shiva.” She said, “Armor from Yatagarasu. Accessories too, though it was very strange.”

Bakugo raised a brow, “What was it?”

“It was a ring from Byakko, but... more than that. It was made of ice, and spread frost on Nezu’s desk. Nezu cut Joker off before he could reveal its purpose.”

“So,” Midoriya counted on his fingers, “We have the Red Rain happening during Joker’s Finale with *armed* heroes waiting at the USJ for unknown enemies. We have the name of Joker’s arch-nemesis. And then there’s that fact that Joker’s wor-”

“What?” Bakugo glared when Midoriya snapped his mouth shut, “He told you more, didn’t he?”

Midoriya hesitantly nodded, “It’s... difficult.”

Yaoyorozu frowned, “Nezu said the truth of Joker’s situation is stranger than fiction.”

Bakugo snarled, “What is it, Deku?”

“I... I can’t.” Midoriya shook his head.

“What do you mean you can’t? You agreed to share information so we know what’s going on!”

“Its... I...” Midoriya sighed as he ran a hand down his face, “The only thing I can say is that he once told me he wasn’t strong enough to protect the people he loves, that he feels like he failed and its

probably this... 'God Of Control's' fault. That's all I can offer. Really, it's something Ren will have to tell you himself."

Yaoyorozu laid a firm hand on Bakugo's shoulder when he was about to protest. "I know we want answers, but we have to be patient with this. If its something we have to heard from Ren himself, then so be it."

Bakugo deflated with a sour scowl.

There was a moment of silence as they digested this information, only disturbed by the new voice right behind them.

"So, what are we going to do about it?"

The three of them jumped around to see Todoroki leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, expression deceptively passive if it weren't for the fire in his eyes. Iida stepped around the corner, looking pale and sweaty, though a sharp glint shined in his eyes, too. Kirishima followed another moment later, looking sheepish.

"Oi, this was a private meeting, you damn extras!" Bakugo snapped.

"How long have you been there?" Midoriya asked.

"Long enough to hear everything." Iida pushed up his glasses.

"I saw Bakugo dragging you away, Midoriya." Todoroki said.

"Iida and I saw it too! And we thought... well," Kirishima rubbed the back of his neck, "We didn't want you guys to get in trouble from another fight, you know? Especially on such a fun day!"

Iida nodded, "But it turns out it was something different altogether, though even more horrifying."

"We don't know anything about Aniki's pain at all, do we?" Kirishima stated, his eyes watering, "If Aniki is hurting, or if he's in some sort of trouble, then we have to do *something*, right!?"

“You guys...” Midoriya whispered.

Todoroki’s frown deepened, “It would be an insult to not help him for a change.”

“We could go ask him.” Yaoyorozu suggested.

Midoriya shook his head, “I offered, and he said they have it handled for now.”

“Still,” Kirishima brightly grinned, “Even if we can’t help out *this time*, that doesn’t mean we can’t go show our support now! That way he knows we’ll have his back in the future, no matter what!”

Midoriya bit his lip, “I suppose it can’t hurt?”

Yaoyorozu smiled, “That’s a sound plan.”

“Whatever.” Bakugo growled.

Todoroki pulled himself from the wall, “We should check the Blue Lotus.”

The six of them walked around the building and didn’t get far before Ashido saw them.

“There you are!” She rushed over to them, “The whole class is going to the Blue Lotus to celebrate a job well done! Wanna come!?”

They exchanged significant glances and followed her. Others in their class joined in, still riled up from the end of the concert. Then, Bakugo froze when the sky suddenly changed colors.

Reds, yellows, greens, and purples washed over the blue of the sky. Kohryu and an angel soared over them, raining down waterfalls of light in every color.

The whole class only relaxed as the sky returned to normal.

Ashido's laugh drained away the tension, "Wow, who knew we were still so jumpy about you-know-what?"

"Yeah, I feel silly!" Hagakure waved her arms.

"Let's not bring that up." Shoji said.

"I agree." Kyoka fidgeted with her ear jacks, "I want to forget it ever happened."

Tokoyami pulled his jacket tighter around himself, eyes darting as his feathers bristled.

Midoriya and the others kept silent. They walked through the grove of trees and into the sprawling opening containing the Blue Lotus. Crowds of people huddled around tables as familiar mouth-watering scents danced on a breeze.

Ashido gasped, "Joker!!"

Shinsou and Amamiya gaped as the whole class approached the counter.

Amamiya smirked, "This won't be another awkward staring contest, right?"

"N-no way, dude!" Kirishima pumped up his fists, "We're here for your awesome food! I haven't had your brownies in *months* !"

"We have plenty of those and more." Shinsou gestured towards the glass display, "Take a look and order when you're ready."

Kaminari, Ashido, and Sero lunged towards the display and put their faces on the glass. Others like Shoji, Koda, and Tokoyami carefully studied the chalk signs. Ojiro and Hagakure kept to the back of the group, whispering between themselves.

Uraraka pointed to a large jar on the counter, "What's this?"

“We’re taking donations to rebuild the Blue Lotus.” Shinsou frowned, “We have to rebuild from the ground up, so any amount helps.”

“Have you hired anyone to build it yet?”

“No. Why?”

“Um...” Uraraka bunched her hands into fists, “I need to make a call. Be right back!”

Uraraka sprinted out of the clearing.

“What was that about?” Amamiya asked.

“Your guess is as good as ours, kero.” Asui said, staring at the tea section of the sign, “But I have a feeling she’ll be back soon.”

The others began to take their orders, but Bakugo’s eyes narrowed at one option circled in red chalk.

“I want that.”

Amamiya blinked, “That’s the spiciest option we have. Are you sure?”

“I can handle anything you throw at me!”

“If you say so.” Amamiya said with amusement.

The working pair wrote down the remaining orders and the class scattered to find seating... except for a particular group who stared at Amamiya.

Amamiya curiously tilted his head at them, “Is there something else?”

“We need to talk to you.” Todoroki stated.

“Alone.” Yaoyorozu added.

Iida chopped an arm, "It's important!"

"I promise it'll be quick!" Kirishima stated.

Midoriya planted on a nervous smile.

"Go on." Shinsou said, "I can handle these orders."

Amamiya nodded and gestured for them to follow him to the back, far away from any eavesdroppers. He emerged from the shadows of the tent, footsteps silent.

"What's this about?"

"We know about the Red Rain." Todoroki stated.

Amamiya deadpanned at the other three, "Really?"

"IcyHot, Shitty Hair, and Glasses eavesdropped when Ponytail and I wanted to talk with Deku." Bakugo muttered.

"We were just exchanging information to get a clear picture, so we'll know in case something goes wrong." Yaoyorozu said as she politely bowed, "We promise it was nothing heinous."

Amamiya looked at Midoriya, "They don't know...?"

"No!" Midoriya waved his arms, "I only told them what you shared about the Red Rain! But they already knew."

"And about the *thing* you were fighting." Bakugo growled.

"Also of the weapons you've made..." Yaoyorozu clasped her hands together, "It doesn't paint a very good picture of what will happen at the USJ."

"You want to do... what exactly? You can't fight Shadows unarmed." Amamiya said, "The heroes have it covered. I'll be there when it happens, too."

Kirishima mouthed 'Shadows?' to Todoroki, who shrugged.

"Maybe not this time." Iida stared Amamiya in the eye with indiscernible emotions, "However, we refuse to let you go on without our aid and support! We'll stand by your side when the time comes for us all to fight together!!"

"Damn right! You better not leave us out or I'll kick your ass!" Bakugo snapped.

"Yeah! Er, without the ass kicking part!" Kirishima stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Amamiya, the latter stiffening. He stepped back, hands locked on Amamiya's shoulders as his eyes watered, "You've been suffering for so long, and I won't let my Aniki shoulder this alone anymore! I'll gladly step up and fight for you! After all, what kind of heroes would we be if we just ignored our friend's pain!?"

Todoroki scratched his cheek, "I agree."

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu nodded.

"You guys... I... Thank you." Amamiya's shock washed away with a genuine smile. "I'll talk with Nezu, but when the time comes I'd be glad to have you all watching my back."

"Yes!" Kirishima threw his arms to the sky, "You can leave it to us, man!"

Iida bowed, "It's the least we can do!"

"We've said what we needed to." Yaoyorozu said gently, "We should return before we're missed."

Amamiya's smile lingered on them before he disappeared inside the tent. They reached the front counter to witness Uraraka bowing a full 90 degrees, holding out a business card with both hands to Shinsou. Amamiya had just rejoined her.

“M-my parents own a construction company,” Uraraka stated, “I-I just called them and told them everything you’ve done to help me, w-with the free meals and all, a-and they agreed to give you a good discount because of it! Please consider hiring them!! They’re very good at what they do, I promise!”

Shinsou put her hand over her mouth, “Oh... I don’t know what to say.”

Amamiya nudged her, “You should accept it.”

“Yes.” Shinsou took the card and bowed, “We’ll be sure to give them a call soon!”

Uraraka had stars in her eyes as she stood to her full height, “Thank you so much!”

“No, thank *you*, dear.” Shinsou chuckled, “I can’t wait to tell my husband! Do you want your usual curry order, sweetie? It’ll be on the house for you!”

“Y-yes, please!”

Amamiya winked at their group before he started gathering their orders together.

They went to sit with their class, who pushed some unused tables together. Piles of food were already scattered everywhere, some shamelessly stuffing their faces while others took more than a few seconds to savor the flavors.

“Where’d you guys go?” Ashido questioned as she shoved a fork-full of cake in her mouth. “That’s the second time you all disappeared!”

“None of your damn business, Raccoon Eyes! And don’t talk with your mouth full!”

“We simply had a word with Amamiya!” Iida said, “Nothing more!”

“Ooooh, did you guys share a secret!?” Hagakure asked. “Tell us!”

Iida fervently chopped his arm, “I would never betray a friend’s trust for gossip!!”

“You pretty much just confirmed that it’s a secret.” Kyouka stated.

Asui tilted her head curiously. Uraraka had sat next to her, humming to herself in happiness. Amamiya descended on their table with the last of their goods. They all shamelessly stared as he passed the food around, and Todoroki blinked at the red and white milkshake set in front of him.

“What’s this? I didn’t order it.”

Amamiya smirked at Midoriya, who sputtered, “A peppermint milkshake. On the house.”

“Oh.” Todoroki took it and sipped on the straw, “It’s good.”

Bakugo rolled his eyes as a plate with a bright red curry bun was placed in front of him.

“Good luck.” Amamiya said, “Over 40 people have tried so far, and I’ve had to heal all of them because they couldn’t handle it.”

Bakugo picked it up, stared Amamiya dead in the eyes, and took a massive bite.

Amamiya gaped as Bakugo chewed slowly.

“*Finally* .” Bakugo said with a sharp smirk, “Something with a decent kick!”

Amamiya’s laugh echoed through the clearing, “We finally have a winner! Congrats on being the first to get bragging rights, Bakugo.”

“Those other losers must’ve been too weak. This is easy!”

“Oooh! Lemme try!” Kaminari made grabby hands for it. Bakugo snapped at him as they wrestled until Kaminari snatched it.

“Oi!” Bakugo shot up from his chair as Kaminari took the second bite, and *froze* .

The whole class went silent, watching as Kaminari’s eyes watered and his face became as red as a cherry.

“Hot, hot HOOOT!” He tossed the curry bun away and wailed.
“Everything’s on fire! I’m gonna dieeeeeee!!”

Amamiya sighed as Kaminari flopped on the ground, gasping for air. He snapped his fingers and summoned beautiful lights weaving around them. Kaminari stopped flailing as the lights faded, eyes going wide.

“Oh, it’s gone.”

Bakugo stomped over to Kaminari and lifted him by the front of his shirt, “That was mine, Dunceface! You owe me another!”

“O-okay okay! You can have it!”

“Coming right up.” Amamiya walked away with an amused smirk.

Ashido fanned herself as she watched him go, “Ah, just like old times at the Blue Lotus.”

“It’s nostalgic, kero.” Asui said, “I wonder if we can continue having good times like these after the Blue Lotus is rebuilt.”

“Do you think he’ll still work at the Blue Lotus?” Uraraka pulled back her sleeves before she tucked into her curry, revealing a black and red handkerchief tied around her wrist. Her classmates knew that, for some reason, she’d always kept it somewhere on her person. The only exception was hero training so it wouldn’t get damaged, “I mean, if he doesn’t get a hero license or anything?”

“Maybe!” Kirishima said over his half-eaten brownie, “Even if he becomes a hero down the line, I’m sure he’ll keep making curry!”

Midoriya stared down at his food, willing his eyes not to water to little success. The grip on his spoon nearly snapped it in half.

Bakugo noticed the sudden change, stopping his throttling of Kaminari to narrow his eyes. Todoroki noticed too, his frown deepening.

Amamiya dropped by to deliver Bakugo’s second curry bun, but was whisked away because a new flood of people came into the clearing.

Bakugo and Todoroki shared a look as Midoriya watched Amamiya return to the counter, almost wistfully. Like the other boy would disappear if he wasn’t watching.

Whatever lost piece of the puzzle Midoriya knew, it wasn’t good.

Eventually, the class devoured their exquisite dishes before splitting to explore the Cultural Festival at its fullest.

Ren nursed a cup of coffee, keeping in his relieved sigh as his magic reserves restored themselves.

An hour and a half had passed since the crazy lunch crowd, and they were taking a much needed break. Fafnir dozed nearby and Lavenza was polishing off her third piece of strawberry shortcake. Risumi and Ayumu stood together by the counter while Lunch Rush decided to go take a walk around the grove to stretch his legs.

Risumi leaned against a counter, eyeing him, “I feel bad that you’re working through the Festival.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve pretty much lived it through my Personas.” As well as he could through several wild perspectives all stretching

between the long hours of work, but Ren said it with an easy smile, “I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

She laughed, “If you ever want to work with us again after the Blue Lotus is rebuilt, you just need to say so. There’ll always be a place for you there.”

“Oh.” Ren couldn’t hold eye contact with either of them, “R-right.”

Risumi and Ayumu exchanged worried glances.

“Hey...” Ren looked up as Ayumu pinned him with concern, “Is there something you’re not telling us? You always go quiet when we talk about the future, ever since we’ve been at U.A.”

Risumi approached him and held his face in her soft hands, her smile so warm and patient. It was one of the things he’d miss the most.

“Please tell us if there’s something wrong.” She said, “Was it something we did?”

“No!” Ren shook his head, “It’s just... I... It’s hard to explain.”

“Then you don’t have to tell us right now. We’ll wait until you’re ready, okay?”

“... Okay. Thank you.”

Risumi sagely nodded as her hands dropped.

Thankfully, the tightness in his heart didn’t last.

“Ren-ni!”

Ren turned to the tent’s back entrance, gasping as Eri rushed towards him with the *biggest and brightest* smile he’d ever seen, striking him like the very first sunlight on his face after a ravaging storm. That smile had burned away the shadows in her heart.

“Eri...”

She crashed into him, hugging his legs before jumping back in unbridled excitement. He crouched in front of her as she bounced in place, eyes glimmering like jewels, “It was so cool Ren-ni! The concert was all WOOOO and AHHHH!” She dramatically inhaled, “Then after we went we went *ice-skating* AND I was the only one to answer one of Black Frost’s questions because the answer was *Ishtar* and-” She reached on the top of her head, where a new black and gold Joker mask sat, “I won this all by myself!! Are you proud of me?”

She froze, her dropping smile was a crime against nature, “Ren-ni? Why are you crying?”

“What?” Ren blinked at his blurry vision, and rubbed them away with the ends of his sleeve, “I’m okay, you’ve made me the proudest big brother there ever was.”

Her smile returned like a warm breath of spring after a brutal winter.

“I told you he’d cry too!”

Ren looked up to Morgana sitting on Kaito’s shoulder. Mirio was with them, eyes watery but smile equally as bright.

“Oh, you must all be famished!” Risumi clapped her hands together, her expression also teary, “We have a lot of curry and so many delicious treats yet! Eri-chan, do you want to pick something out?”

Her stomach rumbled, “Yes, please!”

Ren watched Eri hold hands with Risumi as they went to where the leftovers were stored.

He looked at Mirio when they were out of earshot, “Thanks for doing this.”

Mirio laughed and waved a hand at him, "It was no trouble! I wanted to see her smile too!"

"It was so crowded, but..." Kaito crossed his arms, "It was worth it for her."

"Totally!" Morgana held himself with pride, "I'm so happy for her!"

At that moment, Ren's phone sounded an alarm. He reached into his pocket to silence it as everyone looked at him.

Morgana sighed as he hopped over to Ren's shoulder, "We came back just in time."

"What do you mean?" Mirio asked.

"It's time to start my preparations for the finale." Ren said as he stored his phone away, "Can the both of you do me one last favor?"

Kaito raised a brow, "What?"

"Sure thing!" Mirio grinned.

"Make sure Eri's at the front of the crowd before the gate to my tent opens? I have one more surprise for her." He gave a significant look to Ayumu, who smirked and reached into a cupboard and took out a small container.

"What kind of surprise?" Mirio asked as Ren took it.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you, now would it?" Ren stated.
"She'll love it, don't worry."

Eri and Risumi walked back as Ren took off his apron and set it on a hook, somehow the action felt... final. As if this was the very last time he'd ever work with Risumi or Ayumu. His hand lingered on the fabric, ingraining every small detail of the Blue Lotus apron until slowly, he let it go.

“Where are you going?” Eri asked as she held a plate with a brownie.

“The finale starts soon.” He knelt in front of her again, grinning, “You’ll be able to watch your big brother be really cool. Think you can cheer me on from the stands?”

“O-Of course! I’ll be extra loud so you can hear me!”

Ren patted her head, “That’s my girl.”

“Good luck.” Kaito said as they left the tent.

Morgana took a deep breath as the Blue Lotus faded behind them, Fafnir and Lavenza keeping pace at their side, “This is it, isn’t it?”

“Our whole operation hinges on this. Not intimidating in the slightest.”

“I have every faith we’ll pull it off, Trickster.” Lavenza said as she hugged the Compendium, “Both the Magician and I will be there to support you.”

“Yeah,” Morgana smirked as the largest tent on campus loomed over them, “Let’s do this, Leader!”

“Right!”

Hawks watched Gentle Criminal end his stream in front of the Grand Finale tent. Tens of thousands of people have tuned in at one point or another.

“Gentle Criminal’s livestream is over.” He reported as his wings fluttered, hovering high within the USJ, “It shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Indeed!” Nezu’s chipper voice came through his comm, *“The readings just need one more push to be where we want them.”*

“Understood.”

Hawks saw Margaret, way down at the fountain, take a phone from her pocket. Apparently, one of Joker's old phones was the key to this whole mess. Hawks didn't fully understand what was going to happen, though as the hours tumbled by, the air grew thick as if some invisible force was trying to smother them.

That foulness climbed down their throats and infected their very beings with an oily slime. He tasted static on his tongue and a buzzing drone drilled into the back of his mind like tv static.

Hawks hissed as the air churned again, sending a chilling ripple through his feathers and making his teeth itch.

"You feel that?" Miruko asked, her tone serious.

"There's certainly something here." Ectoplasm replied.

"Of course there is!" Spinner yelled, *"Joker wouldn't lie!"*

"Merp!"

"Agreed." Mr. Compress stated, his tone bordering on protective venom.

"Prepare yourselves," Nezu ordered, *"Joker is about to begin the finale. We need to be ready for anything."*

"Understood!" Many voices called.

Hawks put his phone away and unstrapped the impressive grenade launcher named 'Yagrush' from his back. His utility belts and jacket pockets were full of elemental bombs and healing items. The Spiral Inferno Ring on his right pointer finger, a charred black band made from Moloch, filled his veins with boiling fire ready to burn his enemies to a crisp.

His job was to be the air support along with Ryukyu, who's steady wing beats echoed as she circled the USJ, on her back were Nighteye and Nezu to direct everyone when needed. The thick air

seemed to make it harder for her to fly, as she took longer and longer to make a full circle as the hours counted down.

The air above the fountain moved like heatwaves as another spike of strange distortion struck their bodies. It was like trying to breathe through a thick cotton blanket strapped over your face.

Hawks smirked as the strength of Joker's soul flooded his body like hot magma, burning the darkest parts of his heart away.

A sea of faces waited around the massive tent, only being held off by some small robots keeping a space clear in front of the great black gate. As the crowd swelled, so did their excitement. It was palpable on the air, clear in the eyes of those who believed in Joker with all of their hearts.

Fireworks and smoke shot up around the entrance as boisterous laughter echoed from the sky, silence washed through the crowd as a figure stood at the top of the tent. With an agile leap he dropped down, stomachs and jaws plummeted as he neared the hard ground. He flipped into a vibrant green tornado that sprang from nowhere, cushioning his fall as he landed in the center of the clearing.

Bright ripples of color cascaded from his boots as he stood, his confident grin big enough for all to see. Not a peep was made as he walked forward, footsteps echoing like war drums. The robots parted as he reached the edge of the crowd to kneel in front of a little girl with long white hair and a black Joker mask on her head.

He put a hand on his heart and bowed to her like a knight would to a princess, the box under his arm visible as he held it out to her.

She took it and popped it open, her smile were rays of sunlight as she took out a bright red candied apple larger than a man's fist. Joker winked at her before he flipped away to the center of the clearing, holding his arms out as his voice boomed across the grounds.

“Welcome, one and all, to the Grand Finale of the Festival!” He did a showman’s bow, a breeze surrounding him made his coat tails flare dramatically, “Come inside and witness the awesome powers and mysteries of the *Cirque Des Dieux*... if you dare.”

He threw down a smoke bomb. A sharp wind blew it away seconds later, but Joker was nowhere in sight. Silver chains rattled and fell away from the gate, which began to creak open of their own volition. Robots darted inside as the black gate yawned to its widest, revealing the inviting darkness to lure people inside.

...

Meanwhile, several forms dove out of the Velvet Room door placed in the corridor leading out to the main stage.

“That was great!” Mona cheered, “You looked so cool, Joker!”

“What a masterful opening, Trickster.” Lavenza said as she tucked the Compendium under her arm, several bookmarks stuck out of it in preparation for the finale.

“Thanks.” Joker looked out to the main stage, “But we’re only getting started, so let’s not pat ourselves on the back just yet.”

“*Oh, give yourself some credit.*” La Brava’s voice came in from the comm in his ear, “*That was amazing and you know it!*”

Joker chuckled, “How’s it looking outside?”

“*People are flooding in like we hoped.*” Gentle Criminal said, “*It won’t be long before your show can start in earnest.*”

“*Yeah, but we’ll have to stay on our toes. The Metaverse readings are dangerously high.*”

“All according to plan.” Joker said, “I told Margaret to activate it as soon as possible after my show starts, the longer we keep people in here the better.”

La Brava hummed, *“Hey...”*

“What is it?” Mona asked.

“No matter what happens, whether good or bad... I’ll always be grateful we were partners in crime.”

Joker’s heart swelled, “La Brava...”

“I second that.” Gentle Criminal stated, his voice adding to the warmth in Joker’s chest, *“I would’ve been a shallow husk of my current self, no doubt spreading more harm than good, without your humbling lessons! It’s thanks to you and Mona that we got so far. We’ll be with you until the very end.”*

“Yeah! So let’s tackle this Grand Finale like the kickass team we are!!”

Joker and Mona laughed, with the former putting a hand over his eyes when they suddenly felt watery, “If you two make me cry right before I go on stage, I swear...”

La Brava chuckled, *“You’ll love us anyway.”*

“... You’re right.”

“The last of the crowd have gone inside, Joker.” Gentle Criminal said, his jovial demeanor bleeding away into a resolved poise, *“La Brava and I will begin our duties posthaste!”*

Mona’s ears twitched as the sound of thousands of footsteps filtered into their hallway. Eventually the dull drone of conversation washed over the footsteps like a wave, people were finding their seats and the air tasted of anticipation.

Joker's smirked as he pulled on his gloves, "It's Showtime!"

"I can't believe we get seats so close to the stage!" Risumi whispered as they found their designated chairs. "Nezu was so kind to reserve them for us."

"I don't know if I'd call it close." Ayumu said, squinting, "We can barely see anything."

"It's part of the mystery!" Mirio's smile was somehow brighter than the flaming sconces providing just enough dim light to see where they were going, but the center stage remained cloaked by a nebulous void, "I can't wait to see what Joker has in store!"

"What does *Cirque Des Dieux* even mean?" Hitoshi asked as he plopped down beside his mother. "I forgot to ask Joker."

"I-It means 'Circus Of The Gods' in French!"

They stared at Eri as she hopped up next to Kaito, munching on her candied apple.

"How do you know?" Risumi asked, astonished.

"Joker and Mr. Compress have been teaching her French." Kaito said, his eyes focused on the blackness before them, "Joker's added small tidbits in other languages, too."

Eri took another bite of her apple, oblivious to the shock traded by others, when suddenly, the flaming sconces sputtered before going dark.

Hitoshi wasn't the only one to hold his breath, his heart pounding over the dead silence soaking the stadium. Then, a spark in the center of the stage. Hitoshi's breath caught in his throat as the tiny smudge of light exploded to a rising column of blue flame illuminating everything with deep sapphire shades and inky black shadow.

A massive dark form appeared within, as big as a building, and the flames parted before the veritable demon lord who descended upon Kamino. Satanael lifted his open hand, and in his palm stood Joker in all of his royal splendor, his eyes glowing like golden lamps in contrast to the vibrant blue cinders swirling around him.

“You’ve chosen to leave the world you know and brave into the unknown veils of the realms beyond. Well done.” Joker’s magnified voice struck everyone deep in their hearts, “You’re not afraid of the unusual-”

A second star blazed on one of the raised stages, the flames vanished with a beat of leathery wings. A woman with a skull for a face rode on a multi-headed dragon, raising her golden goblet as spears of ice grew around her.

“-The ethereal-”

Ishtar and Orpheus Picaro appeared on another platform in a forlorn dance, floating serenely as if they were underwater. Orpheus Picaro struck the strings of his lyre and sent out weaving musical notes of light over the crowd. Ishtar languidly spun in place and sent out her own spiraling aurora like a lover’s call lost to time.

“-And the *unfathomable* .”

Many in the audience felt their blood chill as a little girl emerged from the shadows on another platform, her grin too wide as macabre power writhed in an aura of death. Another rose next to her, an incomprehensible mass of squirming tentacles made of the void itself.

“Now, before we transcend above this world and into the domain of the gods, let’s give one last rousing cheer with a motto you all know by heart. Take it away, Black Frost!”

Black Frost appeared on the highest platform with a fiery twirl, “Hee ho, Go beyond-”

“PLUS ULTRA!!”

...

Thousands of voices cheered as the stage went dark once more.

“That was so cool!” Awase pumped his fists.

“As expected for a Phantom Thief,” Monoma sighed forlornly as he sulked in his chair, “But I wish he watched our play.”

“You’re still upset about that?” Kendo asked.

“‘Romeo, Juliet, and the Prisoner of Azkaban: The Return of the Kings’ was our magnum opus! It was so much better than what those posers at 1-A could do!”

“Joker wasn’t at 1-A’s concert either.” Awase chipped in, “Word is he’s been at the Blue Lotus all day, working.”

Monoma savagely grinned, “Well, I suppose that’s good enough for me. At least we have the honor of watching Joker perform now.”

“I’m hoping Seth appears.” Tsuburaba said, “Nobody’s seen him in ages!”

“There are rumors Joker doesn’t have him anymore,” Reiko’s soft voice was barely audible over the roar of the crowd. “Because he hasn’t appeared since the Summer Camp.”

“Awww man,” Honenuki sighed, “Seth was so cool. I wonder what happened?”

Pillars of holy light erupted around the stage, expunging the darkness as four heavenly forms orbited each other. Right below them on the main stage stood Joker. All the other deities from before

were gone. Only a few were perceptive enough to see the light blue glow on Michael's body.

"Archangel Gabriel and... that armor, that spear..." Ibara gasped as she placed her hands together in a prayer, "Could it be Archangel Michael? Uriel and Raphael, too?"

"He even has *Archangels* !?" Tetsutetsu yelled.

"Shh!" Kendo waved her hand at him.

The angels lifted their weapons in sync to Joker raising his own archaic dagger. Joker sliced towards the beams of light, the angels' weapons clashing together with a teeth-chattering *hum* of metal.

"Open, Gates Of Heaven!" Joker ordered.

The audience gasped as the light pillars collapsed like waterfalls. Cascading waves flooded the floor around the stage, rippling and flowing in liquid gold, and from the lake, birds of all shapes and sizes arose in the thousands. The living golden forms of swans, swallows, parrots, doves, and more flew together in a mesmerizing tornado, their sweeping feathers leaving trails of light in their wake.

With a wave of Joker's hand, the birds split off and began flying over the audience. Cries of joy echoed through the stadium, as one by one, the birds descended upon certain people.

A dove landed in front of a little girl who had secretly lost her life in the Musutafu fires, revived by Joker's hand.

A mighty eagle circled a support student whose family finally received justice and the courage to move on.

The unlikely pair of a crow and a hummingbird chose two children who had suffered greatly at the hands of others, but through their sibling bond with Joker they've learned to live their lives to the fullest.

1-B flinched back in their chairs as one of the largest birds swooped over them in a great span of feathers as large as a man. The peacock raised its head in a keening cry so beautiful it made tears spring into their eyes, unbidden. Its fiery feathers splayed wonderfully as it lowered itself and stared right into Monoma, the boy's jaw dropped as a wave of calm and undeniable *warmth* flooded into his heart. Kindness and compassion reflected within the bird's fiery white eyes.

He reached up. The moment his fingers brushed the living light, his body glowed and the bird dissipated into streams of light around him. The flame within his heart roared louder as the fatigue from the day washed away, and new strength and vigor filled his being to near bursting. And not only that, it was like this piece of heaven wrapped its arms around his hurting soul and soothed all of the barbed pain and anxieties he's accumulated over the years.

Similar events happened all over the stadium until the birds were gone. Another round of deafening cheers, claps, and heartfelt cries sounded through the tent. Joker and his Archangels deeply bowed before the 'Gates Of Heaven' disappeared and the stage went dark once again.

Monoma collapsed in his chair, expression in shock at the overwhelming sense of *relief* and *freedom* taking root within him. Monoma didn't even notice as the tears dropped onto his pants like a steady rain.

"Monoma, a-are you okay?" Kinoko asked as tears ran down her cheeks.

When he didn't answer, Kendo placed a hand on his shoulder, "Monoma?"

"O-Of course I am! Never better!" Monoma sniffled and wiped his eyes, "Did... did any of those birds land by 1-A?"

“Uh...” Nirengeki cleared his throat as his voice cracked, “Two, I think? An owl and a crane. I didn’t see who they chose though.”

“Oh...”

For once, Monoma didn’t mind being one-upped by his sister class.

...

Class 1-A weren’t the only ones to marvel at the Master of the *Cirque Des Dieux*, his prowess over every element, and of the gods, demons, and mythical deities who followed his every whim.

Cerberus and Byakko performed an epic ballad of fire, lava, and glistening glaciers of ice and snow. Todoroki studied every blaze and freeze with a critical eye, taking note that Byakko had an odd underglow of blue around his body. A few did, actually. Every time the stage went dark the being with the blue glow had changed, as if the blackness allowed Joker make some invisible preparations before his next acts.

Kaminari violently shook Kyouka next to him when a dance of wind and lightning were next, with Joker calling down controlled tornadoes and thunderstorms with Cybele, Odin, Baal, and Shiva.

“Do you think I can be that cool too!?”

“Oi, knock it off!” Kyouka jabbed at him with her earjacks, “Of course you can, idiot! But just stop shaking me!”

Fire. Ice. Lightning. Wind.

Common elements among quirks.

But the next display reached into the realms of the unknown. Fafnir, Titania, Hastur, and another pair never seen before. One, a man with

painted purple skin wearing a scarlet robe, in his hand he dangled a moving puppet on strings. The other, a floating stone coffin cracked open to reveal a single glowing eye and long horn, a terrible clawed hand reaching out from the abyss inside its own tomb.

At Joker's command there were booming pops of cosmic blue fireworks over the stage, followed by mind-bending flows of neon colors that pulled at what a normal mind could comprehend. Bursts of cursed black energy broke through the blinding colors like a cracking mirror. The hypnotizing display ended with Hastur summoning eyes from the darkest voids of space, which opened and shot multicolored beams in some semblance of a laser show.

With a bow from Joker and his mythical entourage, the stage faded to black once more.

"I never thought it would be this wild." Kyouka said as the next round of applause rang in their ears. "He's *never* showed off some of these crazy powers before!"

"I can't even imagine what he'll do for the finale." Sato nodded in agreement. "Not to mention his er... new friends." Hagakure said, "Like who was that creepy guy with the puppet? That scary demon in the coffin? That black tentacle thing!?"

"Fellow denizens of the darkness, perhaps?" Tokoyami tried to ignore Dark Shadow's writhing. His partner had been restless all day, filling him with churning oil and shadows playing with his mind, "My guesses could range from Nebiros to Belial, to any of the 72 demons of the Goetia. As for the void made solid, Dark Shadow reveres it with such fervor that its like nothing like I've ever felt from him before. I wonder if its not one of the mad dreaming gods of H.P. Lovecraft..."

"Uh..." Sero blinked, "We'll just pretend we totally have an idea of what you're talking about, dude."

"Quiet!" Iida chopped his hand, "Its starting again!"

“You’re the one yelling, Class Rep!” Ashido snarked back.

Alice, Fafnir, and Hastur materialized on various platforms on the stage, but Joker was nowhere to be seen until a bright blue blaze drew peoples’ eyes to the ceiling high above. Their guts wrenched in fear as Joker fearlessly balanced in the middle of a tight-rope with no harness. A fall from that height would be fatal.

“How did he get up there so fast?” Yaoyorozu clasped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

“*Gruuuuuegh.....*”

A growl shook their chairs, and the stadium went *wild* as Kohryu shot out from the darkness, his scales glowing from the brightly colored orbs he held in each paw.

Joker held out his arms as Kohryu closed in, and fell *backwards*.

There were more than a few visceral screams as Joker plummeted head first to a swift death.

Ashido gasped and covered her eyes, “Oh, I can’t watch!!” She said, obviously peeking through her fingers.

Joker shot out a grapple as Kohryu flew near, swinging as it caught Kohryu’s horn. Joker’s wide smirk could be seen as he soared right over their heads. They circled over everyone once before navy blue aurora flowed through the tent, and the dark ceiling was brought to life with a swirling galaxy and sweeps of sparkling diamonds. Fafnir howled as twinkling stars rained onto them.

But as the first stars burst apart in explosions of color, something in the air shifted.

Tokoyami stiffened as Dark Shadow screeched within his mind, and in the corner of his eye, he saw some of his classmates clutch their

heads. Others were too busy watching the show and swept the light headache aside as if it were nothing.

“Fumi!! It’s here again!! THE RED RAIN!”

Tokoyami shot to his feet in a panic, but was stopped with a firm hand on his shoulder.

He looked in surprise at Bakugo, his expression grave, “Sit down, Bird Brain.”

“But-!”

Bakugo’s eyes flashed, “Sit. Down.”

Tokoyami slowly sank back in his seat, rigid as he harshly whispered, “What are you doing!? Surely you felt it too!”

Most of his classmates’ eyes were turned up to the ocean of colors over them, but a few watched him with similar looks of worry and... *acceptance* . Todoroki, Midoriya, Iida, Kirishima, Yaoyorozu. It was only now that he noticed their placement around him, as if intentional.

“You...” Tokoyami shivered, Bakugo still had not let go. “You *knew* this was going to happen?”

“We knew you’d probably sense it the most.” Midoriya gave him a shaky smile, “But there’s nothing to worry about.”

“How can you *not be worried?* ”

“Look at Joker.” Iida said.

Joker had detached from Kohryu and fell towards the tallest platform, performing agile flips before he landed in a certain pose, both of his feet wide apart, one hand on the ground and his head bowed. His footsteps splashed in great waves of purples and reds.

Joker looked up, *directly at them* . His grin was gone, his eyes blazing with twin suns that bore into his soul. Dark Shadow *shivered* at it.

The cheers were accompanied by stomping feet, the noise so loud they couldn't even hear their own thoughts. Kohryu's roar added another layer of noise to shove away the strange shift in atmosphere most had ignored. Joker and the others on the platforms did a bow before the stage went dark, but Kohryu was still as bright as a disco ball.

"Joker knows." Todoroki leaned in to whisper, "Let him handle it."

Tokoyami swallowed, "Very well."

Bakugo curtly nodded and let his hand drop.

As they say, the show must go on.

La Brava blinked as a raindrop hit her nose.

Gentle Criminal gasped, "My dear-"

"I know."

The pair watched U.A. bleed into a hell-scape, the bloody rain falling around the invisible barrier that both cradled them in the air and kept the entire tent untouched. With a snap of his fingers, Gentle Criminal put an additional barrier over them to keep them dry.

La Brava balled her hands into fists as she watched the bloody tears trickle down the barriers, "Go get 'em, Joker."

"I'll keep the show rolling. Get the the USJ, Trickster!" Kohryu howled as Joker hurled himself from the stage and into the hallway, where Mona and Lavenza waited beside an open Velvet Room door.

They wordlessly jumped in together.

Joker turned right on his heel as Lavenza brushed the gate with her fingers, and when they jumped out-

The USJ was in complete pandemonium.

A red hue had taken over the glass dome, bathing everything in a hopeless light of bloody terror. Spires of bone protruded from the ground, with skeletal spines crawling over everything like demonic centipedes.

The tear in reality was *visible* . It loomed over everything like a great shattered mirror, pouring unrestrained Distortion into the facility. Sounds of battle hounded their ears, flashes of elemental magic and the screech of metal sang with shouts.

“Joker, look!” Mona cried in horror.

They turned to see a tall silver angel standing over Yagi, Cementoss, and Ectoplasm.

“Th-that’s...” Mona’s pupils shrunk, “That’s a Shadow!!”

All color left Joker’s face as they witnessed their very first Shadow in over half a year. But this... this wasn’t the basic angel made of crude shapes from the Qlipoth World. No, this angel had a fully formed humanoid body, with four great wings sweeping over its torso. The etchings of a hundred eyes were carved within its metal body.

It turned to them, its face a polished, empty mask.

“Help the others!” Joker order, “I have this one!”

“Got it, Joker!” Mona replied.

The Shadow seemed shocked as it flinched away, but with a cry of rage Joker leapt, twirling through the air to land on its shoulder.

“I’ll reveal your true form!” He grabbed that mask and ripped it away.

He jumped off as black blood spurted from the torn face and covered its whole body, which contorted on itself before it fell into a black, bubbling pool.

Joker landed by Yagi, “Are you guys okay?”

“Y-Yes!” Yagi was pale, but his blue eyes blazed as he gripped Providence tighter.

“We are unharmed for the moment.” Cementoss said with an impressive amount of calm clarity.

“How are you here already?” Ectoplasm asked, eyes wide.

“No time to explain! These are-”

Joker didn’t finish his sentence before the black pool burst, and a group of five unfamiliar Shadows hovered above them: Four of which were translucent angel statues made of glass, with vibrant red hearts beating in their torsos. At the head of the group was an angel in flowing white robes and long hair, its face covered by a golden mask and a halo over its head.

“Virtues!?” Gabriel cried in the mindscape, *“And... Angels, but not the ones we know from home. These are far more powerful!”*

“The Trickster is alive!?” One of the Virtues screamed.

Another growled, “How!? Our Lord sensed that he was-”

“It doesn’t matter!” The Angel snarled, “Kill him! Kill the abomination for our Lord!”

“Wait!” Joker cried, “Can’t we talk about this? You don’t have to-”

“SLAUGHTER HIM BEFORE HIS WORDS TWIST OUR MINDS!!”
The Angel screeched in a tone of grinding metal.

Magic charged the air and Joker jumped to avoid their blessed attacks, pillars of light erupting around him as exorcism slips dogged him. The heroes followed his lead, scattering to surround the angels.

Yagi provided cover with his gun, bullets flying through the air. Ectoplasm and Cementoss used a Blizzard Ring and a Dragon's heart to counter with their own magic to give Joker an opening.

"Alice!"

Alice burst out of the mindscape with feral bloodlust, "Just die!"

For once since being thrown in this world, Joker didn't fear the high pitched screaming of her teddy bears as they dog piled on the angels and exploded. The Virtues were eradicated with painful screams and splatters of black blood, the various light pillars died away as the exorcism slips fell limp to the floor.

"How dare you!" The Angel cried as it collapsed to the floor from the fallout, "I'll make you pay for that, sinner!"

"Talk. *Now* ." Joker said as he pointed his gun at its head, "And maybe I'll spare you."

"NEVER!" The Angel covered its ears and howled, "I'll never betray my Lord! Never never nevernevernever**NEVERNEVER NEVER** -"

Joker pulled the trigger. The lone gunshot was accompanied by the gasps of the heroes and the splatter of Shadow blood, the Angel disappearing with a mad cry and an explosion of black.

"Joker..." Yagi exhaled in a shaky breath.

"How could he..." Cementoss whispered.

He looked back to the heroes staring at him with wide, horrified eyes at what looked like a merciless execution of a disarmed foe. Joker opened his mouth to explain, but more silvery angels appeared around them in bursts of shadow.

Alice jumped between Joker, the heroes, and the new Shadows, "We have this area covered, Big Brother! Go!"

Ectoplasm and Cementoss fell into equal stances, expressions wiped of shock to focus on the battle.

Joker bolted, Yagi watched him go before he returned to the battle at hand.

Mona and Lavenza had joined another battle alongside Midnight and Snipe, with another group of Shadows he had no knowledge of. A knight donned in crusader's armor, dual wielding a combat shotgun and an assault rifle. It flew from the bright circles of magic floating at its back. The other was a mechanical abomination of human and different animal faces, red feathered wings stuck out of the small openings on the top of the strange contraption.

"Terminators and Cherubs." Gabriel's laugh wasn't a happy one, "I've not seen them in many years. The Magician and Strength have those covered, but the Priestess fights alone!"

Joker looked to the arch over the stairs. There was another of the angelic Shadows twice as big as the others, but this one was gold and had six wings and four arms holding various weapons. Miruko ducked and weaved over the spear and sword strikes, laughing as she countered the next mace swing with an axe kick that generated its own wind. Sparks flew as the larger Shadow was thrown off balance, unable to guard itself with the shield in its last hand.

"I'll rip your face off, jackass!!"

Miruko jumped on its shoulder, jamming the silver blades of her Gordios into the faceless mask to tear it off with a deluge of black sludge. She leapt and landed beside Joker with a grin.

Joker fell into a battle stance with her as the black pool exploded.

Another pair of angels hovered before the stairs. The one to the left had darker blue skin and pale hair, with six crimson wings. The other had a lighter tint of blue skin, with vivid green hair and gold wings, in his hand was a long rapier. Their wings curled around them completely, as both of them were missing the lower halves of their bodies.

Gabriel appeared between the groups, the odd pair's expression hardening, "Aniel... Kazfiel... it's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

"Don't you dare speak as if we're on familiar terms!" Aniel, the crimson winged angel, spat.

"You've turned your back on god to help this blasphemer who came back from the dead?" Kazfiel shook his head in disgust.

"How do you know of the Trickster's death?" Gabriel asked with a razor's edge to her voice.

Kazfiel laughed hollowly, "It matters not. Whatever the case, he's an unholy abomination that must be purged for our Lord! Oh, it sickens me to see how far you've fallen, Gabriel."

"As if you're one to speak of being 'fallen', Kazfiel!"

A bright blue burst of flame brought forth Michael next to Gabriel. Joker looked to see Lavenza approaching, Compendium open to his page. Mona, Mercurius, Midnight, and Snipe continued their battle with the Cherubs and Terminators behind her.

"Who was it that tried to learn to true name of God from me with silver-tongued deceit?" Michael's wings flared in rage, "And now you serve the false god that has brought nothing but pain and suffering upon humanity!"

"You lie!" Aniel said, wings bristling, "Humanity wants to be ruled over, not just in our world, but so many other worlds like this one,

too! Can't you see we can bring peace and unity across all of space and time?"

Miruko gawked at Joker in disbelief.

"Peace? Unity?" Gabriel swung her sword in an arc, the blade singing through the air, "Does this *invasion* look like peace to you!? No! It is subjugation! Please, wake up and cast away your loyalty to the false god! Join the Trickster's side and stop this!"

"No!" Aniel cried. "Our Lord is true and just! His word is law!"

"The demon's wickedness will not tempt us!" Kazfiel said as he glared at Joker, "We'll slay him if it's the last thing we do!"

"Trickster," Lavenza whispered at Joker's side, "I sense incredible power under the rift. It may be their commander."

Miruko wiped off her disbelief with a sharp smirk, "We can handle these losers. Joker, the strongest one's all yours! Give him a good ass kicking from me, yeah?"

"Be careful." Joker put his hand over his black and gold mask, "Satanael!"

Aniel and Kazfiel gasped as Satanael rose behind Joker. Even in his smaller size, he was intimidating with arms and pitch black wings majestically splayed. They cowered when Satanael returned their glare with one of his own. Gabriel and Michael smirked when the other two angels began to sweat.

"N-no you don't!" Kazfiel shot forward.

Gabriel met him in a clash of swords, smiling softly as sparks peppered them, "You'll not touch them, traitor."

Micheal jabbed his spear at Aniel, the four beautiful angels entering an elegant dance of combat. Miruko cackled as she joined in, using

the Dragon's Horn on her belt to throw severe atomic magic between strikes.

Joker wasted not another moment.

He and Satanael locked wrists and shot into the air with a hard flap from Satanael's wings. The central plaza was a war zone of heroes and angelic Shadows fighting tooth and nail to gain ground. Hawks dove on one particular group giving Best Jeanist and Gang Orca trouble, flames wreathing him as he barreled through Shadows like a raging phoenix.

Ryukyu did the same with another group, and with Nighteye's frightening accuracy they managed to thin the ranks around Mr. Compress and Spinner with bombs of ice and curse damage. They got the pleasure of seeing Tensei, whole body crackling in lightning from Ishtar's Goddess Horn, kicking a Virtue apart at literal lightning speeds.

Eraserhead, Present Mic, and Tsukauchi formed another squad at the base of the stairs. The detective was a crack-shot, the bullets from Judge Of The Dead striking through the Shadows' heads as the others distracted them.

"There, Joker." Satanael pointed with his other arm, "The Attendants..."

Elizabeth, Theodore, and Margaret were fighting against more waves of the larger golden angels with their Personas. They kept the number of stronger Shadows like Aniel and Kazfiel down while they waited for Joker to move against the biggest fish in the facility.

Behind them, as Lavenza said, must've been their commander.

It calmly floated below the rift on *eight* wings, with various different limbs holding things like a book, a staff, or a gun, other empty palms were open with the carvings of eyes staring across the battlefield. The shining platinum metal on its body had a brighter lustre with

hues of shifting colors underneath. It didn't have Yaldabaoth's size or winged halo, but the uncanny resemblance was there despite the additional changes. It watched indifferently as its kin were locked in battle. With a bored brush of its free hand, dozens more silver and gold Shadows appeared and joined in the fights around the USJ.

"Let's give Yaldabaoth Jr. a warm welcome." Joker looked up at his true other self with a shameless grin, "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"We art thou, thou art us." Satanael chuckled, "I wouldn't have it any other way, my dear Trickster."

"Let's do this!"

Joker's world became a blur of colors and the sounds of chaotic battle when Satanael violently twisted around. His true other self gained speed with a few more twirls before Satanael tossed him. Joker soared over the USJ, the wind howling in his ears.

Yaldabaoth Jr. craned its head up as Joker's shadow fell over it. Joker collided with its face, the mask so large that Joker had to grab it with both hands.

He smirked as it tried to shake him off, "You're mine!"

The mask was ripped off. Joker dropped to the ground as black blood coated the ground and clogged the fountain, roiling and rippling until it emerged from the bubbling pool of shadow. Joker's heart leapt to his throat as this angel rose to nearly five times his height.

Golden robes fluttered around a full metallic body, shining coldly from the rays of light generated around him. The feathers of his wings were like blades overlapping one another, scraping together in a razor sharp rasping. The white crosses in his emerald eyes blazed with haughty arrogance.

Joker stood before the greatest angel, who had given him his strongest gun before he fought Yaldabaoth, the *Voice of God* himself- Metatron.

“*You* .” Metatron’s voice reverberated in timbres of cold steel and iron, “How do you yet breathe?”

“This again?” Joker unsheathed Paradise Lost, a weapon fit to cleave angels. Metatron sneered at it. “What are you talking about?”

“Our Lord felt your presence, that *blasphemous bond* you had with him, die. And yet you’re standing before me.” Metatron stared into Joker’s eyes, “This makes no sense.”

“Yaldabaoth sent you here because he thinks I’m *dead* ?”

“Hmph. He summoned us to his glorious side as you exhaled your last foul breath, evolved us into greater powers as your rotten soul withered away. We received our mission then, our arrival is a prelude to his holy rule over this world!”

Joker shook his head, “How long did it take you to get here?”

“Mere minutes.” Metatron frowned, “I thought we were lost for a moment in that blasted void, but our Lord’s light reappeared and guided us here, the first world to fall.”

Joker frowned in thought.

Kamino was *months* ago, but to them the news of his death seemed fresh.

He *had* died, but his bond with Yaldabaoth must’ve died with him since he’d taken the mantle of the World. Joker’s eyes trailed up to the cracks of broken reality as he tried to put the pieces together, watching the infinite black void twist and turn in impossible ways.

Yaldabaoth tore apart entire realities and warped the laws that kept everything in tact. But what about the space *in between* worlds?

Either Yaldabaoth had unintentionally Distorted the flows of time as well, or he gravely miscalculated forces he had no understanding of.

“But your Second Awakening changed that.” Lavenza said after they reunited, “It blazed a pathway through the darkness, and with the aid of my siblings, we were able to break through and reunite with you. Although, the trip seems to have been one way.”

Igor and the Attendants were drawn here through his Second Awakening and the call of his World Arcana, but *it was a one way trip* in which they arrived within seconds. Yaldabaoth was arrogant enough to believe that with Joker’s death, keeping watch on the Velvet Room was pointless.

But that begged the question of the *Red Rain* itself, being an extension of Yaldabaoth’s power.

The only instances were when his phone had been on before he met Overhaul, which broke under the strain, and now, after Margaret activated it under his order. Satanael had sensed weird lights within the break in reality, and these Shadows were drawn by some sort of light when they got lost. Could the light that brought them here be an anomaly messing things up, or some part the Metaverse itself? Or in the Velvet Room’s case, had his new and growing powers pulled them here instantaneously, or did it have something to do with Mona since he was nearby at that time? Some strange combination of both?

Either way, with no guide to show them the way, not only were Yaldabaoth and his forces completely helpless in the space between worlds, but the changes in the flow of time itself greatly favored Joker.

They were still on a time limit as Yaldabaoth’s caustic power ate through the space between and the last natural defences of these worlds, but the balance tipped towards their side for once.

Metatron reeled back when Joker burst out into fits of laughter, "What insanity is this, sinner?"

"It is not insanity." Satanael floated down behind his Trickster, a smug smile on his lips.

"Satanael." The two angels glared at one another as Joker calmed down, "If it is not insanity, then what other strain of madness is it?"

Satanael smirked, "He's laughing because Yaldabaoth is a bigger fool than we previously believed."

"Don't you dare speak my Lord's name in vain!"

"Oh, I'll do as I please." Satanael said.

"Do you really think," Joker wiped his eyes and grinned up at Metatron, "That Yaldabaoth can win? He was wrong about me being dead when he sent you on this suicide mission, and he's wrong about trying to take over these other worlds because he's a greedy, power hungry megalomaniac! You've already lost."

"I am the Voice of God!" Metatron howled in fury, "His divine will shall be done by my hand! I'll not rest until all opposing sinners are crushed! If you must fall under my might instead of accepting our Lord's merciful rule, then so be it!"

"Really?" Joker unsheathed the Nataraja and pointed it at Metatron, "Your previous self helped me out before. *He* saw Yaldabaoth for what he truly was! Why can't you?"

Metatron grasped his head, "I'll not be swayed by your trickery! My previous selves were *failures* brainwashed by a devil's wicked tongue!" Joker opened his mouth to retort, but the green of Metatron's eyes flashed red, "Enough! Face my judgement and perish, worm!"

Metatron summoned a small army of Shadows to overwhelm the USJ. More spires of bone shot from the ground and the air weighed heavier on their lungs as the Distortions spread under his power. Metatron lifted his arm, his metallic limbs screeching as Almighty magic prickled their skin.

“Satanael!” Joker yelled, sprinting around the fountain.

Satanael flew back and rained down thunderous bullets as the unrelenting light of a Megidolaon shook the USJ, leaving a gaping crater in the central plaza.

“Joker!” Margaret flew to his side with Yoshitsune as the dust settled, floating like a goddess of war. “What are your orders?”

Joker shook his head as Metatron blocked Satanael’s blade with the metal of his arm, sparks flying in all directions. “Talking won’t work, so we’ll have to weaken him first. We’ll enact plan b!”

“Understood.”

She and Yoshitsune disappeared into the uncontrolled chaos, the iconic *slashing* of a Hassou Tobi splashing black blood and sending screaming angels to their deaths. Elizabeth and Lucifer danced with the light of Theodore and Helel, dozens of Shadows falling in their terrible wake only for more to replace them. It was like cutting off the head of a hydra, only for two more to appear. The horrible gleam of shining Shadows cut off his view of the heroes.

Joker tore his gaze away and shot Metatron with the Nataraja, the bullets bouncing off of his chest.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” Metatron beat Satanael back with a hit from his massive bladed wings, the feathers ground together like the drawing of a sword as he rose into the air, his ruby eyes glowing with the heat of a volcano.

Lasers shot from Metatron's eyes and struck the ground around Joker, the concrete boiling under his feet.

"Master!" Cerberus materialized behind Joker, who jumped on as Cerberus broke out in a sprint to avoid pillars of roaring fire sprouting around them.

Metatron locked onto them with his eyes, the attack following. One split second was all it took for Metatron to gaze across the various zones behind them. The Squall Zone's dome melted, the Flood Zone's lake boiled away into nothing with great clouds of steam. The yacht crashed onto the floor and broke apart, the pieces slowly melting into slag. A light grazing seared the Conflagration Zone as the dome collapsed in on itself and destroyed the small city within. The trees and greenery around the plaza were turned to ash and the mountains in the Mountain Zone were sliced cleanly in half.

Pain seared into them as the attack caught up, leaving a boiling scar all across the USJ. Satanael cried in rage as he lunged at Metatron again, cutting off the attack in a frantic flurry of beating wings.

Cerberus' skin smoked as he took the brunt of the damage, but remained standing when he slowed down and allowed Joker to hop off. The only small grace was that Metatron's devastating ability didn't touch anywhere near the other battles, most of the Zones were simply caught in the crossfire.

"What happened?" Joker asked as the damage soaked into their soul.

"It wasn't fire," Cerberus growled, "It was Almighty!"

Metatron broke off from Satanael's attack and hovered over the fountain. "Wait... *Two* ?"

They looked up at Metatron, the crimson of his eyes fading to green in shock as he looked between Satanael and Cerberus.

“Oh, do I have a surprise for you.” Joker, his face dusted with ash, laughed as he pulled Fafnir, Mother Harlot, Cybele, Hastur, and Odin into reality.

His soul strained at the sheer number of Personas anchored in reality, like a vase overflowing with an ocean’s worth of water, struggling to keep it all in without shattering. But the cracks of his soul had been painted over in gold, tempered with a new iron will forged in crimson blood and azure flame that would not crumble before the enemy.

Not now.

Not ever again .

Metatron snapped out of his horrified shock with a wave his hand, Shadows rising up in glimmers of gold and silver around him.

The Personas jumped at the Shadows, tearing off the masks with teeth, claws, or weapons. An explosion of black pooled around the battered plaza as scores of angelic beings charged at the order of their commander.

Joker waltzed through the horde as his Personas made a path towards Metatron and Satanael. The entire mindscape flowed into a united soul as the merciless onslaught continued-

-Fafnir cackled as he tore the heads of Terminators off with his jaws, their bullets useless on his silver scales splattered with black-

-The sorrow from Gabriel as she plunged her blade through Kazfiel’s neck, Aniel wailing in rage-

-Cybele dancing through winds tearing out the vibrant feathers of the Cherubs, the many abyssal eyes summoned by Hastur piercing their bodies-

-Alice's cruel laughter as scores of Angels fell beneath her dark power-

-Mother Harlot's joy as she froze another wave of Virtues solid, Odin cleaving them with his spear-

-Kohryu twirled over a small Sea of cheering humans, their boundless energy flooding into the Trickster's soul-

-Joker and Satanael moved as one as they continued assaulting Metatron with blade and bullets-

But one Persona languished, unable to stop picturing the smile of his previous Wildcard amidst the chaos. His heart once again brimmed with new power, but unlike the dark insanity from Kamino, this one was lighter... brimming with Hope to end this slaughter.

Joker and Metatron's colliding Megidolaon attacks caused an earthquake that split the destroyed fragments of the USJ in half, crevasses sprouting to every corner like the deep roots of a gnarled old tree. The glass dome cracked and rained down shards of glass, small trickles and rivers of blood red flowing in the facility. The first splatters reached Joker's feet when Orpheus Picaro snapped.

"I'll stop this madness!"

Joker and Satanael froze as the energy from the small Sea within U.A. was absorbed by Orpheus Picaro.

Metatron laughed coldly as he threw a Megidolaon at them in their distraction. Pain writhed through Joker and Satanael, but they were still standing, albeit injured and shaking. The boundless flow of magic from the Sea stopped dead like a frozen river.

"What's the matter?" Metatron taunted, bearing damage to his silver skin, his robe torn, but he held strong in his own right, "Have you decided to surrender? Bow your heads to me and I'll offer a swift death!"

“NO!”

Orpheus Picaro appeared in a fiery swirl, his shout resonating through the USJ. The battles stopped, humans and hundreds of Shadows staring in shock when Orpheus Picaro's body glowed with vibrant prismatic energy.

“Orpheus,” Satanael frowned, “What is the meaning of this?”

Orpheus Picaro tucked his lyre under his arm, his other hand resting over his heart, “I've felt a power steadily beating within me as the Trickster continues his journey in this world. Now, with this battle of fate and the energy garnered by the Sea of Human Souls, I can don my next form and end this senseless battle!”

Joker inhaled sharply, “You mean...?”

Satanael's eyes widened, “Yes! Orpheus, take that power and soar into new heights!”

Metatron growled, “I won't let you-”

“SILENCE!” Satanael's magic bubbled under Metatron and an oily black serpent shot out.

Metatron snarled as Black Viper wrapped around him, fangs sinking into the crook of his neck. The other angels moved towards the plaza with a unified cry to free their commander, the sheer number of them cloaking the central plaza in shadow. Then, a light encompassed the whole of the USJ. Not the burning white of a Megidolaon, but the calm and pure essence of a light not found anywhere on earth.

It faded after a moment, and Joker gasped at the Persona that took Orpheus Picaro's place.

Still painted in colors of deep black and red, stood a being similar in looks to Orpheus, though *not*. He had longer white hair and a spiked crown, and instead of a lyre, his left arm was wrapped in chains

attached to a string of small coffins. He ascended high over the USJ, the spiked obelisk floating at the Persona's back followed, the golden wings attached to it spread wide.

A horrible screeching battered their ears as hundreds of Angels, Virtues, Cherubs, Terminators, and several forms of Aniel and Kazfiel converged on Messiah Picaro. Joker clamped his hands over his ears at the unnatural, grating sounds ripped from the realms of the divine, the dizzying orchestra not meant to be heard by human ears.

"We art thou, thou art us." The Persona's tranquil voice cut through the mad cacophony of noise, "My name is Messiah Picaro, and I order you all to *begone*. "

He cast a Megidolaon fueled by the remaining energy from the Sea of Human Souls, the smile of his previous Wildcard fading from memory as he forged a new vow for his next Wildcard. Joker heard every Shadow scream as their lives were extinguished in one fell swoop.

All except for one.

Thick silence wallowed after the magic dissipated and Messiah Picaro descended, the light previously around his body all but used up. They felt the eyes of all the heroes on them as Messiah Picaro's feet touched down in front of Metatron, the sole survivor who was now on his knees with his heavy wings drooping.

Metatron stared in disbelief, "It... it cannot be..."

"You have a choice to make, Metatron." Messiah Picaro said serenely, "Be the Trickster's prisoner, or become his mask and help us fight against the false god's tyranny. Which will it be?"

"I'll never be that devil's mask!" Metatron snarled.

Joker sheathed his weapons and looked at Margaret, who nodded and dispelled Yoshitsune. Margaret walked towards Metatron,

handing Joker his old phone in the process.

A Velvet Room door appeared and opened, writhing black chains poured out of it with a snap of Margaret's fingers. The Black Viper disappeared as the chains coiled around Metatron's body and dragged him towards the Velvet room, but the angel wasn't done just yet.

He focused all of his twisted hatred at Joker, "You may have won this battle, you incorrigible demon, but the war will be won by my Lord! Mark my words, God will descend upon this world and wash it clean of sinners! He will not spare any of you as your souls burn in the fires of-"

Elizabeth jumped and kicked Metatron in the face, flinging him into the Velvet Room door which then closed in a loud slam of metal.

"Geez. What a chatterbox." Elizabeth muttered.

"He'll be locked away until we can interrogate him." Margaret said with a sigh.

Joker grimly nodded and looked at his phone. The fruits of their mission bore an unexpected result: a startling change to the Metanav. The icon had the same cracks as the rift over their heads, each shattered piece of the Metanav's icon bearing a different art style in glitched or reversed colors. He frowned as he exited the app in the way he would when they left the Metaverse.

"Returning to the real world..." A warped voice said with a hiss and pops of static.

Slowly, the cracks in reality sealed themselves back together, and the reddish hue of the sky faded to a peaceful blue. Any blood red puddles turned to normal water. Bone spires and skeletons receded back into the broken earth. The only evidence that the tear remained was a single break in the air over the fountain, like a bullet through

glass. The broken USJ dome allowed sunlight to pass through, dotting the razed facility in a new warmth.

Someone cleared their throat before Joker could check through the Metanav for more clues.

He looked up. All the heroes' gazes were locked onto him in silence. Scuffed, bruised, and bloodied with obvious expressions of shock, disbelief, confusion, horror, or a combination of all of them. Ryukyu had landed softly while he was distracted, so it was Nezu who cleared his throat, fur raised on end.

"Your performance?" Nezu asked as easy as if they were talking of the weather, though his black eyes glinted eerily.

Sweat broke out on the back of his neck, but Joker replied calmly, "I need to do the finale."

"Right." Nezu turned towards the heroes, "We'll wait for you in the designated meeting room."

"I'll heal you all first."

Cybele's Salvation might've healed their injuries, but traces of the nightmare they just survived were stuck to them in their expressions and torn costumes. Only Mr. Compress, Spinner, and Lady Stubbbs were calm, the men giving him thumbs up to signify that they were okay.

Joker glanced at Messiah Picaro as all other Personas aside from Kohryu returned to him. The new Persona bowed deeply before following his brethren. Joker turned his back when he couldn't take the heroes' blatant stares and walked into the Velvet Room.

The Attendants and Mona joined him seconds later.

Heavy drag marks and gouges on the stairs led to one of the isolated cells in the outer ring. He chose to ignore it and turned to face the

wall of light, flinching at the unexpected pair of arms wrapping around him, joined by another.

“Elizabeth? Theodore?” Joker blinked, awkwardly hugging them back

The both of them let go, and Joker gaped as Elizabeth hastily wiped tears from her eyes.

“We never thought we’d see Messiah be reborn like that.” Elizabeth said, smiling as she ruffled Joker’s hair. “Well done.”

“He looks dashing in your colors, Joker.” Theodore cleared his throat, “Though I never thought to see Elizabeth cry...”

“Hey!”

“Ooomf!” Theodore clutched his stomach where Elizabeth punched him.

Margaret chuckled softly, “Enough fooling around. We still have work to do.”

The white door rippled and they stepped into the hallway of his stadium. Kohryu’s roars and the cheers of the small Sea within the tent soothed them.

Mona looked at him in concern, “After everything that just happened, you’re still good to go on stage?”

“I’m as good as new, Mona. Satanael used his Victory Cry.”

“Th-that’s not what I meant.” Mona sighed when Joker gave him a look, “Well, if you’re sure...”

Joker got out his other phone and texted Gentle Criminal and La Brava the all clear, and to do their part of the finale at Mona’s signal, “You ready, Lavenza?”

Lavenza smiled, something so warm and soft and filled with pride, as she ran her gloved finger down the many bookmarks in the Compendium. "Of course, Trickster. Let's give them the finale they all deserve!"

Joker nodded as he headed towards the main stage, "It's time to finish this."

"Ren-nii hasn't appeared in a while," Eri watched as Kohryu vanished after a display of warping colors and strange eyes.

Kaito had his arms crossed, finger tapping incessantly on his arm, "I'm sure he's fine."

Mirio glanced at him in concern, "What do you mean? Its not like he's in any danger!" When Kaito said nothing, Risumi and Ayumu exchanged worried glances while Hitoshi narrowed his eyes. Mirio's smile faltered, "Er... right?"

Just then, another pyre ignited on the stage. Then another, and another. One after the next until the entire stage was nearly full, and at their heart stood Joker. People began to cheer as Byakko, Black Frost, and Mother harlot erected a massive ice pillar halfway up to the ceiling.

Joker moved like a maestro as he guided the next Personas' in tandem to his elegant movements.

Odin and Cu Chulainn struck the pillar with their spears, cutting off large chunks and sending an icy spray into the air.

Cerberus and Byakko roared as they charged, claws slicing through a portion like butter.

Gabriel and Fafnir were next, shaving off more snow to pepper the air. The first chills of the final act reached the audience.

Yatagarasu, Cybele, and Alice carved it with their magic, and the ice sculpture began to take shape.

A few of Joker's Personas vanished, replaced by more as Joker continued to direct them in a mesmerizing waltz.

Hastur, Vasuki, and even Kohryu returned, their honed strikes hacked more from the statue into a more refined shape. The wind generated by Kohryu carried fine ice shards over the audience.

Shiva, Nebiros, Vishnu, Titania, Micheal, Uriel, Byakhee, Macabre, Mot.

One after another were secretly summoned by Lavenza to continue refining the ice sculpture until it became recognizable, disappearing as fast as another took its place in a seamless flow of deities.

Moloch, Thor, Kali, Dionysus, Raphael, Beliel, Norn, Pixie, Bishamonten.

The ice crystals turned into a fine, cool mist washing through the whole stadium.

Satanael and Messiah Picaro appeared over the statue and, with a mutual nod, plummeted at the same time. Their stokes were the final touches to the statue, but Joker wasn't finished.

He twirled on his heels to face the audience, and made a downwards swiping motion with his arm that ended with him kneeling, the Personas following all in unison. Suddenly, the perpetual darkness plaguing the tent was driven away by the rays of sunlight shining down from the open ceiling, the tarp having been ripped away so suddenly.

The air sparkled like diamonds as the sun bounced around the mist, casting the whole stadium in a veil of shifting colors. Best of all, the sunlight pierced through the translucent sculpture and made it *glow* .

The giant statue was gorgeous. A work of art. A *marvel*.

It began with Joker and Arsene posing on the bottom in uncanny detail, as if carved from the hands of a renaissance sculptor. And from them spawned every Persona in the Compendium, rising up and out in perfect copies of the real ones, all held together with swirls of frozen blue flame.

But at the peak, held up by Satanael's great icy wings, were Seth and Sraosha locked in flight towards the heavens.

There was awed silence, then a deafening wall of noise as people rose from their chairs in a standing ovation.

Hitoshi found himself joining in, grinning as Joker and his multitude of Personas took a bow in the sunlit aura of rainbows. Hitoshi squinted. The last he knew, Joker had trouble holding 8 Personas out at once, but there were more than that on stage now. They began to disappear before he could count the new total until only Joker and Kohryu remained.

"What's he doing?" Mirio asked, awe-struck.

"What else?" Kaito smirked as Kohryu lowered his head to the stage, "It's the Phantom Thief way to leave *in style* ."

Joker hopped on Kohryu's head and they circled over the audience. He waved to people with his iconic grin before the dragon shot out of the opening at the top, the tip of his tail tossing the last of the sparkling ice crystals into the clear blue sky.

Joker, Mona, La Brava, Gentle Criminal, and all of the Attendants hurried down a certain hallway within U.A.'s main school building. The Festival had concluded. People vacated the grounds as the students' spirits soared at the raging success of the Festival overall. The sun began to set by the time they reached the door to the meeting room, the voices behind it were muffled, but frantic.

“Joker...” Mona looked at him, ears wilting. “Are you ready?”

Joker’s hands curled into fists, “Yup.”

“We’re with you.” La Brava grabbed his sleeve.

“Indeed.” Gentle Criminal stood tall as his piercing gaze drilled into the door, “We won’t make the same mistake when you first shared your story with us, Joker. We’re in this together.”

Lavenza gave him a nod of encouragement, as did the other Attendants.

Joker took a deep breath and threw the door open.

Conversation stopped at their sudden appearance, most heroes landing bug-eyed or panicked gazes right on Joker. They stared at him differently now, as if he were a brand new foreign species never before seen on this planet, all of them having heard the angels’ or Metatron’s direct words about the truth of their predicament. Or, like Yagi, Cementoss, and Ectoplasm, witnessed first hand what happened to Shadows who didn’t comply.

Mr. Compress and Spinner were the only ones to give reassuring waves. Lady Stubbs kept glaring at Nighteye for some reason, the man frowning sharply.

The silence stretched and crept over every facet of the room like a persistent weed. Nobody moved or breathed. Joker set his jaw and repressed shivers at feeling like he was being held under a microscope. Which, in this case, *he was*.

Naturally, Joker did the first thing that sprang to mind.

He cleared his throat and imitated Sojiro, “Let me explain.”

Internal screaming intensifies

I've literally been teasing my betas with Metatron gifs, using his iconic Fire of Sinai, for about a year now with 0 context, and I've been so excited to throw a twist in and use really old angel designs from SMT(plus the Angels from SMT V), some of which we've not seen in literal decades, adding to Messiah Picaro's evolution which I've been so excited for for several months. Ah, the true beginning of the end everybody. It's going to be fun >:)

Another fun fact for the beginning of this chapter, I actually did that reading for myself and Arachne to add into the story, and it worked out so well in ending with The World.

Welp, with this cliffhanger I'm going to start my break. See you guys on July 8th!

Another Ideology

Chapter 92: Another Ideology

“Okay, you’re scaring me.” Hawks said more seriously, “What’s wrong?”

Miruko muttered something.

“What?” Ryukyu asked.

“It’s not fair!!” Miruko yelled as she round-house kicked the street light in half, the bulb flashing out as it crashed onto the pavement.

Woah an update a bit over 3 weeks earlier than planned!? There's a good reason for this, and also a good reason as to why the next chapter will have to be delayed to August as well.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Joker’s story spilled out in a never ending flow of words, all documented by Tsukauchi’s pen.

Protecting that woman from Shido and getting arrested, his probation to Tokyo. Meeting Sojiro and staying in Leblanc’s attic. How he and Skull discovered the Metaverse, meeting Mona, their first target and the result of taking his Treasure. Other Phantom Thieves and Palaces, explaining the true nature of Personas and Shadows and battles against Palace Rulers.

Questions were frequently asked and answered. The room became choked in tension after Sae helped him escape the interrogation room, drugged up to the gills after dodging an assassin’s bullet, the

heroes' wrath tempered with tense shoulders and watery red eyes. More than a few had darker expressions or white knuckles.

Joker proceeded with Shido's Palace, Crow's death, and up the Qlipoth World with Yaldabaoth. The silence began then. He saw it as soon as Yaldabaoth split reality and cast the Phantom Thieves to different worlds, and while they regaled their ventures in this world starting from the League's first attack.

The confused glimmers in their eyes, the bewildered stares between one another, as if all of the stunts in Tokyo happening in a *different version* of Japan was too outlandish to believe. Nezu's inky gaze drifted back and forth from the dead silence of one half of the table, to the other side who hadn't stopped speaking.

Tsukauchi's faithful pen kept writing until they rounded off with their latest battle against Metatron, having scrawled enough pages to compile several novels worth of events. Tsukauchi set his pen down, threaded his hands together, and stared at the notes with haunted eyes.

Nobody spoke a word since.

The vigilantes traded glances, but Joker signaled them to wait. The Attendants stayed silent most of the time, only speaking when spoken too, but even Margaret and Theodore were showing subtle signs of impatience. Several more minutes pass, and the first sparks of irritation arose in Joker's heart.

Joker grabbed the cup in front of him, frowning when the coffee had long dried up. With a sigh, he placed it on the table harder than he intended, the loud *thunk* of ceramic made the heroes flinch.

"Will somebody say *something* ?"

Nezu gave a pointed glance to Midnight, who cleared her throat and snapped the heroes' silence like a twig.

“I believe them.” Midnight said resolutely, “I said I’d have their back no matter what, and I *keep* my promises. After what happened at the USJ, the destruction far worse than anything the League did... It’d be signing our own death warrants if we covered our ears and turned our backs on them simply because we think their story is too far fetched.”

“Well said, Midnight!” Nezu chirped.

“Of course we should believe him.” Yagi offered a warm smile to Joker, who smiled back. “The least we could offer is our trust and compassion.”

Nezu looked to Tsukauchi, “What are your thoughts, detective?”

Tsukauchi shook his head, “It’s a lot to take in at once.”

“But they haven’t lied once, have they.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“No.” Tsukauchi shuffled his notes, “My Quirk registered everything as the truth, and given the current state of the USJ, it’s anything but a fantastical lie.”

“Of course its not a ‘fantastical lie!’” Spinner cried.

“Merp!” Lady Stubbs added with a stamp of her paw.

“But having *multiple worlds* in trouble at the hands of a false god is a hard pill to swallow.” Nighteye stated, to which others hesitantly agreed. “And I don’t agree with some of the methods Joker used to... defeat those Angels.”

Mr. Compress scoffed, “Oh sure you don’t, you’d rather roll over for your new overlords as long as they’re ‘nice’ about it.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Nighteye’s calculating gaze met Joker’s, “How can you go from reacting to All For One’s death the way you did, to putting a bullet through a helpless enemy’s head?”

“We already told you normal Shadows aren’t human, the only exceptions are Palace Rulers.” Joker said, keeping his irritation at bay.

“I admit it was surprising, witnessing Joker executing the Angel like that.” Ectoplasm said, “However, looking at what we know now, it was the safest and most humane choice to make in the middle of battle. I don’t hold any resentment over it.”

Joker gave him a thankful nod.

Nighteye opened his mouth, but another beat him to it.

“Please, debating won’t get us anywhere.” Gentle Criminal stood from his chair, “It may be hard to believe for some, but it *is* the truth, and Joker handled the Shadows as he always has in the past.” His bright blue eyes scanned over the heroes, as if daring to make another challenge, “Don’t make the mistake of not believing him, or discrediting his methods, as La Brava and I did when we first heard the story.”

“Yeah!” La Brava leaned forward, her tiny form radiating strength, “One of our biggest regrets was doubting them! You’ve seen what they have to face, so don’t you dare back out on them now!”

“You guys...” Mona murmured.

“Fine. I’ll let it go.” Nighteye pinched the bridge of his nose, “But this aside... everything makes sense when put into the context of my Quirk malfunctioning as it did, since you’re an anomaly that was never supposed to be here in the first place.”

“Thank you.” Joker smirked, “Besides, it’s not all doom and gloom. There are a few fun little truths, too.”

Tsukauchi gave Joker a look as if he would regret his next words, “Such as?”

“The differences in time.” Joker said, “It was Christmas day when we fought Yaldabaoth. My birthday is in February. I’m technically 17 years and 4 months old now, but because we landed here in April, my 17th birthday has yet to come. Well, technically we were in 2016 and jumped to 2218 in this world, so I could be 219 years old here...”

Tsukauchi swallowed, “The... the both of them are true.”

“How does that even work!?” Present Mic yelled as he gripped his head. “That makes no sense!”

Nezu cackled as others stared off into space to digest that.

“Ooh, here’s a *really* fun one!” Mr. Compress grasped Joker’s shoulder, “Arsene Lupin is my distant ancestor, and since Arsene was Joker’s truest other self, that would make this not-17-year-old-boy my 20 times great-grandfather! In a strange, roundabout way.”

Tsukauchi looked as if he gained ten years, “True...”

“No wonder you two look so alike!” Thirteen said.

“Of course.” Mr. Compress preened, “Dashing good looks and master thieving skills runs in the family!”

“Speaking of differences in time,” Lavenza said, “Having multiple time-lines in our world is a common occurrence as well.”

Elizabeth nodded, “The guests Theodore and I have had walked the same path, yet were different people within branching timelines.”

“Shiomi Kotone was a girl who fought hard to protect her friends and loved ones, and made the ultimate sacrifice on the top of Tartarus to seal away Death.”

Elizabeth nodded, “Arisato Minato was a boy who put his friends over everything else, and paid the ultimate price at the top of Tartarus in order to seal away Death and save the world.”

Joker's heart grew heavy at the mention of Minato, the emotions coming from none other than Messiah Picaro himself. Ah, so Minato was his Wildcard. No wonder Theodore and Elizabeth looked pained when he first tried to ask about them, and Elizabeth's reaction to seeing Orpheus before.

"There are differences to the timelines of course," Theodore said.

"Minato lost a close friend to death."

"While Kotone saved that very same friend, but at the cost of him falling into a coma."

Joker's eyes widened, "Margaret? Lavenza? Is it the same with you?"

"Of course." Margaret smiled fondly, "In one timeline, Narukami Yu discovered the true identity of a serial killer and saved the world from a deadly fog created by Izanami. In another, he aided the serial killer in his escape and framed another. There are infinite combinations of outcomes."

Lavenza looked at him in concern, "There are some where you perished along your journey, one where you accepted Yaldabaoth's deal to continue the Distortions. If you sold out your friends to our world's Judgement, then Crow would've been successful in his attempt to kill you."

"You can't be serious..." Mona said, eyes as wide as dinner plates. "Joker would never work with Yaldabaoth!"

Joker pursed his lips, but said nothing.

"Unfortunately, it is true." Margaret gave Joker a reassuring smile, "But currently we cannot say how differently time runs between these various worlds, or how its affected in the space between."

“So, if I am to guess,” Nezu looked over the Attendants, “*This* timeline is an anomaly?”

“Precisely.” Margaret said, frowning, “It shouldn’t be possible to connect on such a deep level with entirely different worlds.”

“Our master might know.”

“Theodore!” Elizabeth snapped.

“This Igor you spoke of?” Nezu asked.

Joker sighed, “We kept him hidden before, but now we have to introduce him to you.”

Mr. Compress looked at Joker, “Spinner and I met him once, but it would be beneficial for everyone else. He is rather... intriguing.”

“Let’s meet Igor then,” Nezu said as he gave a stern glance to the few looks of hesitant doubt in the room, “And eradicate any last traces of disbelief. Shall we?”

Joker rose to his feet and used his Key, the room gained a soft blue glow and low clouds of fog clung to the floor around the heroes’ feet. The door opened with rattling chains as he disappeared into the ghostly mist.

Those who’ve been here before entered second. Others slowly filtered in as Joker reached the bottom of the stairs, shivering at the cold fog, the sound of chains harmonizing with Belldona’s unforgettably beautiful singing, the dreary atmosphere of a stone cold prison.

Midnight and Present Mic openly ogled, those like Ectoplasm, Cementoss, and Thirteen traded concerned glances and kept staring strangely at Joker. Vlad kept his scowl, but his unease was apparent. Yagi bordered on haunted heartbreak.

“Hey,” Ryukyu pointed behind Joker, “That way was closed off before.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth sneered, “To *protect* our master from intruders.”

“Enough, Elizabeth.” Margaret chastised, her expression softening as everyone reached the bottom of the stairs, “This way.”

They walked down the hall and reached the Velvet Room proper, Igor beamed at the appearance of so many guests. Joker leaned against the open door of his cell while the Attendants and Mona lined up behind Igor’s vintage wooden desk.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room.” Igor said, his bloodshot eyes unblinking, “My, my, what a crowd you’ve drawn, Trickster.”

Many stared up in awe at the vast galaxy swirling in the nebulous ceiling, their faces splashed with silver starlight.

“What is this place?” Nighteye gazed into the cell behind Joker, frowning. Aizawa and a few others had spotted his cell, looking unsettled.

“It’s a place between dream and reality, mind and matter.” Igor said, “It’s somewhere Wildcards can gain new powers to grow stronger throughout their journeys.”

“This is my cell.” Joker said, “It’s open now, but I got the full prisoner treatment when Yaldabaoth was posing as Igor. Striped prisoner’s uniform, iron cuffs on my wrists, a fancy ankle bracelet attached to a huge metal ball. The works.”

“You *lock* your guests in jail cells?” Aizawa growled, glaring at Igor.

“... Of course not.” Margaret said coolly, “The Velvet Room takes a different form for each guest. My guest was in a limo.”

“Elevator traveling to the top of Tartarus.” Theodore said, to which Elizabeth nodded.

Lavenza sighed, "The Trickster's Velvet Room was twisted into this shape by Yaldabaoth, and with myself being split apart and my master sealed away, there was little we could do to aid him."

"What's done is done." Joker stated, "Besides, I broke free with my own power and made this place my own."

Lavenza smiled warmly, "Indeed."

Nezu clapped his paws together, "Igor, if I may be so bold to get straight to the point, how is it that Yaldabaoth gained the power to trespass upon multiple worlds?"

"I don't know, even the Velvet Room doesn't have that power naturally. Yaldabaoth's new ability is a grave anomaly, indeed." Igor shook his head, "The only person who may know the answer, without asking Yaldabaoth himself, would be my master."

"Wait, *what* ?" Joker gaped, "I thought you were the real master of the Velvet Room?"

Igor chuckled as his eternal grin widened, "I am not its master, no. I was created by my master and given the charge to watch over this space and the guests who find themselves here. It was I in turn who created the Attendants to help with such duties."

Mona crossed his arms, "Can I ask who is the master of our master?"

"Philemon." Igor whispered. The name seemed to emanate from every crevice of the Velvet Room. After a moment of shocked silence, Igor shook his head, "You see, he lives within the realm of the collective unconscious, and once made a bet with his counterpart, Nyarlathotep, in a wager to test the strength of the human heart. You could say they were the catalyst that created Personas in the first place."

Joker's jaw dropped.

“They... *created* Personas?” Mona whispered.

“Indeed.” Igor sighed, “But I wouldn’t count on either of them to make an appearance. I’ve not spoken to my master in many years.”

“Our new prisoner might know more.” Theodore said, “I’m sure he’ll have plenty of valuable insights as to the well-being of Joker’s home as well.”

“He’s still quite furious about his captivity, and won’t give the answers we seek for quite some time.” Margaret added.

“Let him stew in isolation for a while and he’ll sing like a canary.” Elizabeth said with a smirk. “He still believes Yaldabaoth will swoop in and save him at any moment. How pathetic.”

Nezu wilted in disappointment, “I see. Then we must put that aside and focus on what we can do now.”

“Like filling in the MetaNav,” Joker retrieved his phone from his pocket, “But its different now.”

“Really?” Mona went to Joker’s side when he opened the app, “Whoa! It is! The design is all wonky and broken.”

“Before we needed the target’s name, location, and the Distortion. For example, Kamoshida’s key words were his name, Shujin Academy, and Pervert Castle.”

Midnight wrinkled her nose in disgust, “How lovely.”

“And now?” Nezu asked.

“The location is the same, but this time there are ‘Core’ and ‘Door’ options, as well as an option to ‘connect or disconnect.’”

“The ‘Door’ option may be the portals themselves.” Mona said. “But I have no idea what ‘Core’ means.”

La Brava hummed, “You can search the app’s history, right? Wouldn’t there be information there since we used it at the USJ?”

“Right.” Joker frowned as he found it, “Target: Magician, Door: Black Mist, Core: Quirks, Location: School. Connected to... it’s just a bunch of symbols.”

“I’m the target!?” Mona cried.

“Wait, *Black Mist* .” Tsukauchi said, “As in... Kurogiri?”

Joker nodded. “Yaldabaoth used Kurogiri’s portal to banish us.”

Tsukauchi fell into a thoughtful silence.

“If Yaldabaoth thinks you’re dead, then you wouldn’t be on there as the World, Joker.” Nezu added, “But I wonder why its set-up the way it is?”

The Attendants exchanged glances, and Margaret added, “We’ve spoken to the Trickster on this subject before.”

Theodore nodded, “How Yaldabaoth is slowly altering the rules of these realities through his unnatural meddling. These could be the ‘Keywords’ needed to target these specific worlds.”

Nezu grinned, “If the Door is the portal you came through... and our world’s ‘Core’ keyword is Quirks... then it could be the certain types of magic or powers specific to that world? The Location is self-explanatory but may take a lot of brainstorming nonetheless.”

Mona gasped, “Joker, try putting in another Arcana!”

Joker opened a new tab in the MetaNav, but froze.

Mona’s excitement died when his partner’s face crumbled, “I know what you’re thinking Joker, but I think we should try Oracle and Skull first.”

“Really?”

“Think about it!” Mona waved his arms, “Oracle’s abilities are invaluable in this situation! And... its unlikely we could sneak back to our world as is without Yaldabaoth knowing about it.”

Joker looked at his phone with a new determination, “Hermit and Chariot.”

“Match found.” The distorted voice crackled as the first category filled in.

Joker’s heart soared, and he and Mona stared at each other in wonder.

“Okay, so the Door.” Joker said.

Mona crossed his arms and hummed in thought. “The door they fell into was a shoji door, right?”

“No match found.”

“Uh...” Mona blinked, “So its not a normal shoji door?”

“Doesn’t seem so.” Joker thought back to that fateful moment where Oracle and Skull were tossed away, “It gave off a weird vibe, and it *glowed* from what I remember. There has to be more to it.”

“Glowing door?” Mona tried.

“No match found.”

“Door to heaven?” Joker said.

“No match found.”

“Spirit portal?” Joker guessed again.

“No match found.”

Mona sighed, "This is going to be harder than we thought. Just like old times, eh Joker?"

Joker placed the phone in his pocket, "We'll keep trying to fill in the words later, but at least we have a start."

Igor turned to the heroes, "You've all gained knowledge of the Trickster's true origins as well as a way towards the enemies and allies alike. Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"I might regret asking," Tensei looked around uneasily, "But how do you gain new powers in a *prison* ? You've said that when we were here last, but you never specified what you had to do, just that it was... painful."

Joker looked at Lavenza, "We could do a demonstration, but it's not pretty."

"We can handle it." Nezu clasped his paws together, "Anything to get a better understanding of your powers and what Yaldabaoth put you through to get them."

"Heck, we don't even know how he does it." Spinner added.

Joker saw everyone stare at him expectantly. "If you say so. Lavenza?"

She ran a finger down Compendium's spine, "Who will you fuse?"

Blue cinders fluttered around Joker as Alice and Black Frost appeared beside him. "You ready?"

"Hee, anything to grant you new strength, ho!"

Alice curtsied, "Of course, Big Brother."

Joker patted Alice's head and gave a high-five to Black Frost before they followed Lavenza to the other side of the room. The sudden appearance of the guillotines startled the heroes, as they weren't

there when everyone first came in, only becoming visible when necessary.

Hawks paled as the blades glimmered in the pale light, “You can’t be serious.”

Belladonna’s singing flowed with everyone’s horror when Lavenza threw the blue shroud over Alice and Black Frost, dragging their wriggling forms under the precarious blades.

La Brava gaped at him, “This whole time whenever you got *new* Personas-”

Joker remained a calm mask of neutrality, “Yes.”

Spinner clutched Mr. Compress, Lady Stubbs shielded her eyes with a paw like a noble lady about to faint.

“We’ve heard the term ‘fusion’ before,” Gentle Criminal said, unable to look away, “But I never imagined it was like *this*.”

The *SLAM* of metal was followed by an explosion of writhing energy, which combined into a fierce Persona born before them. The Ultimate Strength Persona, a ferocious blue-skinned god bound in chains and skulls, his expression set in a thunderous scowl that looked as if he’d tear your face off as soon as you looked at him wrong. In his right hand he held a vajra, the arm raised as if to call down the fury of the heavens.

“I am Zaou-Gongen.” He spoke like the slow rumble of a splitting mountain, “I shall lend thee the power of three divinities. I am another angry mask of thee...”

He turned into a mask that flowed into Joker, his veins flowing with icy fire as the calls of the other Personas welcomed this new power into the fold.

Joker shrugged when the heroes gawked at him. "I told you it wasn't pretty."

Nezu opened and closed his mouth several times.

"Oh my *god* ." Hound Dog muttered, "You struck Nezu speechless."

"That happens once in a dozen blue moons." Power Loader whispered.

The rat regained his bearings, his black eyes peering deeply into Joker, "How many Personas can you fuse at once?"

"*Nezu* ." Aizawa snapped.

"I can fuse more than two Personas." A bubble of emotion flickered in his heart like a lone candle, the source was a certain Persona, "But... wait..."

Yatagarasu appeared on Joker's shoulder, "If the Devil wanted another demonstration, then use me. It is my time."

Joker raised a brow, "Your time?"

"Yes. Due to our power increasing from this latest battle, and from Messiah Picaro's own evolution, the path to my next self is made clear."

Joker felt it too. That candle building up in Yatagarasu over time now rose into a roaring pyre rivaling the heat of a volcano.

"Alright." Joker gave him an affectionate pet, "Let's do this, pal."

Yatagarasu nuzzled Joker's hair, "I'll need Ishtar, Kohryu, and Shiva to join me."

Joker slipped Lavenza the last of his cash to summon Shiva, and the four Personas went before four guillotines and donned the executioner's shrouds.

“I can’t watch this again.” Spinner said as he covered his eyes.

Cementoss deadpanned at Nezu, “You just *had* to ask, didn’t you.”

Nezu watched the next execution with a critical gaze.

Joker’s soul ignited when the guillotines fell, everyone but Joker and the Attendants ducked as the magic thrashed around the walls until they clashed in blinding rays of light. Joker shielded his eyes as warm sunlight replaced the soft silvery light of the stars.

Joker lowered his hand and gazed upon the dual *Sun* and *Aeon* Persona before him.

An empyrean woman smiled at him, her face painted white with crimson markings, her expression peaceful as her eyes burned with the golden glow of the sun. The white kimono she wore was rimmed in layers of crimson and gold, shimmering from the golden light she radiated. Her long ebony hair swayed in a black halo in contrast, and was decorated with a gilded headdress with celestial bodies carved into it. Joker’s eyes traced the moving smoke-like scarf floating above her shoulders, trailing down to wrap under her arms and out again at her sides.

“I am Amaterasu.” She said, voice commanding the warmth of summer, “As your mask, I grant you the life-giving power of the sun. Use it to eradicate the darkness and illuminate the heavens!”

With a flash of holy fire, she turned into a mask and flowed into Joker. His other Personas, awed by the power bestowed upon them by Yatagarasu, greeted her as one of their own. Zaou-Gongen bowed to her in respect.

The guests stared at Joker in unrestrained devotion, some seemed shell-shocked to have witnessed the birth of the most important deity in Japan.

“Now you have Messiah *and* Amaterasu!?” Spinner said after a spell of silence, “Dude, that’s totally cheating!”

“We need all the power we can get to fight against a *god* and his vast army of bloodthirsty angels.” Joker countered. “I bet the numbers at the USJ were only a tiny fraction of what we’ll face in the final battle.”

Mr. Compress tipped his hat, “Touche.”

Ryukyu cleared her throat, reverence simmering in her eyes, “So we’ve seen fusion, do you... need to do that when you get equipment as well?”

“Not with the guillotines, no.” There were sighs of relief, but Joker continued, “We get the equipment from the electric chair, train Personas through solitary confinement, and sacrificing one Persona through the gallows will strengthen another with skills or experience.”

Relief shriveled back into horror.

“... We don’t need any more demonstrations.” Vlad muttered as he pointedly glared at Nezu.

“Yes. We’ve received what useful information we could, at the moment.” Nezu looked around to blanching heroes, “Let’s return before we overstay our welcome.”

They needed no further instructions to turn tail and leave. Aizawa hovered near the hallway entrance for a moment, glancing between Joker and the cell with an inscrutable expression before turning his back. Nezu politely bowed to Igor and was the last of the heroes to leave.

“You guys go ahead,” Joker said to the Attendants and vigilantes, “I want to ask Igor something.”

“Very well.” Lavenza cordially nodded, “We’ll wait for you outside.”

“What is it, Trickster?” Igor asked when they were alone.

“Something occurred to me.” Joker shoved his hands in his pockets, his fingers brushing the phone in his right pocket, “The rift wouldn’t open unless the MetaNav interacted with it in some way, but the MetaNav had disappeared completely when we were first here, and you came through when my phone was broken by it. Did Mona regain his ability to let through without realizing?”

Igor leaned forward, “It was not the Magician.”

“Then...?”

“Did you happen to see a butterfly before the MetaNav appeared again? Before the Velvet Room returned to you?”

“I-” Joker stilled. He *had* seen one. Once. “When I... after I died and talked to Akechi in that strange dream, a glowing blue butterfly came to us and took me back. I thought it was just the butterfly from a Samarecarm, but my Second Awakening, the return of the MetaNav and the Velvet Room, the Red Rain at U.A., everything happened in quick succession after that.”

“... I see.” Igor unblinking eyes were deep in thought.

“Do you think it was Philemon?”

“I cannot say for certain.” Igor’s eerie smile widened, “My master has not made an appearance in several years, that much is true, but perhaps he decided to lend a helping hand in his own way. Humanity has always been watched by forces outside of our comprehension. Our situation may have drawn special interest from such beings, as well. Perhaps they are watching right now, waiting to see how this war between you and Yaldabaoth ends.”

Joker bristled, “Do you think Yaldabaoth obtained this power to access worlds from one of them?”

Igor's eyes sparkled in affirmation, "There's always that possibility, Trickster."

"Great." Joker muttered, "Thanks, Igor."

Igor nodded, and Joker left the Velvet Room.

The heroes and vigilantes turned to Joker when the Velvet Room door closed. They had already been affected by the truth, pinning him with all sorts of emotions, but all notions of hesitant disbelief were cleaved by a guillotine's blade.

Joker glanced at Nezu. "I have a few open slots that need to be filled now."

Nezu nodded knowingly, "Very well. I'll have extra funds delivered in the morning."

Power Loader sputtered, "So that's where some of our money has been disappearing to!"

Joker gestured to the godly gear hanging from their hips or strung over their backs, "The shiny new weapons and armor you guys have aren't free, you know."

Power Loader grumbled.

"Now everyone," Nezu said, "It's been an arduous day, both mentally and physically. And it's quite late. Let's adjourn for today. Rest. Eat. Compartmentalize the ground-breaking truth and our new mission if you have to. We'll have a lot of work ahead of us and we need to be well-rested!"

"What about the USJ?" Thirteen asked.

"Its in dire need of repairs." Cementoss added.

"Indeed, and it should be safe to do so. The readings have gone down to an all time low." Nezu retrieved his phone and showed the

graph, “No spikes at all!”

“I wonder if it has to do with us using the MetaNav.” Mona said, “It could’ve stabilized the rift since it was the key to opening it in the first place. And since we closed it properly, it can’t run rampant anymore.”

Nezu turned to Joker, “What are the chances of the USJ having another unexpected incident?”

Joker hummed, “It’s unlikely, but I wouldn’t put it past Yaldabaoth not to get suspicious and try something after a while.”

“I agree, the rift closing doesn’t mean it isn’t still dangerous.” Margaret said, “We Attendants will continue guarding the facility while it’s under repairs and afterwards.”

“So you’ll keep us updated after we leave?” Hawks asked. “As much as we’d like to, sticking around U.A. for too long would make people ask questions.”

Nezu nodded, “I’ll give you daily updates and inform you immediately of any emergencies. Otherwise, we must act as if everything is normal around the students, and *especially* the media. The timing of the next stage of our plan relies on Joker and Mona.”

“Right.” Joker said, “Getting stronger Personas and a wider variety of gear for you, while filling in the MetaNav to reach our teammates in other worlds.”

Vlad let out a long sigh, “If that’s all, I’m going to go straight to bed. My brain is complete mush after this.”

“Yes, yes.” Nezu waved him away, “Good night, everyone!”

Exhausted heroes gave Joker and Mona glances of deep-seated respect and sorrow before they left. The vigilantes followed after a nod from Joker. The Attendants returned to the Velvet Room.

“Joker, Mona.” Nezu sighed when they stared at him, “It would be wise to start informing those you trust about your situation. Your unexpected departure might prove detrimental to them otherwise.”

“Hitoshi and Midoriya already know.” Joker shook his head, “But Eri... Risumi and Ayumu... everyone else...”

“It won’t be easy, but it needs to be done.” Mona said gently.

“... Yeah.”

“Plus one other thing.”

“What?” Joker asked.

Nezu straightened his spine while his tone morphed into that of a strict teacher’s, “While our plan relies on your pivotal role as the Trickster, you *will* make a promise to not run yourself into the ground in a blind rush to accomplish your tasks. I’ve watched people shoulder the weight of the world by themselves until it broke them, and I refuse to watch it happen to you. Am I understood, young man?”

Joker’s face turned red, “I promise I’ll take my time.”

Mona snickered, “I’ll make sure of it!”

Nezu deflated with a soft sigh, “Good. Now go get some rest.”

Mona returned to his feline form and Joker relinquished his costume in a flash of blue fire. Morgana jumped on his shoulder and they walked out of the empty school together, surprised at the night sky twinkling with stars.

“Wow, he wasn’t kidding when he said it was late.” Ren closed his eyes and enjoyed the breeze on his face, “You feel that?”

“What?”

“The Metaverse’s presence is weak.”

“It must be centered around the USJ now.” Morgana smiled as he looked around, “Our first mission was a huge success, in more ways than one!”

Ren smirked and continued walking. It was... quiet. Peaceful. A gentle wind rustled the trees, a few fiery leaves fluttered down onto the cobblestone path, marking the beginning of the end of fall and ushering the creeping shadow of winter. They reached the gate of the teacher’s dorms when a voice called to them.

“Ren! Mona!”

Ren looked down the path, “Midoriya?”

The boy slowed down with a pant, stabilizing himself with his hands on his knees.

“What are you doing here?” Morgana asked, wide-eyed.

“Isn’t it past curfew for students?” Ren added.

Midoriya caught his breath, sheepishly smiling, “I-It is, but I couldn’t sleep or sit still, and when I noticed the teachers return without you... well, don’t tell Iida I snuck out to make sure you were okay.”

“You thought the worst had happened.” Morgana said, flicking his tail.

Midoriya nodded, “So? Is everything okay...?”

“For the most part.” Ren’s eyes trailed to the dorm, “It’ll take the heroes some time to really understand what’s happening, but they’re not locking us up in an asylum, so that’s a start.”

Morgana rolled his eyes, “As if I’d let them.”

Ren smiled at him before looking at Midoriya. "Thanks for checking on us."

Midoriya nodded, "I'm glad you guys are okay! I should get back before Iida notices."

Midoriya rushed towards the 1-A dorms while Ren walked through the gate. Their hearts eased when they went inside and were greeted by a patter of small feet.

"Ren-nii!" Eri threw her arms around Ren's legs.

"Why are you still up?" Ren asked with a gentle smile, Amaterasu's warmth flaring at the presence of the Aeon Arcana.

Eri stared at him with her doe-like eyes, "I wanted to wait for you."

Ren patted her head, "Sorry. We had a lot to talk about with the heroes."

"Adult business?"

Morgana chuckled, "Something like that."

Kaito leaned against the wall nearby, "A few heroes came back and went straight to their rooms. Most of them were... not in the greatest mood. Mr. Compress said others decided to take long walks around the school grounds."

"It's not surprising after the day we had." Ren frowned as Nezu's warning replayed in his mind, and he knelt in front of Eri, "We're going to have an important talk. Not tonight, but soon. Okay?"

Eri's expression turned bold, "O-okay. I'll be a big brave girl, I promise!"

Ren smiled, "Good."

"Can you read Arsene Lupin to me?"

Ren's heartstrings tugged, "Of course I can."

They held hands as they went to her room. Marshmallow was asleep on the corner of her bed, cracking open an eye and chirping at their entrance. The white feline crawled over Eri as she got settled in bed, and it only took half a chapter for her to fall asleep.

Ren smiled sadly as her little arms were wrapped around Marshmallow. He tucked the covers around Eri's chin while Marshmallow began to purr.

Morgana grimaced as he continued to stare at her, "Ren..."

"I know." He patted her head before they walked out, shutting Eri's door softly behind him.

Kaito leaned against the couch, waiting for them, "When are you going to tell her?"

"Tomorrow, at the earliest." Ren dully replied.

Kaito's expression turned somber, "The sooner the better."

Ren turned away so Kaito couldn't see the heartbreak on his face, "Yeah. Good night."

"Good night."

The exhaustion hit them like a ton of bricks the moment Ren's door closed. He sagged on his door and groaned, "What a day."

"You could say that again." Morgana said, rubbing against his hair, "Come on, let's get to bed before you pass out on your feet."

"What about a shower? I feel gross."

"... Do you really have the energy for one?"

"No."

“Then let’s get you straight to bed! You can shower tomorrow!”

Ren chuckled, “Bossy as always.”

“Hey!”

Ren was out the moment his head touched the pillow.

Morgana curled up on his partner’s chest and followed him into dreamland.

“Okay, this whole silent thing really doesn’t fit you, Miruko.” Hawks said, his hands folded behind his head, “And Gang Orca... and Jeanist...”

Miruko was the first to stomp away from the gaggle of teachers, the others naturally followed as if driven by some instinct to stick together.

“I agree.” Ryukyu crossed her arms, “Are you alright?”

Tensei shared a look with Hawks at the continued silence.

Miruko led them to Ground Beta and stopped below the lone street light illuminating her. Gang Orca and Best Jeanist were behind her, the trio had not spoken a single word since they discovered the literal torture their kid went through in the interrogation room and the other hard truths revealed to them.

“Okay, you’re scaring me.” Hawks said more seriously, “What’s wrong?”

Miruko muttered something.

“What?” Ryukyu asked.

“It’s not fair!!” Miruko yelled as she round-house kicked the street light in half, the bulb flashing out as it crashed onto the pavement.

“Miruko...” Ryukyu uttered in shock.

“We took down those crummy smuggling rings together, went through Sapporo... Kamino...” Miruko furiously rubbed her eyes, “He *died* under our watch! We saw *his body* in the morgue, for fuck’s sake! We were separated for *months* before we reunited and fought Overhaul together. Now we know of all of the fucked up shit other adults put him through before we met him! We... we just got the kid back into our lives, only to learn we’re losing him all over again! I don’t even understand half of what he said and its just... so- ARGH!”

The street filled with silence after her scream echoed into the empty city.

Tensei swallowed as he looked to the others, “How do you all feel about this?”

Gang Orca’s fists were clenched, “I can’t say it doesn’t hurt.”

Best Jeanist refused to let his eyes up from the ground, his hand rubbing his stomach where he was gored in Kamino and subsequently healed by Ishtar.

“Everyone...” Ryukyu sighed, “I feel the same, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“How can you say that?” Miruko accused.

“Think of it this way,” Hawks put his hands up when he got the hot end of Miruko’s glare, “It’d be pretty crappy of us if we forced him to stay here, right? This whole situation is way more fucked up than we could’ve ever dreamed, but intentionally keeping him away from his loved ones is even worse.”

“But...” Miruko’s eyes flooded with frustrated tears, her voice broke like the fractured remains of her heart, “Doesn’t he realize we love him, too!?”

“Oh, Miruko.” Ryukyu wrapped her arms around the other woman, “Of course he does! This will be just as hard on him as it is on us.”

Miruko hugged her back.

Gang Orca sighed and ran a hand down his face, “In the end, this isn’t about us or how we feel. It’s about helping someone we care about safely return home.”

“And kick this Yaldabaoth’s ass.” Miruko muttered.

Tensei smiled softly, “That too.”

“We’ll miss him.” Best Jeanist whispered.

Tensei’s warm chuckle further softened the atmosphere, “That’s a given.”

Gang Orca looked to his comrades with a fire in his eyes, “We can’t let him know about this. It’ll only make it harder on him while he needs our support now more than ever. Failing him is *not* an option.”

“Agreed.” Hawks said with a wistful sigh. “We’ll see him off with smiles when the time comes, yeah?”

Tensei and Best Jeanist solemnly nodded.

“You feeling any better?” Ryukyu asked as she rubbed Miruko’s back.

“Not really. Sorry, I just-” Miruko broke off from the hug and furiously wiped her eyes, “Gang Orca’s right. I didn’t want Ren to see me like that and feel all guilty, those darn puppy dog eyes of his are way too effective.”

Ryukyu smiled and linked arms with her, “That’s okay. It’s better to get it out now rather than let the emotions stew. How about we go soak in the hot spring and have a girls’ night?”

A tiny smile blossomed on Miruko's face, "... Okay."

"We could all use some rest and relaxation." Best Jeanist looked up into the darkened sky, "It's been a rough day even for seasoned heroes."

They began their walk back towards the teacher's dorm, but Hawks had another idea to make his friend's smile grow.

"Hey," Hawks nudged Miruko, "I'm waving the white flag."

Miruko squinted at him, "What?"

"I'm admitting that pancakes are better than waffles!"

Her eyes sparkled, "Really?"

"Yup, really!" He forced himself to grin brightly despite the sadness raging in his own heart, "You officially win this war. Well played, my rabbit friend."

Miruko punched him on the shoulder, "Hell yeah! Ryukyu, to celebrate we're making pancakes tomorrow for breakfast!"

Hawks put his hand over his heart, "I'll eat a whole plate, just for you."

"Yes!" Miruko's smirk returned in full force, and she and Ryukyu listed off all the types of pancakes they could make.

The others smiled in opposition to the lingering hurt burrowing their chests, but one other emotion resonated within each of them.

The resolve to beat down this new enemy and see their kid off with bright smiles.

Ren awoke swathed in warm blankets, afternoon sunlight streaming in through the balcony doors. He sat up and stretched, working the

knots out of his heavy limbs.

"Good morning, Trickster." Amaterasu greeted.

"You slept for quite some time." Satanael said.

Ren rubbed his eyes and threw off the covers, *"Where's Mona?"*

"The Magician woke some hours ago, but didn't want to disturb your sleep." Zaou-Gongen said.

"How sweet of him." Mother Harlot chuckled.

"We needed the rest after such an exciting battle!" Cybele said.

"Of course thou wouldst only focus on the battle itself, instead of the Trickster's well-being. How uncouth."

"Shut up, Odin!"

"Oh? Are we fighting!?" Fafnir raked his claws like a bull about to charge, *"I'm going to win no matter what!"*

"Stay outta this, wyrm!"

"We need not argue over a hard-won victory." Hastur whispered from the void.

"No, he needs to apologize for insulting me! Or perhaps I'll just skin him after all... a purple cloak would be lovely..."

Mother Harlot burst into hearty laughter.

Amaterasu's smile radiated tranquil wrath, *"Behave yourselves, or else."*

Messiah Picaro shook his head, *"You'd all do well to listen to her."*

Zaou-Gongen inched away from Amaterasu, *“Her fury is terrible indeed.”*

Mother Harlot, Odin, Fafnir, and Cybele withered under Amaterasu's motherly glare, and backed by Satanael's dangerous head tilt, they were outmatched.

“Okay, fine.” Cybele muttered as the fight died within her.

Odin curtly nodded.

Fafnir deflated with a disappointed grumble.

Mother Harlot sighed, *“And just when things were going to get fun...”*

Cerberus leaned over to Cu Chulainn and Vasuki, *“The newbies are all feisty.”*

Cu Chulainn hid his laughter with a cough while Vasuki rasped out a low chuckle.

Ren dragged himself out of bed by then, smiling at their banter. He retrieved clean clothes from his closet and headed for the bathroom, but stopped at the package sitting next to his door with an envelope taped on it. He picked it up and opened the envelope, mouth dropping at the sheer number of 10,000 yen bills inside. There had to be several hundreds of thousands of yen in here. By far it was the largest chunk of cash he'd ever held in this world.

He turned the envelope over to a sticky note.

I persuaded the staff to agree to a budget increase for fusions and a larger variety of equipment while Miss Yaoyorozu dropped by earlier to hold up her end of the deal! Inform me when you need more yen and catalyst items, or if there should be discussions for further increases, but remember what you promised last night.

- Nezu :)

“Of course he signs with a smiley face.” Ren said.

He tucked the bills away, the items from Yaoyorozu following after a quick inspection. Shower first, food second, then he'd consider who to summon back, and what Personas to fuse or execute next.

One long hot shower later, and he stepped out of his room.

The gentle conversation he heard through his door stopped on a dime.

He looked around the common area to see Present Mic, Aizawa, and Ectoplasm staring at him, the tension so thick it suffocated him. There was a clear difference between *he* and *them* now, and it made the room heavy and strange. Nobody greeted him. They just... stared. Perhaps they realized yesterday wasn't some wicked fever dream, that Joker mercilessly shattered their world views and broadened a horizon they weren't wholly prepared for.

“Good morning?”

Aizawa sighed as he returned to grading some papers, “Good afternoon, Ren.”

The man's usual callous and dry voice snapped the other two out of their stupor.

“Uh, the others are in the kitchen!” Present Mic said with an ear to ear grin, although the man himself was pale, “Get yourself some lunch before you go hungry, kiddo!”

Ren's smile tightened, “Right. Thanks.”

He turned his back to their stares and wandered into the kitchen. The vigilantes, plus Eri and Kaito, were crowded around a table,

drawing. Hawks sat at the island, leaning over it with pained groans while his wings drooped to the ground.

“Hey!” Morgana grinned, “About time you get up, sleepyhead!”

Ren yawned and looked to the time on the microwave. It was just past 12:30.

“I’ll cook something for you?” Tobita smiled softly as he got to his feet.

“Thanks.” Ren looked to Hawks, “What’s the matter with him?”

“Ugh.” Hawks raised his head, “Too. Many. Pancakes.”

“Pancakes?”

Shuichi cackled, “Yup! Miruko and Ryukyu made over two hundred pancakes this morning and made everyone have a plate! Or in Hawks’ case, *three* plates, all with different flavors!”

“Too bad you missed it, Ren.” Manami said. “ We decided it was best not to wake you up.”

He shrugged, “Pancakes aren’t really my thing anyway.”

“See! Joker’s on my side!” Hawks groaned, “Eugh. Pancakes are heavy and soggy and they sit in my stomach like a rock for an entire day! Waffles are crispy and they have cups to hold butter and syrup properly! Admitting Miruko was right was a mistake...”

Ren patted him on the back, “You need healing?”

“Nah.” Hawks buried his face in his arms, “If Miruko sees I cheated then she’ll get all sad and angry again. I can’t do that to her.”

Ren’s heart sank, “Oh... was she upset about yesterday?”

Hawks waved his hand, “Forget I said anything. I’ll be fine... eventually.”

“If you say so.” Ren walked away and took a seat beside Eri and Morgana, “Where’s everyone else? The common room was almost empty.”

“Miruko, Ryukyu, and the others went with Cementoss and Thirteen to inspect the USJ.” Manami said, “Other teachers are helping the students clean up the festival.”

“Look!” Eri held up her drawing, streaks of gold and a lot of blue in the center. He recognized himself near the bottom of the page, “It’s your finale yesterday! Isn’t it so pretty?”

“It is. Great job.”

Eri beamed and set it back on the table to continue working on it. He and Morgana shared a heavy look. Tobita finished his omelet and lay a firm hand on Ren’s shoulder in support after he delivered the goods.

Shuichi and Atsuhiro scribbled frantically in some mock art competition in which Eri was the judge. Apparently, Eri thought Shuichi’s incomprehensible shapes were more pleasing than Atsuhiro’s refined smudges. He wondered if Yusuke would agree with her or not.

Despite their lighthearted antics, Ren ate in heavy silence.

“I was thinking we could do brainstorming sessions.” Manami carefully watched Ren, “You know, to fill in that app?”

“That’s a good idea.” Morgana said, “We did that with everyone back home.”

“I came up with some fantastic word combinations that will be sure to fill it in!” Atsuhiro said.

“Me too!” Shuichi beamed, “I can’t wait to see who’s right! It’ll totally be me!”

“Why you...” Atsuhiro playfully glared at his lizard companion.

Eri looked up from her coloring, “What are you guys talking about?”

And just like that, Ren’s appetite withered and died. He set his spoon on his plate and pushed it away. Ren gave Morgana a nod.

“Hey, Eri.” Morgana caught her attention, “Why don’t we go out in the garden, just you, me, and Ren?”

“Okay!” She hopped down and ran out.

“Do you need help with your jacket?” Kaito called after her.

“No! I can do it myself!”

Atsuhiro smirked in pride, “They grow up so fast.”

Ren stood up, shoulders heavy as if he were about to walk to his own execution. Considering he’s done that with so many Personas, this somehow felt worse.

Manami bit her lip, “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s fine, Manami.” Ren smiled at her, but it felt fake, “Its better we get this over with.”

“Are you sure you don’t need backup?” Tobita asked.

Ren shook his head, “No, we need to do this ourselves.”

“We’ll be here.” Atsuhiro said as he gave Ren a reassuring smile, “Good luck out there.”

Morgana hopped to Ren’s shoulder as they left the kitchen. Eri waited by the garden door, dressed up in a jacket with apples

stitched on the front pockets. She bounced in place, smiling when they opened the door.

Crisp air greeted them and the leaves fell from the trees in a vibrant gold and purple carpet. The fountains were turned off now, so it was as if they were detached and isolated in their own silent little world.

“Ren-nii! The leaves are so pretty!”

Ren’s throat tightened as she threw a big handful of leaves in the air, her radiant smile wider than it was yesterday. His hands formed into fists and the pounding of his own heart beat against his ribcage.

How in the world was he supposed to do this?

Morgana shared his sentiment, but plastered on a smile as shaky as the leaves clinging to the branches.

“Eri, watch this!” Morgana kicked up a breeze to sweep the leaves into the air. Any still attached to the branches joined in gentle twisters of gold and purple. Eri laughed as she spun around with them until Morgana settled the leaves all in one big pile.

She bit her lip as she turned to them, “I want to jump in it. Is that okay?”

“Of course!” Morgana glanced at Ren, his smile full of plastic, “Why don’t we all jump in together?”

“Okay!”

Eri held onto Ren’s hand as they jumped into the pile of leaves. She popped her head out from the pile, smiling brightly as leaves clung to her hair.

Ren lay flat on the ground, letting the soft leaves cushion him. Eri copied him. Morgana was between them on his back, and they spent several minutes staring into the bare branches and the cloudless sky beyond.

The silence was too loud.

Morgana nudged Ren, uncertainty in his own expression.

“Eri-” Ren started.

“It’s okay.” Eri sat up and picked leaves out of her hair before looking down at her fidgeting hands, “This is the important talk, right?”

Ren grimaced. “It is.”

Fear returned to those big, ruby red eyes. An expression they *never* wanted to see on her face again, “I-I promised I’d be a big, brave girl. S-so... what’s wrong, Ren-nii? Does it have to do with why have you two been so sad before?”

Morgana’s eyes widened, “You knew?”

“Y-yeah, but you tried so hard to h-hide it, so I didn’t say anything.” Her eyes searched Ren’s face, “Did I do something bad?”

“No way, Eri!” Morgana cried, “You didn’t do anything bad!”

“Morgana’s right. I don’t know how else to say this, but...” Ren sat up and held her hands in his, his thumbs massaging her wrists, “Eri, we’re going to have to say goodbye soon.”

The garden lost the warmth and colors it held moments ago as Eri’s eyes widened, her little fingers tightening around Ren’s hands.

“Wh... what?”

“Ren and I are going to fight a battle, our biggest one yet.” Morgana whispered as a chilled wind threaded through the garden, “And... when that battle is over, we’ll be going home with our friends.”

“But... I... can I come with you?”

“No, Eri.” Ren’s heart beat faster as her hands trembled and her eyes watered, “You have to stay with Kaito and Hitoshi and the others.”

Her shoulders began to shake, “B-but you can come visit, right?”

Ren shook his head, “Once we go home... that’s it. We won’t be able to see each other any more. I’m so sorry, Eri, I wish things could be different, but-”

Her hands dropped out of his grasp.

Morgana looked on the verge of tears, “Eri?”

“Can I...” She sniffled as tears dropped onto the leaves, “I don’t think I can be a big brave girl anymore...”

“It’s okay to cry, Eri.” Ren held out his arms, but his stomach turned to a ball of ice when Eri flinched away from him.

The dam broke when Ren tried to reach out to her, a heart-rending cry tearing across the garden. She ran back into the dorm.

“Eri!” Ren and Morgana followed Eri back inside.

Faces poked out of the kitchen and the heroes in the common room shot to their feet as Eri slammed her door shut.

Ren knocked, “Eri, please talk to us.”

Morgana pawed at the door, a few tears plopping onto the carpet, “Eri...”

A hand pulled Ren away, and they turned to see Kaito with a grim expression, “Give her some space, alright?”

Ren looked behind Kaito. The heroes gawked at him, the vigilantes and Hawks, clutching the kitchen entrance with a green face, stared with pained expressions.

“... Right.” Ren gave her door another glance before turning away.

“What the heck just happened?” Present Mic asked.

“I told her we’d have to say goodbye soon.” Ren stated with a sour tone, stamping down the emotions boiling in his chest and throat, “Maybe I should’ve been more gentle with it.”

“Let’s face it,” Shuichi shook his head, “There’s no other way to go about it, especially to a little girl.”

“Give her time, Ren.” Atsuhiro said, “She’ll come around.”

A silence sunk its claws in the dorm. Ren couldn’t take it.

“I’ll be in the Velvet Room.” He bee-lined to his door.

“Wait a moment!” Tobita stepped towards Ren, arm reaching out, “You don’t need to go off alone. How about we figure out some Keywords together?”

Ren sighed, “Mona?”

“I’ll stay here.” Morgana curled up in front of Eri’s door, “In case she comes out.”

Ren nodded, and donned his costume in a dull haze of cerulean. He reached into his pocket and tossed his old phone at Tobita, “Knock yourselves out.”

“What about you?” Manami asked in concern.

“I’ll be fine.” His smile didn’t fool anybody, “I just... need some time to think.”

Joker shut his door to their worried gazes and disappeared into the Velvet Room.

A metallic scream shook the chains over his head, and he was reminded of the deep gouges in the stones at his feet. Joker couldn't contain his curiosity and, backed by his rather foul mood, decided to see what state Metatron found himself in. He wandered to the outer ring of cells until he came upon Metatron.

Hundreds of black chains sprouted from the cushioned walls and entombed most of Metatron's body, the tips of his bladed wings had been snapped off in what Joker assumed was an attempted escape, the gouges in the stones, violently torn fabric, and the burn marks inside the cell was proof enough.

Metatron looked up when Joker approached, still bearing the injuries from the USJ alongside a firm imprint of Elizabeth's shoe on his face.

"Cur! Demon!" Metatron spat, the chains grinding together at his fruitless struggles, "Come here to feel pleasure at my suffering? I'll show you, you debauched wretch, the power granted to me by my Lord won't allow me show weakness-"

The Voice Of God collapsed into his chains and hacked a wet cough, the sound of oil splattering on metal hitting Joker's ears. Metatron stilled after several *horrible* seconds, breathing stuttering and grinding.

Joker sighed, and before he thought twice, he channeled Cybele's power and cast Salvation with a snap of his fingers.

Metatron looked up at Joker, eyes wide as his marred skin smoothed over, "Why would you heal me? If this is some trick-"

"We may be on opposite sides right now, but I'm not the monster Yaldabaoth paints me as." Joker stated as he turned around. "Even I wouldn't let an enemy suffer like that. Sorry I didn't heal you earlier."

Metatron gaped as he watched Joker walk away, "This doesn't change anything!"

Joker threw a sad smirk behind his back, "I'll listen whenever you're ready to talk."

He left Metatron behind and walked into the main room.

Lavenza smiled at him, "You have quite the heart of gold, Trickster."

"You heard that?"

"Of course." Igor said, his own smile growing, "Showing kindness could be the key to changing Metatron's heart. He may not see it now, but he will in time."

"Right..."

Lavenza's brow crinkled, "Are you alright?"

"I just woke up and it's already been a rough day." Joker's chuckle felt hollow, "Can we get down to business? I have a few bonds I'd like to master on top of some fusions."

Lavenza opened the Compendium, "As you wish, Trickster."

Meanwhile, after the door to Joker's room shut with a sense of finality, Ectoplasm sank into his chair, his face falling into his palm as he cursed under his breath.

The rest fell into thoughtful silences while Tobita stared forlornly at the phone in his grasp.

Morgana stayed by Eri's door, listening to a little girl mourn the big brother she hadn't yet lost.

Thwack!

"Good!" A mighty voice called within the secluded clearing, "Remember the Trickster's teachings, keep your stance wide and your mind as sharp as your blade!"

Another sword rushed towards Hitoshi, one of many floating around the deity hovering over the grass in a lotus position. Hitoshi, to his credit, clutched Paradise Lost in a reverse grasp and deflected the next blade.

Sweat draped his body, but he kept eyes on Futsunushi as he readied his next strike, "Remind me again-" The song of sparks and metal striking metal filled the clearing as Hitoshi parried, "-why we can't just train normally!?"

Hitoshi jumped aside to avoid another sword.

Joker leaned against a nearby tree, with Zaou-Gongen and Amaterasu hovering on either side of him, carefully watching the battle. Messiah Picaro was sitting up in the branches above.

"I thought we'd find random sticks and start with the basics, but-" Hitoshi yelped as two swords slashed at him, one he deflected and the other he rolled away to avoid, "This is ridiculous!"

"Real experience will do you better than sparring with sticks, and who better to train you than the deity of swords himself?" Joker said with a smirk, "Besides, I wanted to get a feel for my new Personas. It's a win-win for both of us!"

"Oh, that's totally not fair!"

"Life's not fair, Hitoshi." Joker stated with a confident nod, "But remember you wanted to get better at using daggers, and this is the best method for it."

Hitoshi countered another blade, "This is how you learned, right?"

"Yep. It was either learn fast or die with Shadows."

Hitoshi stared at Joker in horror. The distraction earned him the flat end of one of Futsunushi's blades right on the back, pushing him

down into the dirt. Paradise Lost fumbled out of his grasp and tumbled over the ground.

“Ouch...” Hitoshi groaned into the grass.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Amaterasu helped Hitoshi to his feet and wiped the dirt from his shoulders. Hitoshi gawked at her, face splashed by her sunlight, as she ruffled his wild purple hair, “Futsunushi, did you have to hit him so hard?”

Futsunushi recalled his blades to his side, splayed out like the ribs of a fan, “My apologies, lady Amaterasu, but the Trickster ordered me not to go easy on him.”

Zaou-Gongen chuckled, his face split in a terrifying leer, “He has the spirit of a true warrior. Going easy would be an insult!”

Messiah Picaro floated down, “It will leave a nasty bruise. Do you wish for healing, Moon?”

“Uh...” Hitoshi cleared his throat at the deities staring at him, much to Joker’s amusement, “Sure?”

Messiah Picaro snapped his fingers, much like Joker would, and Hitoshi’s whole body became illuminated in a pillar of rainbows. The Oratorio dissipated, and Hitoshi looked down at his hands.

“Wow.” Hitoshi looked at Joker as he picked up Paradise Lost, “How many healing skills do you have?”

Joker’s sheathed his dagger, “Let’s take a break. We’ve been at this for hours.”

The Personas’ bowed to him and vanished in a unified veil of cinders.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Joker snorted, “Sometimes I think I don’t have enough. Though, there is one that scares me.”

“How can a healing power be scary?” Hitoshi asked with a raised brow.

“Amaterasu has several skills I’ve never seen before. She has Invigorate, Regenerate, and combined with a skill called Holy Whisper, it helps replenish my health and magic even further. She could use *Prominence* to summon a small sun and reduce this whole forest to a charred crater. But one is called Holy Benevolence, and it brings *multiple* people back to life at once.”

Hitoshi paled, “I eat my words. That *is* terrifying. Let’s hope you never have to use it.”

“No kidding.” Joker sighed as he released his costume and sank against the trunk of the tree.

Hitoshi frowned, “Are you okay?”

“Just peachy.”

Hitoshi deadpanned, “Yeah, you look absolutely fantastic and not like a teenager who fought for his life recently. Which, I’m still a bit salty you *went off and fought a huge battle at the USJ* without telling me. I would’ve helped out in a heartbeat.”

“I know.” Ren stared up at the fiery gold canopy, “But you deserved to enjoy the Festival with your family, not fight Shadows. We’re still dealing with the aftermath and the heroes... they just keep staring at me whenever I’m in the same room with them.”

“Look at how long it took me to come around to the truth, Ren. They’re heroes, they’ll get over it quicker than I did. Hey, at least you got a bunch of shiny new Personas to show off, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Futsunushi was armed with One-Shot Kill and Sword Dance thanks to sacrificing Gabriel and using some Skill Cards. Paired with skills like *Trigger Happy*, *Rebellion*, and *Apt Pupil*, he was the Ultimate Magician Persona with a mastery of scoring critical hits.

Futsunushi, when Itemized, produced a long wavy blade blazing red from its own inner inferno. Bequeathing Hinokagatsuchi to Hawks over breakfast was like watching a child open the biggest Christmas gift he's ever gotten, the other heroes' jaws were on the floor as Nezu fell out of his chair from cackling.

Meanwhile, Zaou-Gongen received *Gigantomachia* and *Arms Master* from Cu Chulainn, plus *Firm Stance* and *High Counter* from other sacrifices. Ryukyu promised to use the Gigant's Belt sparingly after Joker told her the effects of a charged up *Gigantomachia* destroying a whole mountain during the Summer Camp.

Ren spent most of yesterday in the Velvet Room, and didn't come out until Mona barged in and threatened to have Mercurius drag him out by the scruff of his coat near dinner time.

Hitoshi's frown deepened, "The heroes' reactions can't be the only thing bothering you. What's up?"

"I told Eri we'd have to leave, too."

"Oh. How'd she take it?"

Ren shook his head, "She hasn't come out of her room, not even when I made apple curry. Kaito and Aizawa convinced her to open her door for food, but..."

"You know she'll come around, right?" Hitoshi said as he sat next to Ren.

"That's what people keep saying." Ren scoffed, "But they didn't see the heartbreak on her face. The *betrayal*. She probably hates me now."

“She doesn’t hate you!” Hitoshi resisted the urge to smack Ren on the side of his head, “How could she ever hate you when she loves you so much?”

Ren refused to look at Hitoshi, choosing instead to study the canopy, “I want to tell your parents next, but I’m afraid of their reactions. Especially Risumi in her condition.”

Hitoshi bumped Ren’s shoulders, “Are you sure? You don’t have to push yourself so much.”

“I’d rather give them enough time to process everything before its too late.”

“Alright, we’ll do it together.” Hitoshi stood and helped Ren to his feet, “They should be at their dorm still. Damn, this is going to be a hard talk.”

Ren snorted derisively, “You’re telling me.”

They walked together out of the forest until the dorms came into view. They hesitated by the front door, but with a confident nod they opened it and stepped inside.

“Oh, you’re just in time!” Risumi said as they were swept inside.

Ayumu sat at the coffee table with an open laptop, his grin falling. “Hitoshi, you’re covered in dirt! What happened?”

“Nothing, just training. What’s going on?” Hitoshi asked.

“We got enough donations, and a very kind offer from a company who has a daughter in 1-A, to get everything we need to rebuild the Blue Lotus, and then some.” Ayumu chuckled, “They’ll start after the initial paperwork goes through. We’ll be choosing a building layout soon and everything. Bigger rooms for our apartment, a remodeled cafe, brand new kitchen equipment. The list is endless.”

“Isn’t this exciting?” Risumi placed a plate of chocolate chip cookies on the coffee table, “Oh, I can’t wait!”

“Congratulations.” Ren said as his heart sank, “I’m sure it’ll be amazing.”

Ayumu exchanged a look with Risumi, “You’re doing it again, Ren.”

Ren sat down in the armchair and took a cookie, but simply stared down at it with a frown.

Hitoshi planted himself on the chair arm, “You might want to sit down for this.”

Risumi did so by her husband, gripping his arm, “What’s wrong?”

“Do you remember when I asked how I’m supposed to be okay with someone vanishing out of my life one day?” Hitoshi asked, expression turning sour as Ren winced, “It was before you signed those papers so I could be trained and eventually transfer to the hero course next year.”

“Yes, I remember that quite well.” Ayumu said, worry creasing his face.

“You never brought it up again, so we thought everything was okay.” Risumi glanced between Ren and Hitoshi, “Is this related to that talk?”

“Yeah. The person I was talking about was... well...” Hitoshi glanced pointedly at Ren, who looked up to see the realization on their faces as they pieced it together.

Risumi paled, “No...”

Ayumu swallowed thickly, “You never told us you were sick. I didn’t think you *could* get sick considering your powers and everything...”

“What? No, I’m not sick. It’s nothing like that.” A hollow chuckle escaped Ren as he barely kept his composure from cracking, “But the truth is still going to be difficult.”

Risumi took a deep, shaky breath as her hold on Ayumu tightened, “Whatever it is, you can tell us, Ren.”

Ayumu firmly nodded, “We’re here for you, okay?”

With Hitoshi at his side, Ren spilled the truth once more.

Atsuhiro glared at the phone with the teachers and other heroes gathered around it, “Gateway to the afterlife!”

“No match found.”

Manami sighed and wrote it down on the list, “Next.”

“Uh... I’m completely out of ideas.” Shuichi griped. “I already used ‘elevator to hell’, right?”

Manami flipped back on the list, “Yep, it was your first guess, actually. Which makes no sense anyway.”

“Hey...”

“Entry to Nirvana?” Tobita tried.

“No match found.”

The whole common room groaned in frustration.

“Boy, this is tricky!” Present Mic yelled.

“You’d think it’d be filled in by now,” Hawks glanced at the mile long list in La Brava’s hands, “We’ve been at this all day.”

Tobita rubbed his temples, “Did it take this long for any Palaces, Mona?”

Morgana sighed as he splayed himself out on the couch, “It took us a while to get Shido’s Keywords, but it was nothing like this. We must be missing *something* .”

Nezu sipped his tea, staring out the window in deep thought.

“Keep at it,” Best Jeanist stated, “We’ll get there eventually, right?”

“I hope so...” Morgana murmured.

Midnight looked to Aizawa, who planted himself by Eri’s door via his big, squishy sleeping bag, “Any word from Ren? It’s been *hours* . Maybe he has some new ideas?”

Aizawa sighed, “Hitoshi sent a text. Apparently, Risumi hasn’t stopped crying.”

“But they believed him?” Yagi asked.

Aizawa nodded, “With Hitoshi backing him up, yeah. They know what really went down yesterday, too.”

Kaito sighed, “We’re losing people who are important to us. Their reaction is understandable.”

Miruko and Ryukyu exchanged glances as the rest fell into a grave silence.

Midnight groaned as she melted into her chair, “Gods, this *sucks* . I just thought...”

Aizawa raised a brow, “Yeah?”

“Well, you know!” She got to her feet and started pacing, every hero and vigilante in the room watching, “I thought we’d have them for a couple of years before they were able to be heroes! Or Ren could be

a teacher here because we damn well know how good he schooled us before the Festival!”

“I-I’m sorry. We never wanted it to be this difficult.” Morgana whispered, his ears drooping. “We never imagined we’d be leaving so many people behind, people that we care so much for.”

“Oh, honey *no* .” Midnight picked the feline up and hugged him to her chest, “We know its not your fault. We’re gonna miss you, that’s all.”

“I know.” Morgana’s eyes were wet as he looked around the room, “We’re going to miss you too.”

“Joker could’ve easily reached the number 1 spot for sure, had he chosen to stay and be a hero.” Yagi added wistfully.

“But the reality is we’re helping them get home.” Aizawa stated as he met Morgana’s gaze, “It’s illogical to dream up ‘what-ifs.’”

“Oh, come on Shouta,” Hound Dog eyed him, half in amusement, half in sadness, “You cant lay there and tell us you’re not heartbroken over the situation. You and Tsukauchi, both.”

Aizawa opened his mouth, but shut it moments later.

“That’s what I thought, you big softie.” Hound Dog said, to which Aizawa glared at him.

Morgana cleared his throat and Midnight set him down on the couch, “We could certainly use a detective’s skills for this.”

“Yeah! Where is Tsukauchi anyway?” Midnight asked.

“He left.” Yagi stated. “Nighteye, too.”

“Left?” Midnight gaped, “Without a proper goodbye?”

Yagi shrugged, “Apparently he had to file Joker’s half of the story in the records, and said something about checking up on Kurogiri, too.

Well, Joker's half of the story in *our* world, at least."

"What are we doing about... the rest?" Hound Dog asked.

"The other parts have been marked as top secret and locked away by yours truly!" Nezu returned to planet earth with his usual chipper smile, "Ren, Present Mic, and myself have already worked up a cover story for Mic's next radio show!"

Present Mic grinned and threw a thumbs up to the air.

"The public is going to *riot* no matter what lie you guys came up with." Hound Dog rubbed his eyes, "I can feel the headache its going to cause now."

They heard the door open and Ren walked into the common area. His eyes were bloodshot and he overall looked drained. He saw them staring and looked at the floor while Morgana ran to him, jumped on his usual perch, and rubbed against his face.

"You okay, kiddo?" Midnight asked softly.

"It... was hard, but I'll be okay." Ren glanced at Aizawa, his hands petting Morgana, "Eri?"

Aizawa shook his head.

"Oh." Ren slumped. He looked up and Midnight felt bad when he winced at their constant staring. "I'll be in my room."

"Wait!" Midnight approached him, smiling softly as he reached for his hands, "Ren, sweetie, you don't have to hide in your room. I know things have been... tense these last few days, but we're sorry if we made you uncomfortable and will do our best to remedy it. Right, guys?"

"That's right." Hound Dog nodded, "We'll work to be better during the rest of your and Mona's stay here."

“If not, I’ll kick their ass.”

“Shouta!” Midnight cried, but it put a thin smile on Ren’s face.

Atsuhiro straightened up, “Don’t leave me out of that, Eraserhead!”

“Merp!”

“What they said!” Shuichi cried.

“You did nothing wrong, Amamiya.” Cementoss bowed his head, “We are the adults who should’ve contained any negative reactions to your situation.”

“We’re sorry, Ren.” Miruko gazed into Ren’s eyes with unfamiliar intensity, “Stay in here? Pretty please?”

“Okay.” Ren deflated with a sigh, “Apologies accepted.”

“Yay!” Midnight dragged him over to one of the couches, “You look exhausted, kiddo. Hang out with Auntie Nemuri for a bit!”

Ren snorted, but he complied as they sat next to each other. “Any luck with the MetaNav?”

The heroes and vigilantes blanched.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Perhaps we need to broaden our realm of thinking.” Nezu said.

“What do you mean?” Morgana asked.

“You’ve used rather simple ideas so far. Mona, Joker, your world had multiple dimensions, between the normal reality and the Metaverse, correct?”

“Well, yeah.” Morgana said, “What does it have to do with this?”

Nezu idly swirled his teacup, "Perhaps this world has other *natural* dimensions in their universe in which they can travel between, not using a normal door, but one that doubles as some sort of passageway between realms."

Ren blinked, "So a bridge between natural dimensions in their universe, completely separate from our own worlds and universes all drifting in some ineffable and unknowable blackness?"

"Precisely!"

"I have such a headache..." Shuichi muttered.

"Join the club." Vlad said in exasperation.

Morgana wilted over Ren's shoulder, "This makes me even more concerned for Oracle and Skull, if they're really in another world with *multiple* dimensions. What if something really bad happened to them?"

"You can't think like that." Aizawa droned, "You know them the best, would they really just give up and leave you and your other friends behind?"

Ren smiled, "No, they wouldn't."

Morgana shook himself as if to rid any bad emotions, "They'd stick together no matter what. Though I bet Skull probably ran head first into a problem without thinking it through."

"I can imagine Oracle berating him for it," Ren said with a fond smirk, "But she'd support him anyway."

Aizawa's face softened, "There you have it."

The front door opened again and Gang Orca trudged inside.

"Welcome back." Ryukyu said with a smile.

“Dare I ask how it went?” Aizawa asked as he forced himself to sit up in his sleeping bag.

Gang Orca smirked, “Don’t worry, all the kids passed. Including Bakugo.”

“Did I miss something?” Ren asked.

“This year, I was asked to join in on Provisional Licence exams for students in various hero courses.” Gang Orca’s smile softened, “Students who didn’t pass the initial exam took supplementary lessons over the past few months to get a second chance at it. Bakugo was one of them. Although...”

“What?” Aizawa’s eye twitched, “Don’t tell me he did something stupid.”

Gang Orca chuckled, “No. However, after licenses were passed out, I was about to congratulate him, but instead *he* congratulated *me* on, and I quote, ‘Kicking the Shadows’ asses.’”

“Oh.” Ren played with a lock of his hair, “I might’ve let it slip during the Festival.”

“Wait a minute.” Tensei’s eyes were wide, “Does that have to do with telling Midoriya the truth?”

“You *actually* told Midoriya the truth before us.” Midnight gaped, “Like, about you being in a different world and everything? How did he take it?”

Ren shrugged when he was suddenly the center of attention, “It surprised him at first, but he said it made sense after stringing all of the clues together.”

Vlad stared at Aizawa, “I don’t envy your students, Eraser. They’re scary.”

Aizawa rolled his eyes, “And how did that reach Bakugo?”

“Like I said, I let the word ‘Shadows’ slip when Bakugo, Yaoyorozu, Midoriya, Iida, Todoroki, and Kirishima came to the Blue Lotus’s tent. The only thing they don’t know, aside from Midoriya, is me being from another world. I... haven’t told them yet.”

Aizawa took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

Tensei laughed, “I’m not surprised Tenya was part of the group.”

Ren nodded, “Like Midoriya, they offered to help when we need it.”

“I don’t feel comfortable having my students fight Shadows.” Aizawa said, his tone serious. “Not after the USJ was nearly razed to the ground.”

Nezu chuckled, “We shouldn’t send them away just because they’re students.”

“I agree. They’re Arcanas for a reason, Eraser.” Ren stated, “Plus, they were pretty adamant on fighting no matter how I felt about it.”

“Can you really turn them down?” Morgana asked, smirking at Aizawa, “Besides, they’re heroes-in-training! The extra experience will do them good, now that we know Persona Gear works just as good against Shadows as Personas themselves.”

“And we would do well to increase our numbers!” Nezu said. “Staying stagnant could prove fatal.”

Aizawa glared at Nezu, who vibrated in place with a wide grin. The man rolled his eyes and sunk into his sleeping bag, muttering to himself.

“In any case,” Gang Orca looked at Ren, “There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

Ren blinked, “Go ahead.”

Gang Orca looked at Ryukyu, who stiffened before his gaze returned to Ren, "I want to invite you and Mona, as well as any of the other vigilantes who wish to come, as my personal guests during the Hero Ranking."

"Hero Ranking?" Morgana asked.

"Ah, the annual party where heroes are officially ranked for the following year." Atsuhiro shook his head in disgust, "I'm afraid I'll have to miss such a lively event broadcast on television."

"Same here." Shuichi said, "No offence, of course, but it's not really my thing."

Manami and Tobita traded a silent conversation through eye contact.

"I don't know..." Manami said, "That event is so crowded. I don't think I'd do well."

"I'd like to stay here if Manami isn't going." Tobita looked at Ren in apologetic concern.

"That's fine." Ren frowned, "But what about the media? It was bad enough that one woman turned feral on Risumi during the Festival, what would happen to whole group of them?"

Miruko cracked her knuckles, "Oh, you don't have to worry about that."

Best Jeanist nodded, "It's a written rule that the media cannot harass any pro hero's guests invited to the event, otherwise they get a permanent life time ban."

"Besides, they've changed it up a lot this year." Ganr Orca said.

"How so?" Morgana asked.

"Usually, it's held in a massive stadium which would then be open to the public." Ryukyu said, "This year, the new head at the Hero

Commission made it a smaller event. The Rankings themselves will still be broadcast live, but the event itself will be held in honor to the heroes and their families instead.”

“Hey! It’s good timing for us if you go, Joker!” Present Mic grinned, “It lines up with our original rendezvous over the radio, and since its such a hot topic more people are bound to tune in! We can watch the Rankings and go straight to my studio!”

Hawks smirked, “And we’ll all be there! I heard there’ll be a banquet before the official rankings! It’ll be fun!”

“Getting out of U.A. for longer than five minutes would do you a lot of good, too.” Hound Dog added.

Morgana and Ren shared a glance, before Ren said, “We can’t say no to that.”

“While you’re gone,” Atsuhiro snatched up the phone, “We’ll continue working on filling this thing in!”

“Then it’s settled.” Gang Orca ruffled Ren’s hair, his hand lingering a long moment before he reluctantly pulled away.

Ren frowned as he watched Gang Orca disappear into the kitchen, sensing some sadness within him.

“Hey, Ren,” Midnight held up her hands and waggled her fingers, “Can I... would be weird if I could...”

Ren chuckled as he leaned over, “Go ahead.”

“Yes!” Her hands threaded through his hair, “Oh my gosh, Ren! What’s your secret? Girls would kill to have hair as soft as this!”

“Ooh, me next!!” Miruko said as she rushed to Ren’s other side, “I want to feel!”

Ren’s face turned red as the heroes continued to dote on him.

“Hey, if Ren’s hair is this soft...” Hawks looked right at Atsuhiro with a predatory smirk, “Then does that mean your hair is equally as soft?”

Atsuhiro froze, “W-well, I-”

“You know, he hasn’t let us feel his hair once.” Manami said.

“That’s true!” Shuichi added.

“A distinguished gentleman takes his hygiene quite seriously.” Tobita smiled at Atsuhiro, “I’m positive it should be just as soft as Ren’s.”

Ryukyu’s grin turned feral, “There’s one way to find out.”

Atsuhiro slowly backed away, “Well, look at the time! I have someplace to be!”

“Oh, you’re not getting away that easily!” Miruko cackled as she charged at him.

The atmosphere lightened as a game of cat and mouse ensued between Atsuhiro and the ladies. Everyone else watched them run back and forth across the dorms, laughing at Atsuhiro’s ingenuity at avoiding capture.

That was, until Lady Stubbs got involved and tripped him by tackling his leg.

Midnight, Ryukyu, Miruko, La Brava, and Lady Stubbs each felt his hair and decided that it was just as soft as Ren’s, much to the man’s grumbling ire. He only softened when he saw Morgana and Ren laughing together with everyone else.

The only thing weighing on their hearts was the fact that Eri’s door remained closed, unknowing that the little girl had pressed her ear to it to listen to her big brother’s laughter.

“Have you told them?”

“... No.”

“Enji, you have to. They don’t even know about *this* yet.”

“I know.” Enji, for the large man that he was, looked sullen and worn. He reached across the table, but stopped when Rei tensed. The nurses nearby watched him like a hawk, ready to intervene if necessary. He set his hand down instead, their fingertips a hair’s breadth apart, “I’ll tell them everything after the Ranking.”

“I see.” A silence weighed on them as Rei studied Enji with her cold gray eyes, “About that, have you made your other choice?”

Enji grimaced, “I... haven’t decided.”

Rei sighed as she stood, “Whatever you choose, Todoroki Enji, I’ll be watching.”

She walked towards the hospital, where the nurses were waiting to take her back inside. Rei was gone with the beauty and grace of a winter’s first snowfall.

Enji never felt more alone as a quiet breeze whispered through the hospital gardens, until his eyes were drawn towards a splash in the small pond nearby. A black and white koi fish, which Rei told him that Natsuo named it *Joker*, stared at him from the water.

“I don’t need you judging me, either.” Enji muttered as he pinched the bridge of his nose, “And now I’m talking to a fish.”

For his own sanity, Enji left and cast his fate to whatever was in store for the Hero Rankings.

You know how Yatagarasu referenced Okami a couple of times now? Ammy was always planned for a late story Persona, but I never really liked Amaterasu's design in Nocturne(And she wasn't in P5

anyway), so I took some of her older designs plus just a tiny bit of inspiration from Okami and combined them for her version in DTESH. I've always wanted to draw this Ammy plus Joker's new costume sometime... but my art skills are definitely not up to par to give them justice. I'll also update the final persona builds in part 2 of the Thieves Den for these latest builds.

We'll be wrapping up the last of the BNHA loose ends within the next couple of chapters, and then... it'll be time :) There's still the chance that there will have to be one more chapter to properly space things, but we'll see. Some other things will also be covered in the Epilogue.

Now, as for why there's this early chapter and then another delay is that I'm moving, so I won't really have time to write/edit for the rest of June or July as I take care of everything and get settled in.

Plan for the next chapter update day is August 19th. I know it sucks to have such delays when we're so close to the end, but sometimes life just decides to hit you repeatedly and you have to roll with the punches the best you are able :D See you in August everybody <3

No More What Ifs

Chapter 93: No More What Ifs

“SOMEONE GIVE ME THEIR PHONE!” Ashido jumped up as if she were electrocuted.

Tsuyu chuckled as she held hers out. Ashido swiped it and bolted into the kitchen, giggling like a madwoman.

Kirishima gaped, “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Tsuyu shrugged.

We've surpassed 800k hits and 11k Kudos!!! Oh my lanta I never thought we'd ever reach those sorts of astronomical numbers!! Thanks so much everyone!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Your hair refuses to cooperate.”

“Believe me, people have tried to tame it for over a decade.”

Best Jeanist sighed as he tucked away his comb somewhere in his costume, “And here I thought I could tame any hair after Bakugo’s.”

Morgana chuckled, “I don’t think a hairstyle like yours would look good on Ren, anyway.”

“Hey, I could own any hairstyle I wanted.” Ren ran a hand down his fluffy locks. “It just doesn’t want anything else.”

Best Jeanist looked strangely at Morgana, “Do you want me to comb your fur?”

“No!” Morgana scrambled over Ren’s shoulder, careful not to poke any holes in the nice blazer Best Jeanist made for Ren, “I don’t need any help grooming my own fur!”

Gang Orca, who sat slightly squished across from them in the limo, chuckled. His deep laughter reverberated through the small space, “Always the a feisty one, eh Mona?”

Morgana turned his nose up at them and began licking his paw.

Best Jeanist and Gang Orca smiled, but then traded a *look* that caught Ren’s attention.

“What is it?” Ren asked.

“There’s something I want to ask before we arrive.” Gang Orca leaned forward, the leather seat creaking ominously, “It involves Ryukyu too, but she gave me the green light while she takes care of her guests for the evening.”

Ren raised a brow, “Shoot.”

“Ryukyu and I began a villain rehabilitation program a while ago. Along with some other things, like affordable therapy for long term patients, children’s centers, homeless shelters and access to resources for them to get back on their feet.”

Ren’s eyes widened in wonder, “And?”

“We’d like your permission to name our collective organization the Amamiya Foundation.”

Ren’s heart warmed. “That’s... I would be honored.”

Gang Orca nodded with a toothy grin, “I’ll let Ryukyu know.”

Morgana snapped out of his obsessive grooming, “What’s this villain program, anyway?”

“Ryukyu proposed the idea after you opened her eyes to so many shades of gray. We’ve realized there are no programs to help people labeled as ‘villains’ to get a solid groundwork to turn their life around. It already has a few patients, guests which Ryukyu invited to this event.”

“Really? Who?” Ren asked.

Gang Orca shuffled, his fiercely protective eyes burning into Ren, “Himiko Toga. Bubaigawara Jin, villain alias Twice. Kirisame Koutaro, villain alias Mustard. Toga and Jin willingly turned themselves in after the Overhaul Raid, and Kirisame...” Gang Orca sighed heavily, “Ryukyu spent days getting the 14-year-old boy out of Tartarus. He hasn’t quite recovered from the experience.”

“Will you be okay seeing them?” Best Jeanist asked.

“They were informed ahead of time about me inviting you.” Gang Orca said carefully, “They’ve been through much, and are not the ‘villains’ you knew them as before.”

Morgana grimaced while Ren curtly nodded, “I’ll be fine as long as they’re not upset at seeing me.”

Gang Orca’s gaze softened, “Thank you, Ren.”

“No, thank you for reaching out and giving people a second chance.” Ren smiled, “The Councilor Arcana really fits you two.”

“Councilor?” Gang Orca asked.

Ren nodded, “Like Risumi and Ayumu who share the Strength Arcana, you and Ryukyu share the Councilor Arcana.”

Best Jeanist’s eyes crinkled with a smile, “To think, in such a short time there would be villain and vigilante programs. Hawks is throwing

together resources to combat Quirkless discrimination as well.”

Ren straightened, “He is?”

“He has many connections in the Hero Commission and government,” Gang Orca said with a firm nod, “And as the number 2 hero in Japan, he has a lot of influence in the public. His main goal is to have laws made to protect Quirkless peoples’ rights to things like jobs and housing.”

Ren thought of those trapped in the lab in Sapporo, how Kagome mentioned she was working for Hawks full-time while Hawks himself backed up the others looking for better work. The relief at finally being financially stable was a great weight lifted from her shoulders.

“I’m... really glad.” Ren said as his face warmed in a genuine smile, a little knot of worry in his chest dissipating.

“Me to.” Gang Orca reached over to place a gargantuan hand on Ren’s fluffy curls, “You can leave everything to us, Ren.”

“We’ll take good care of things here.” Best Jeanists said softly, “You don’t have to worry about anything when you go back home.”

Morgana and Ren both nodded at that.

At that moment, the limo slowed to a stop and they could hear the dull murmur of people outside.

Best Jeanist put a hand on Ren’s shoulder, “Remember, the media cannot hound you.”

“If anyone bothers you, let us know.” Gang Orca nodded, “Really, the most hype happens when the top ten heroes are announced on stage. Until then, it’s rather relaxed. Hang out, eat some delicious food. The others should already be waiting for us inside.”

“And if it gets to be too much, Present Mic will leave early with you.”

Morgana grinned, "Oh please, we totally have this in the bag! Don't we, Leader?"

Ren smirked as he pet Morgana, "Of course."

The entire limo groaned in relief as Gang Orca opened the door and stepped out first. Ren heard the flood of voices shouting questions or demanding comments, all lost in an incomprehensible wave of noise. Best Jeanist, and another crazed wave of questions, followed.

Ren and Morgana waited within the safety of the limo until they gave the signal. The veritable wall of noise and camera flashes froze solid as he stepped out with Morgana on his shoulder, wearing a finely tailored dark blazer and dress pants, the blaring red 'GUEST' badge attached to his front pocket visible to all.

Ren basked in the irony as they walked towards the doors in silence, Gang Orca's footsteps thundering to his right and Best Jeanist's eyes sharpening on his left. These reporters, who had published all assortment of articles nonstop for the better part of the year, were blue in the face, shaking fists clenched around microphones or recorders.

He met Chitose's eyes as they neared the entrance, the woman's pencil snapping in her grip.

Ren smirked as he waltzed through the door with two of the top ten heroes in the entire country.

Morgana broke out in a fit of cackles when the doors closed behind them, "Did you see their faces!?"

"We figured you'd enjoy that." Gang Orca said.

Ren's eyes lit up, "You planned this."

Gang Orca bore a savage smirk of his own.

“We did.” Best Jeanist stated calmly, “We figured they deserved some *just desserts* after all of the trouble they’ve been putting you through for so long.”

Ren’s smirk widened as Morgana finally calmed down, “Perfect.”

“You’re all here!” Hawks bounced up to them, trailed by a grinning Miruko, “Did it work?”

“It did.” Best Jeanist replied. “Their faces were priceless.”

Miruko howled with laughter, “Serves them right!” She threw an arm around Ren’s shoulder, careful not to jostle Morgana, “Let’s get some grub! They set out a whole buffet and everything!”

They were led down a hall and into a massive ball room, the imperious ceiling rising high over their heads and the floor polished to a shine to reflect the hundreds of colorful heroes standing around, the constant chatter droning into a low hum. A grand stage took up one entire wall, a whole train of tables laden with steaming dishes on the other. Smaller tables were strewn around for the guests.

Morgana sniffed the air, “That food smells delicious!”

“At least you don’t have to hide in my bag, Morgana.”

“Yes! Miruko, is there tuna!?”

Miruko smirked while the laughter of the others were behind them, “Of course there is! They have all sorts of fancy shit here!”

Their entrance had not gone unnoticed. The hum of small talk bled away into silence as heroes stared at the teenage vigilante and his talking cat. Whispers broke out as the shock filled the room to the brim. Miruko’s arm tightened around Ren as her smile sharpened, causing many to turn away in a blind panic.

Ren didn’t mind, but he sent a thankful glance to Miruko anyway, who winked in return. She released him when they reached the

buffet.

“Wow.” Morgana licked his chops as Ren snatched a plate, “Should we get the fish first? Oooh, look at that salmon! No, wait! Get the fried pork, Ren! Oh, but look at all of those delicious cakes! Lady Ann would be so jealous-”

“We’ll just get a little bit of everything like last time.” Ren said with a nod.

“Of course, you *have* to try the fried chicken!” Hawks said as he stuck by their side. Miruko wandered down to the table while Best Jeanist and Gang Orca loaded up on seafood behind them.

“Fried chicken.” Ren chuckled, “Why am I not surprised?”

Hawks pouted as he snatched up a whole chicken’s worth of fried goods from the table. Judging by the humor lacing the eyes of the staff on the other side of the table, they knew to be prepared ahead of time.

Ren gave in and got a piece, but Ren staggered before they could move down the line. Hawks stabilized him as Ren looked to the small form that collided with his legs, and some part of him hoped that Eri had somehow made it here. It wasn’t Eri, but another familiar face just as small as her.

“Kota!” Mandalay rushed through the crowd, stuttering to a stop when she saw who the boy was hugging, “Oh, Joker!”

“You jerk!” Kota stepped back, his eyes flooded with tears as his face turned crimson. He wore mask pins on his shirt and stickers on his hat, both in Joker’s new and old mask designs, and a pair of red shoes Ren was sure a certain green haired Chariot wore, “Do you know how sad I was, thinkin’ you died!? H-how the heroes said I-I couldn’t see you anymore!? How... how you didn’t show your stupid face for *months* !?”

Hawks held Ren's plate so he could crouched down, smiling sadly, "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

Kota sniffed and crossed his arms, "Whatever. Just don't go dying again and I'll forgive you!"

Ren chuckled, "I won't be dying anytime soon. I promise."

Kota stared sharply at him, lips in a firm line, "Good."

Mandalay lay a gentle hand on Kota's shoulder, smiling at Ren as he stood, "I'm glad we could see you here."

Ren nodded, "How are the other Pussycats? Did you guys repair that mountain yet?"

"We're good." Mandalay had a look Ren couldn't place, calculating yet soft, "It's... still a work in progress. Pixie Bob regaining her quirk made it a lot easier, but even so restoring a whole mountain will take time."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Ren stated as he rubbed his neck.

"Don't be. A mountain is a small price to pay for saving the students' lives. I'm glad to see you again, Joker."

Ren nodded, and looked down to Kota staring back up at him, defiant. He looked back up to Mandalay, "Can you do me a favor?"

Mandalay blinked in surprise, "Anything."

"There's a little girl at U.A. around Kota's age. We rescued her from some villains..." Ren frowned, "I'm sure she could use a friend her age."

Kota's expression softened with a hint of curiosity.

"Of course." Mandalay smiled, "We were planning on visiting U.A. sometime so Kota could see Midoriya. He's been missing both of his

heroes so much-”

“N-No I’m not!” Kota’s face burned, and he grabbed Mandalay’s oversized paw to drag her away, “I-I think the others are calling for us!”

Mandalay chuckled as she waved to Ren, “It was nice seeing you again. I’ll tell the others you said hi!”

Hawks blinked, holding out Ren’s plate, “Huh. Well that was unexpected.”

“I’m glad to see him though.”

“And to get a friend for Eri. I bet they’ll be best friends in no time!” Morgana stated.

“Yeah... hopefully.” Ren was about to turn back to the buffet, when something else caught his eye.

There was a thin man standing on the stage floor, directing the stage hands on where to place various items or set pieces. He had a messy head of vibrant crimson hair, and a fine tailored suit that spoke of wealth and power. The man paused, as if sensing he was being stared at, and turned directly to Ren with a curious tilt of his head. Ren didn’t know why the man pulled at him so much, the rest of the world seemed to tilt as Ren’s silver eyes met the angled, ice blue eyes of the stranger, piercing gaze unfettered by the man’s thin glasses.

They continued to stare at each other, the noise and all other people fading away until it was only the two of them. The man simply smiled knowingly before he turned away, and the spell was broken.

“Hey, earth to Ren.”

Ren jumped when Hawks waved a hand in front of his eyes, “What?”

“Uh, you were staring off into space again.” Morgana said, “Personas talking to you?”

“No. Hawks,” Ren pointed to the man on the stage, “Who’s that?”

Hawks’ expression brightened, “Oh, that’s Ryoto!”

“You know him?” Ren asked.

“Yep, he’s with the Hero Commission.” Hawks’ smile turned wry when Ren and Morgana stiffened, “Don’t worry, Ryoto’s one of the few good ones. He took over as President when Kunikazu ‘retired.’ He’s been whipping the rest of those sorry excuses into shape to make changes to the system.”

“So you know a lot about him?” Morgana asked, not understanding his partner’s sudden interest, but supporting him anyway.

Hawks frowned at his plate, “I mean, the guy technically raised me.”

“*Raised* you? But he looks so young.” Ren added.

Hawks shrugged, “Yeah, now that I think about it, he hasn’t really aged a day since I was a kid. Maybe it’s his quirk or something.”

“How can you not know his quirk?” Morgana asked, wide-eyed, “If he raised you...”

“I never asked, and as far as I know, he never tells people.” Hawks stared at Ryoto’s back, “He’s a good guy. He made sure there were bright spots in my life when the Commission trained me to be a hero, even going so far as to do it behind Kunikazu’s back. You know, he was the one to change how the Rankings were done this year.”

“... I see.”

Curious, Ren used Third Eye before Ryoto disappeared back stage. He paled when the man burned red in his vision, his aura exploding

out to encompass not only the stage, but the *entire room and beyond*. Ren blinked, startled out of Third Eye.

"We've never seen such an aura like that, even when facing All For One." Satanael murmured when Ryoto disappeared from view.

"What does it mean? With power like that..."

"I know not, Trickster."

"Such a powerful individual working behind the scenes..." Amaterasu poured her courage into Ren, *"It would be wise to avoid him. We have enough on our plate as is."*

Hawks opened his mouth to speak when Miruko descended on them with a plate piled high with food.

"Oi! What's taking you slow pokes so long!?"

"W-wait!" Morgana cried, "W-we need to get tuna, a-and cakes, a-and rice, too! Just give us another minute!"

"Well, you better hurry up!" Miruko smirked, "The sushi is almost gone!"

Morgana wailed in despair, only calming down when Ren rushed to the sushi counter and requested to the staff for their best cuts of fatty tuna.

They gave them freshest slices from the kitchen. Given the not-so-subtle Joker pins on their uniforms, they were more than happy to do so.

"Your hair looks lovely, Toga. Are you using the conditioner I gave you?" Ryukyu asked.

"Y-yes! I've never had my hair look so shiny!"

Toga beamed in pride as she ran a hand over her twin buns, decorated with extra braids and flower pins. The silver sparkle of the bangle on her wrist complimented her scarlet dress, not many knew how the harmless looking piece of silver silenced the demons who'd howled for blood for so long.

"Of course she looks pretty!" Jin cried. He wore a suit and tie, and while he still had his mask on, the silver bracelet on his wrist silenced his own demons, too, "Anyone who says otherwise will meet my fist!"

Ryukyu smirked, "I don't think we need to go so far as that." The woman looked to her right and frowned, "Kirisame, you haven't touched your food. Are you feeling alright? Is the noise too much for you?"

The dejected boy had come to the facility late one night from Tartarus, haunted and buried deep in his shell. So different to the cocky, angry brat who walked into the League's bar months ago.

Toga swallowed. She really dodged a bullet by taking Gang Orca's hand that day.

"I'm... not feeling hungry." He whispered, eyes downcast.

"That's okay." Ryukyu put a gentle hand on his shoulder, and after all this time building trust the boy didn't flinch away from her touch anymore, "Eat whatever you can, but I won't force you to, okay?"

"... Okay." Kirisame picked up a small bowl of miso and brought it to his lips.

Ryukyu smiled at him in the same way it soothed the ache in Toga's heart.

That's just it. Her smile. Gang Orca's patience. The heroes and nurses didn't treat them like glass, or like crazy criminals to be locked up. No, they let her and Jin decorate their rooms to their

liking, watched movies with them, let them paint and do enough artwork to cover the entire wall of the common area. One of the nurses even showed her how to braid her hair one night when she couldn't fall asleep, now wearing those same braids in her hair.

And therapy.

They didn't push her to breaking. Ryukyu once calmed her down from a panic attack after she told a story about how her parents treated her like a monster when her quirk came in. It was *okay* to not talk about it right away. It was *okay* to take it slow, to talk when *she* was ready.

It was okay .

They never scrutinized the clothes she wore or how she styled her hair. Never put her down for the quirk she was born with. Didn't shove her in a box and order her to stay there *or else* . Not once.

"Oh, there you are." Ryukyu looked up to the group approaching their table, "I thought you guys would be late."

"Apologies." Gang Orca set his dish down on the table, they all pointedly ignored the creaks it gave off. "Thank you for reserving the table for us."

Ryukyu smiled, "Of course. Where's-"

Toga's eyes went wide when she saw Joker, carrying a plate with a ridiculous amount of food as the cat on his shoulder licked his chops. They all froze when he and Toga made eye contact, the heroes behind him watching them both.

Kurisame stayed seated, while Toga stood. Jin gave her a concerned glance as she walked around the table, her shoes clacking on the polished floor.

Ryukyu slowly rose out of her chair when they were a few feet apart, brows wrinkled.

Toga recited this encounter over and over in her head, just in case she ever met Joker again, but actually seeing him, here and now, made all of her recited apologies burn away.

"How about we have a proper dance, my lady?"

"It's easy." Joker spun her around in a slow waltz. "Just follow my lead and you'll do fine."

He treated her like a human being despite making him bleed. Even after she... she hurt him in more ways than one during the Summer Camp. She felt her face heat up and her eyes burn. Joker looked at her in concern, but she bowed a full 90 degrees before he could speak.

"I'm so so sorry !" She ducked her head, oblivious to how Gang Orca stood between them and the larger crowd, how Hawks extended his wings to give their little corner more privacy.

"... What?" He whispered.

"F-for everything. I'm sorry!" Toga felt the tears flow, but she didn't stop, "I-I hurt you, *tormented* you at the Summer Camp... you were so nice to me before, you were the first one to treat me like a normal person, and I... I..." She shook her head, "Without you I wouldn't even be here right now! Without you, I... wouldn't have *Hope* ."

A hand touched her shoulder, and she looked up to see Joker smiling at her. He handed a handkerchief out to her with his other hand.

"I feel bad for making a beautiful lady cry." He stated softly.

Toga stood up straight, "Why don't you *hate* me?"

Joker tilted his head, the golden specks in his eyes glistening like liquid sun drops, "Because you've changed. You say I gave you Hope, but you're the one who chose to get away from the League Of Villains, to make that change for yourself." His smile grew as he urged her to take the handkerchief, "And Toga-san, changing takes *real* strength and willpower, something you already had within you. "

"Ren..." Ryukyu whispered.

"I'm only stating the truth, Ryukyu." Joker... *Ren* stated as she dried her eyes with the handkerchief.

Hawks grinned as he handed a plate back to Ren. "Let's sit down and eat before we all wither away, yeah?"

Toga collected herself and sat back down, clutching the handkerchief. Jin gave her a reassuring pat on the back as the rest of them sat down with their food.

"By the way, where's Tensei?" Ren asked as he fed the first strip of tuna to his cat, "I figured he'd be with us."

Best Jeanist pointed to another table across the room, "He's with his family, but said we could stop by whenever we felt like it."

"Eat first." Ryukyu said with a grin, "Then you can go say hi."

Their table settled with the clink of silverware on plates, and the atmosphere stayed light with pleasant chatter and delicious food. Ren engaged Jin in easy banter, even when the latter waved his arms around and shouted random questions. Gave Kirisame his full attention when he spoke, eyeing the cat strangely.

Ren playfully winked at her when he caught her staring.

Her face burned and she stared down at her plate. But she had to admit the flaming pyres of *Hope* burning within her heart strengthened. Some unknowable bond with Ren flooded his soul

with Hope and new power. She held the handkerchief tighter, a smile spreading across her face.

Deep in her heart, she knew everything will be *okay* .

Endeavor wasn't the only one to watch Joker since he took his first steps inside.

Other heroes and their ilk kept staring. Watching. Whispers broke out as he talked to Mandalay and her boy, sat with his certain group of heroes, spoke fondly with former villains nestled in a table in the far corner.

Now, he was standing by the Idaten family table. The former Ingenium grinned and laughed alongside him, the matriarch had bolted from her chair the moment he approached, crying and thanking him profusely as she hugged him. The younger Iida, the one who was in the same class as his Shoto, rapidly chopped his arms and spoke to the vigilante with practiced fervor.

"Boss." Burnin' came to his side, expression serious, "We cleared the hallway for you."

"Good."

Burnin' grimaced as he began to walk towards the vigilante, "Are you sure this is a good idea? People are watching. What if-"

"Nothing will happen. I just want to speak with him in private."

"If you say so..."

Burnin' watched him go.

His heavy footsteps gave him away, and Iida Tensei was out of his chair and in front of Joker before he could blink. A hushed whisper

overcame the entire room as scores of heroes turned into shameless onlookers.

“Endeavor.” Iida Tensei greeted as if his voice turned into acid, “Can I help you?”

Endeavor looked Joker in the eye, the gold in his sharp gaze glinting from the flames of Endeavor’s costume, “I would like to speak with Joker. Alone.”

Iida Tensei bristled, “As if I’d let you-”

“It’s okay, Tensei.” Joker placed a hand on the man’s shoulder and stepped around him. He pointedly glanced at Endeavor’s arm, where the scars from Kohryu were, before meeting his eyes once more, “If he tries anything, Amaterasu will gladly show him how hot the sun really is.”

“If you’re sure.” Iida said, expression grim.

The younger Iida gaped while his mother pinned Endeavor with a glare, and the sentiment was shared with the dark looks from Joker’s table. Especially Ryukyu when her eyes shifted into a dragon’s protective gaze. The message was clear.

Touch him and you die.

Joker followed, confident and suave under the weight of hundreds of gazes, into the private hallway his sidekicks cleared. The vigilante studied the hallway and pinpointed several exits, Endeavor could see the same sharp intelligence in the cat as it did the same.

Joker leaned against the wall, both vigilante and feline waiting in expectation.

He didn’t know how long they stared at one another, silence stretching into an eternity, as Endeavor’s own tongue decided not to work. All the raw emotions, the sacrifices these past several months,

facing the deserved vitriol of his own children, the *person* who began it all waited patiently right in front of him and he just-

“Death suits you.”

Those words cracked the silence like thin ice.

“Excuse me?”

“Death.” Joker crossed his arms, his feline still staring, “Bearing the Death Arcana means you’re going to have major changes in your life, and from what I’ve seen, you’ve changed *a lot* this year. You’ve gone from attacking me in Hosu and the Musutafu Raid, to pulling out of the manhunt, down to supporting Nezu’s program when it came to brass tacks. You fought alongside Fafnir against the High-End Nomu. Now, we’re speaking face to face.”

“The Arcana...” Endeavor frowned, “I remember hearing this explanation before we took down Overhaul. You’re saying that I’m *Death*, in the same way my Shoto is the Hanged Man?”

Joker firmly nodded.

“Do any of my other children bear Arcanas?”

Joker set his jaw, “Todoroki Touya is the Reversed Justice.”

“So you knew. How long?”

“... How long have I known about Touya being alive?” Endeavor nodded. Joker sighed, “I’ve had my suspicions since those fires in Musutafu. We encountered each other during the Summer Camp, and he found me again before we fought Overhaul.” Endeavor didn’t know how to handle the pity in the vigilante’s eyes as they scanned the red-purple scarring weaving around the left side of Endeavor’s neck and crawling all the way up to his cheek, “He *really* doesn’t like you.”

Endeavor grimaced.

After a moment of tense silence, Joker spoke again, "Why did you want to talk to me, Endeavor? You're one of my Arcanas, but it's not like we're the best of friends or anything."

"I wanted to... ask for your advice."

Joker's eyebrows shot up, and even his cat blinked in shock.

Endeavor cleared his dry throat- damnit why was talking *so hard* - "How would you ask for forgiveness from those you love? I've not been the father or husband I should've, and my family has paid the price. I've been trying but... they still push me away despite my efforts."

"Do they know about Touya yet?"

"My wife, Rei, does." Endeavor sighed, "My children... do not."

"First, you need to be open and honest with them about *everything* ." Joker said with unwavering confidence, "Second, empty words don't mean much, but action does. What are you willing to do to show your sincerity? What are you willing to sacrifice if it means keeping your family together? How are you willing to 'die' and be reborn?" Joker's expression hardened in resolve, the vigilante's lips perking up in a smirk, "By that look in your eye, you already have something in mind."

"Yes."

Joker raised a brow, "If you already knew what you had to do, why did you ask me?"

"You're the one that started it all in Hosu, who changed the way I see how the world truly is... and how it could be better." Endeavor's hands tightened into fists as an unfamiliar heat burst within his chest, giving him the courage of a phoenix reborn from the ashes, "Hearing your honest words gave me the last resolve I need to go through with it. Thank you."

Joker waved a hand, "Don't go thanking me yet. You have a lot of work ahead of you, hero."

Endeavor firmly nodded.

The overhead speakers crackled, and the announcement came for all heroes to wait back stage.

"Well," Joker pulled himself from the wall, "I better check-in with the others before they think you murdered me or something. We don't want them missing their own time in the spotlight to hunt you down."

Endeavor huffed, "*Me* murder *you* ? The last time I checked, I couldn't even touch you." He held up his arm, "And Kohryu was the one to give me permanent scars."

He didn't say it with any heat or malice, and Joker smirked at the dry humor the hero injected into it. They returned to the too silent room and split off. The staff worked swiftly to put away the food, the tables, and to arrange seating for media and guests, though the honored guests were separated so no media sharks got the bright idea to sneak a picture.

Burnin' ran to him as reluctant heroes began to head back stage, oggling Joker and Endeavor as if they expected them to come back covered in blood, "You okay, Boss?"

He raised a brow at her, "Why wouldn't I be?"

Burnin' blinked, "N-no reason. They're calling for heroes to go backstage now."

"I've heard."

He walked around her and headed to where the others were, ignoring the hole Ryukyu was trying to drill through his head. He caught Hawks as they entered the back of the stage together, the both of them eyeing each other for separate reasons. Endeavor

noticed the new flaming red blade on Hawks' back, giving him the iconic look of a flaming angel of vengeance. All of Joker's heroes had exotic equipment, and that didn't go amiss between Endeavor and the rest of the heroes.

"Congratulations, Hawks."

"Eh?" Hawks snapped out of his glare, "Congratulations on what?"

The bird's feathers ruffled when Endeavor offered him the tiniest of smiles before walking away.

The common room was filled with vigilantes and heroes who didn't go to the Rankings. They seated themselves on the couches as the television was tuned in to madness of the annual event, but they had it muted until it was time for the top 10. For now, they concentrated on a much more dire project.

"You wouldn't happen to have an example from that endless well of wisdom, would you, Nezu?" Atsuhiro asked sarcastically. "We've been trying since Ren and the others left this morning, but you've been staring off into space this whole time."

"I've not been 'staring off into space', rather running calculations based on what words we've used so far."

"Sooo?" Shuichi asked, scaly brow raised. "Any ideas then, wise guy?"

Nezu stared at the phone with his beady eyes, having been silent for *hours*, "Oh... perhaps something like 'World Penetration Gate!'"

"Eh?" Shuichi blinked rapidly, "It wouldn't be something that ridiculous!"

"Match found."

A beat of silence-

“WHAT!?” Many voices screamed as Tobita swept up the phone and gaped at it.

Nezu cackled as people leaned over Tobita’s shoulder.

“‘Senkaimon’ is what it says.” Tobita said, “How strange...”

“We just need the location now, right?” Manami said excitedly, “That should be easy!”

“Cafe!” Shuichi shouted.

“No match found.”

“Why would a *world gate* be at a *cafe* ?” Atsuhiro asked.

“I don’t know!” Shuichi threw his hands up, “I’m shooting ideas off the top of my head!”

“School.” Kaito tried.

“No match found.”

“Mansion?” Ectoplasm said next.

“No match found.”

“Oooh, a gym!!” Midnight shouted.

“No match found.”

“A library?” Cementoss said.

“No match found.”

“Merp!”

“No match found.”

“Good try, Lady Stubbs.” Shuichi said with a smirk.

“Please don’t be a brothel...” Midnight whispered.

“No match found.”

“Oh thank goodness.” She said.

“Ren said that gate looked like a shoji door, right?” Vlad muttered,
“Japanese garden?”

“No match found.”

Everyone spewed their ideas for random locations, but the minutes turned to an hour and they were no closer.

Atsuhiro’s face fell into his hands and he groaned in exasperation,
“We get one step closer only to find ourselves in the exact same predicament as before!”

“Progress, no matter how slow, is progress all the same.” Nezu said with a beaming grin, “I’m sure Joker and Mona would agree.”

“I guess.” Shuichi sighed as he leaned back into the cushions and pet Lady Stubbs, “It looks like the top 10 ranking is going to start soon. I vote we have a break!”

“Very well.” Nezu swiped up the remote and unmuted the television.

“Oooh, the top ten are coming on stage!”

“Turn it up, Ashido!”

“Stop crowding me!”

Shoto frowned as his classmates surrounded the television, phone in hand. Iida messaged him explaining what happened with Endeavor and Ren, and that the both of them came back seemingly unharmed, but Shoto couldn't help the worm of worry wriggling in his gut.

Why would his father ask to speak to Ren in private, when he himself hasn't seen Endeavor since the Overhaul Raid? He almost regretted letting Natuso and Fuyumi know, and had to silence the chatroom between them.

Bakugo huffed as the number 10 spot was announced, "Who the hell thinks a *washing machine hero* deserves one of the top spots?"

"What, are you jealous because he'll be more popular than you?" Sero asked with a smug grin.

"Shut up! I'll blow that damn machine to bits!"

"Sure you will..."

Ashido shushed them as the number 9 hero came onto the stage and stopped beside Wash.

"*Gang Orca!*" The cheery announcer shoved a microphone at him, "*How does it feel to reach the ninth spot!? Especially when you were in the teens last year, and ranked number 2 on the hero who looks most like a villain!*"

"*Honored. I hope to live up to the expectations set out for me and be able to pave a brighter future for the younger generations.*"

"*Aww, how sweet! And now, for the number 8 spot-*"

Shoto watched in disinterest as Yoroi Musha, the old samurai looking hero, took #8, while Crust took #7.

"*Next up, this hero took a small hit to her reputation earlier this year, but proved her mettle and shot straight back up!*" The Dragoon Hero walked to the stage, waving, and the announcer was on her within

seconds, *“Ryukyu, do you have an opinion on how much your ranking has changed these past months!?”*

“It’s been... humbling.” Ryukyu bowed her head, *“I’ve made changes in hopes to better myself and those I care for. Like Gang Orca, I want to create a brighter future for the next generations.”*

“Oh, so it’s confirmed you two are working together for all sorts of beneficial programs!?”

“That is correct.” She shot a smile at Gang Orca, who returned it in kind, *“I’m glad to have him as my partner in crime.”*

“Noble goals, indeed! I can’t wait to see where this path takes you two!”

“Thank you.”

“Now, the #5 spot goes to-”

Edgeshot claimed the fifth spot with an agile, silent grace.

Miruko marched in at #4 with her head held high, her grin spread from ear to ear, and as with all heroes so far, the microphone was shoved in her face.

“I would ask how it feels to make the #4 spot, Miruko-” The announcer gaped at her fists, *“-but I have to ask where in the world did you get those support items!?”*

“Oh, these?” Miruko held up her fists with gleaming platinum knuckles attached to sterling blades, *“Gifts from a friend!”*

“A friend? Who?”

Miruko cackled, *“That’s a secret! Let’s just say these babies sure pack a punch and leave it at that!”*

“O-oh, alright!” The announcer cleared her throat, *“Moving on to the #3 spot, The Fiber Hero: Best Jeanist!”*

The man walked on stage and stood next to Miruko, a knowing look was passed between the two.

“Many thought your days as a hero were up after Kamino, Best Jeanist,” The announcer stated, *“But you managed to come back and take the third spot! How do you feel?”*

“I returned thanks to a certain ex-vigilante’s healing powers. Without that, I most likely would have to give up my role as a hero due to the injuries I sustained.”

“You mean Joker!?! He’s here today, isn’t he?”

Best Jeanist gave her a cold look, *“I would prefer you not ask for more details.”*

The announcer paled, but let out a shaky laugh, *“O-of course! Now, onto the #2 spot, this hero soared to the top at such a young age and it looks like he’s here to stay!”*

Hawks walked on stage, a casual smirk on his face, his vibrant red wings relaxed. But his wings weren’t the only thing to draw attention as audible whispers broke out from the broadcast.

“Dude, where did he get a flaming sword !?” Kaminari shouted.

“Tokoyami, why didn’t you tell us?” Ashido demanded.

Tokoyami’s feather’s bristled, *“I... I did not know he obtained such a divine weapon. He did not have it last time I saw him.”*

Momo pursed her lips as Hawks stood next to Best Jeanist.

“Uh... nice sword?”

Hawks winked, *“Thanks!”*

“Can I ask where you got it? Such an amazing support item... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Hawks reached back and gripped the handle of the blade, a black charred ring on his finger glimmering in the spotlight, *“Like Miruko said, I can’t disclose my source. However I can say that they put their **heart and soul** into creating them!”*

Momo gasped and put a hand over her mouth.

Shoto exchanged quick, surprised glances between Midoriya, Kirishima, and Bakugo. After all, they were the ones who put the pieces together on the items being made from Joker’s *literal* heart and soul.

“What’s wrong, Yoamomo?” Tsuyu asked.

“Um...” Momo shook her head and ran her finger over Flit, who perched on her shoulder with a musical timbre, “It’s nothing. I believe Hawks made a pun, that’s all.”

Kaminari blinked, “I don’t get it.”

“Wow, that much is obvious! But now that I’m looking...” The announcer studied Hawks, Best Jeanist, Miruko, and Gang Orca, eyes glancing over weapons and new accessories, *“All of you have brand new additions to your costumes! I never thought Gang Orca knew how to use a hammer, or Miruko with those weapons... the only thing I can come up with between you all is your connection to Jo-”*

“Now now,” Hawks grinned, but everyone could see the knife’s edge to it, *“Let not make wild speculations, yeah?”*

“R-right, of course! Shall we move on to the #1 spot, then?”

Shoto’s chest tightened when his father walked on stage, and the man didn’t take two steps before Natsuo blew up the chatroom with

insults. But there was something... off. Despite his new scars, Endeavor boasted unrestrained confidence and power, but something within his eyes spoke to Shoto.

Kinder, yet resolved.

Shoto couldn't tear his eyes away, his phone forgotten.

"It shouldn't be surprising that you finally reached the top spot after being #2 for so long! How does it feel to be #1, Endeavor!?"

"About that. I have an announcement to make." The announcer blinked rapidly as he took the microphone and stared directly into the camera, his blue eyes piercing right through Shoto. *"I... cannot take the title of number one hero at this time."*

All of his classmates' jaws dropped as a chaotic wave of questions exploded on the other side of the camera.

Endeavor cleared his throat, and everything went as quiet as the grave.

"Due to personal reasons, I'm officially abdicating the title of #1. I promise to come back and be a better hero in the next years to come, and will only take this title when I feel like its deserved. Thank you for your time."

Endeavor handed the microphone back to the announcer and promptly walked off stage, leaving all of Japan in a shocked silence.

The announcer floundered, *"Er... well, we've never had something like this happen before! If that's the case, then Hawks is the new number one hero?"*

"Eh? Eh!?" Hawks whipped his head around, presumably to stare after Endeavor. *"That's what you congratulated me about before!?"*

"A-and that would mean everyone here goes down another rank!"
The announcer tried holding everything together as frantic whispers

trickled in from the reporters, *"Which would mean the new 10th place hero is Kamui Woods, Wash would be number 9-"*

Shoto startled when his phone began to ring and, ignoring the shocked gazes of all of his classmates, fled to the kitchen to answer it.

"What the hell was that!?" Natsuo's voice crackled in Shoto's ear, drowning in rage.

"S-surely there's an explanation?" Fuyumi stuttered.

"There damn well better be one! What the hell was all that crap about 'being a better hero'!? He hasn't talked to us, let alone shown his face for weeks!"

"... Ever since the Overhaul Raid."

"What?"

"Something happened during the Overhaul Raid. From what I know, he fought someone with one of Joker's 'friends'. And... Iida did say Endeavor wanted to talk to Joker in private at the event. That has to be connected somehow."

"Okay." Natsuo took a deep, calming breath, *"I'll try and find out what Flaming Dipshit is going to do now. Fuyumi, can you call mom and see if she knows anything?"*

"Y-Yes."

"What can I do?"

"Well, Joker is at U.A. now, right?"

"He's not here today. He's doing an interview with Present Mic in a little bit."

"Okay, stay put and listen to that interview! When Joker gets back, try to ask him questions, okay? He has to know something we don't!"

Shoto pursed his lips, "... Right."

"Let's keep each other updated, okay?" Fuyumi said, *"We'll get to the bottom of this. We always have."*

"Yeah, thanks Fuyumi."

Natsuo hung up first. Shoto and Fuyumi said their goodbyes and followed suit. He felt eyes on him and turned around to see Momo hovering by the doorway, keeping other eavesdroppers at bay.

"Are you alright, Shoto?"

"I don't know what's going through my father's head anymore."

Momo's smile softened, "Let me know what I can do to help."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." She placed both hands on his shoulders, "Your family helped me out when I needed it most, so let me repay the favor, okay?"

"... Okay."

"Do you want to go back out with everyone?"

"Yeah. Sure."

A hushed whisper overcame the common room when he and Momo walked out, but stilted conversation continued when they sat down at the couch. Many eyes returned to the tv, where the new President of the Hero Commission was closing out the Ranking. Despite the panic and shock, he handled the questions and outcries like a professional.

Hawks stood behind him with the other top ten heroes, expressions set in half-startled determination as the Rankings officially came to an end.

The news went on next, talking about nothing else except this supposed 'scandal' and theories on what could've caused it.

"It's everywhere online already." Kirishima grimaced as he glanced at Todoroki, "People talking about... you know."

"I'm surprised Joker's not involved somehow." Ojiro stated nonchalantly.

Shoto opened his mouth, but closed it. His eyes fell to his phone, waiting for Natsuo and Fuyumi, his mind scurrying with so many questions to ask Joker himself.

Momo sat up primly, hands folded on her lap, "It's not right to stick our noses into private business or stir up baseless rumors."

Shoto sent her a thankful look, and the others tactfully changed the subject and the channel. He didn't know how long he sat there, letting the conversations of his classmates slip over him as he fell into some strange trance. Waiting for his siblings to get back to him, wanting answers, yearning for the time to go faster so he could stand face to face with Joker.

Momo's concerned looks went unnoticed.

At one point, Koji placed his pet rabbit on Shoto's lap, smile warm and understanding. At another, Iida returned to the dorms, and any questions about the Rankings were silenced by both him and Momo.

Snacks and dinner were passed around, but Shoto was too focused on petting the rabbit's soft fur to eat.

It wasn't until later when Ashido gasped and swiped the remote to turn off the television.

“Hey, I was watching that!” Sero whined.

“Shh! Joker’s interview with Present Mic is starting!!” She turned up the volume on her phone and set it face down on the coffee table, grinning from ear to ear.

Shoto snapped out of his hazy bubble at the sound of Present Mic’s voice.

“Gooooood evening listeners! I’m Present Mic and as you know, this is Put Your Hands Up Radio! Boy, it’s been an eventful day, hasn’t it!? But it’s about to get more exciting because I have special guests tonight. Ones who gave me quiet a fright the last time they tuned in!”

“Sorry about that, Present Mic.” A voice they were all familiar with huffed with laughter, *“But the dramatics were necessary due to the circumstances behind it.”*

“Oh, I’m sure! But you’re not the only guest in my studio tonight. Care to introduce yourselves!?”

“You all know me as T-san.” Another familiar voice spoke. *“And I’m sitting directly across from Joker’s partner in crime, Mona.”*

“It’s Morgana! Morgana!”

“Morgana?” Present Mic asked, *“I thought your name was Mona?”*

Joker chuckled, *“Mona is his codename, just like mine is Joker.”*

“Gotcha! By the way, this is one of the few times you’ve been on air, Morgana! And it’s been a while since you’ve last been live on the air, T-san! One of the things Listeners are dying to hear is how long have you guys known each other?”

“Well... since the beginning, really.” Joker said.

“Care to elaborate?”

"They first called me to help spread awareness of Silver Falcon's corruption." T-san said, "We've had a steady partnership since. Let me tell you, it was a surprise to know that Joker's companion was a talking cat."

"Hey! I am NOT a cat!"

"But... you are literally a cat?" Present Mic stated.

"It's a bit more complicated than that. But I'm not just a normal cat, you know!"

"Well that much is obvious! Another popular question is, and you don't have to answer if its too sensitive, how did you and Morgana first meet, Joker?"

"We first met in a dungeon, and I found him locked in a cell."

Kirishima went pale, "... A cell ?"

Midoriya bit his lip, staring at the phone with wide eyes.

Ashido waved her hand at him, everyone else leaned closer in horrified curiosity.

"We were in a similar situation, so we busted out together with another friend of ours. We've been attached to the hip ever since."

P resent Mic's voice softened, "No wonder you two are as thick as thieves."

"Don't you know it." Mona... or rather Morgana, stated, "We'd do anything for each other, and that's that!"

"Like listening to him yammer on about sushi for hours."

"Hey! Who's the one who tells you to go to bed on time!?"

"Aren't they quite the pair?" T-san said, chuckling.

Present Mic laughed, *"I think we're getting a bit off topic, so let's return to current events. You were there during the Rankings, right?"*

"We were." Joker answered. *"Gang Orca invited us as his guests."*

"What do you think of the situation? You've commented before with T-san on your thoughts with All Might and the title of Number 1 Hero, but what do you think of Endeavor giving it up?"

Joker hummed, *"As I said before, relying on a singular pillar isn't the way to go. Endeavor stepping down when he wasn't in the right mindset was a smart move in the long run. Plus, Hawks will make an amazing Number 1. As people have noticed, he is part of a particular group of heroes I'm fond of. As long as they support one another as a unified group, then there's nothing to worry about."*

"I agree." Morgana stated, *"Even a leader needs help and support from his teammates."*

"Sooo you're saying that even if Endeavor, one of the most powerful heroes in Japan, is stepping down as Number 1, we're still in good hands?"

"Precisely." Joker's smirk was evident in his lilting voice, *"Plus, Mona and I have been around U.A. long enough, spent time with their students and faculty, and I'd have to say the next generation of heroes are looking brighter than ever before."*

"I agree! I would know, since I teach there!!" Present Mic said, *"So, you spoke of how you and Morgana met, and what exciting thing happened today, but usually with guests I have Listeners call in and ask questions! Do you mind if we take a few calls before we move on?"*

"Go ahead. I'd love to hear questions from our fans-"

"SOMEONE GIVE ME THEIR PHONE!" Ashido jumped up as if she were electrocuted.

Tsuyu chuckled as she held hers out. Ashido swiped it and bolted into the kitchen, giggling like a madwoman.

Kirishima gaped, "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Tsuyu shrugged.

"Alright, first caller! You are on air with Put Your Hands Up Radio-"

"Joker, you cheat!" An unfamiliar woman caterwauled, *"You rejected my interview during the Cultural Festival and now you go to Present Mic's crummy radio show behind my back-"*

"Aaaand that's the end of that caller." Present Mic deadpanned, *"You know who that was, Joker?"*

"Someone who disturbed the peace when I was working at the temporary Blue Lotus during U.A's Cultural Festival." Joker sighed, *"They caused a scene and had to be removed by security."*

"Yeah, 'security' being Fafnir." Morgana stated.

"Ooof, I'm sorry you had to deal with her." T-san stated dryly.

"Next caller?" Joker asked.

"Right!" Present Mic responded after a click, *"What's your name, Listener!?"*

"Um..." There was a soft voice of a child, *"M-my name is Matsuoka Takashi, a-and I have a question for M-Mona."*

"For me!?" Morgana was clearly excited.

"D-do you have a Quirk? Besides... t-talking?"

"Er, well..." Morgana cleared his throat, *"I have powers similar to Joker. Now, while my partner in crime can summon multiple deities at once, I only have one. Mercurius."*

"Oh. Is he cool?"

"You bet!" Morgana said, "He has wind powers and he can heal! Oh, and I can turn into a bus, too!"

"He can WHAT!?" Sato yelled.

"Didn't Joker post something about cats turning into buses on his Spotlight a while ago?" Ochako asked.

"Yep. That's one weird cat..." Sero commented.

"He said he wasn't a cat though." Tsuyu said, "I wonder what that's supposed to mean, kero?"

Momo put a finger to her lips in the traditional 'quiet' gesture.

"Can I ask one more question?"

"You bet!"

"What's your favorite sushi?"

"Fatty tuna! Extra fatty tuna is the best!!"

"Hawks gave us an entire fridge full of tuna recently, and Mona ate it all in one sitting." Joker stated with amusement.

"Yep! I didn't even get sick or anything!"

"Wow, that's so cool!"

"Thank you for calling Matsuoka Takashi!" Present Mic ended the call, "We have enough time for one more caller before we return to business! Shall we?"

"Of course." Joker said.

"Caller number 3, what's your-"

"I bet Joker recognizes my voice, Mic-Sensei!!"

Class 1-A heard Ashido from the kitchen, her voice echoing over the radio.

"Well, if it isn't one of my favorite people from U.A's hero course."
Joker said, laughing, *"What's your question?"*

"What are you gonna do after you're done with the vigilante program? Are you gonna be a hero? Oh, if you are, then can you teamup with my totally awesome future agency so we can kick butt together!?"

"Hey, that's cheating, Mina!" Ochako yelled to the kitchen, her voice catching over the broadcast.

Most in Class 1-A chuckled, but those died down when the line went silent for far too long.

"Ah, well that's..."

Midoriya was the only one who didn't smile earlier, ducking his head to shield his eyes. It didn't go amiss by Bakugo or Shoto.

"What's wrong, Joker?" Ashido asked, suddenly on alert.

"We were going to cover this near the end of the interview." Present Mic stated, his lack of cheerfulness made Shoto's stomach sink, *"But what do you want to do, Joker?"*

Joker sighed, *"It might be best to rip-off the band-aid now."*

"Are you not gonna be a hero?" Ashido asked, her demeanor deflated. *"Oh, but if not then are you going to work at the Blue Lotus after its rebuilt?"*

"Neither." Morgana answered curtly.

“To make a long story short, Mona and I worked out a new deal with Principal Nezu. Now, there are more details to hammer out before our plan is finalized, but Mona and I agreed to give up our vigilante careers, and any chance of being heroes in the future, in exchange for going home.”

No radio show should ever air a minute of dead silence, but there they were. The only disturbances were other phones chiming with wild notifications. All of Japan witnessed Endeavor giving up the title of Number 1 Hero, and now learning that they'd lose Joker too...

The media would feed off of this for *months* .

“As a staff member at U.A., I can confirm this has been in the works.” Present Mic said, his voice low.

“You... are you forcing Joker to give up, Sensei?” Ashido's voice trembled.

“What!? No way!”

“No.” Morgana chimed in, *“The heroes aren't forcing us to do anything. It was our choice, and ours alone.”*

“It's true.” Joker's tone remained steady, but they all felt the biting undercurrent in it, *“Mona and I have been apart from our home for a long time, away from all of our friends and family. We'll still be at U.A. for a while, and I'll do my best as a temporary Teacher's Assistant to impart my experiences while I can, but when the time comes we'll give up our roles and leave the future of this world in the capable hands of others. That includes Hawks and those in the top 10 and beyond, those who are currently training hard to be heroes, and anyone who chooses to stand up and do what's right.”*

“We believe in everyone to take care of things when we're gone.” Morgana chirped, happy yet sad at the same time.

There was a click.

"Oh, it seems our Listener hung up..." Present Mic stated as Ashido walked into the room with her head low and arms slumped at her side, "Well, this would be the perfect time to take a break!"

"Wait, Present Mic." T-san interrupted, "Can I say one thing before the break?"

"Sure thing!"

"I've been in the media business long enough to know that several outlets will use this against Joker, that they'll twist his words and make it seem like he's abandoning people or running away, but let me tell you this." There was a small creak, as if T-san leaned closer to the microphone, "Joker and Mona shared their past with me before this interview and... how they got stuck here, and let me just say it broke my heart how much bullshit they've been through."

"T-san..." Morgana whispered.

"What I really want to say is, haven't they done enough? Don't they deserve to be reunited with their loved ones after being separated for so long? The rest of the world doesn't get to demand anything from a kid who just wants to go home and see his family, remember that."

Joker chuckled wetly, "Well, that's one way to put it. Besides, with my permission, T-san is writing a book of sorts about everything Mona and I have done here. So even when we're gone, people can look back and see where we started."

"That's right." T-san said. "It won't be out for a while yet, but everyone can look forward to it."

"And on that note, I'd say its time for the break! When we come back-"

Ashido tossed Tsuyu's phone back to her and then silenced hers.

Bakugo stood up, red eyes burning towards Midoriya, "You knew."

Midoriya's head whipped up, "I-I... well yes, but it's more complicated than-"

"That's what he told you before any of us!?" Bakugo stomped towards Midoriya, scowling, "That he's *leaving* !?"

"K-Kachaan, that's-"

"It has to do with the Red Rain, doesn't it?" Tokoyami interrupted, his eyes sharp. "Joker knew about it during the Festival."

"Wait, there was a Red Rain *during* the festival!?" Hagakure waved her arms wildly, "When!?"

"I'm so confused." Jiro raised her hand, "Please back up and explain *how* Joker even knows about the Red Rain in the first place. I thought the teachers were keeping it hush hush?"

Momo exchanged a glance with Iida before she stood up, "Everyone, there are some things you should know, things that Joker shared with a select few of us, but what is said here *cannot* leave this room. As a class, we must stand together, understand?"

Kaminari sunk in his chair, "She used the angry mom voice."

"Kaminari."

"Y-Yes, ma'am! S-sorry, ma'am!"

Iida chopped his arm, "This is serious! Any of you who cannot take this as *mature heroes-in-training*, leave immediately."

Nobody moved, all staring at attention.

Shoto stared down at Koji's rabbit as Momo began a trimmed down explanation of what happened during Joker's absence during his performance. Why they didn't see their teachers during the whole Festival. Though it was unknown what sort of enemies they faced,

the term 'Shadows' was shared, and only that normal Quirks and support items wouldn't harm them.

When most of everything was shared, there was a short silence only broken with a familiar sigh.

Momo whirled around to the entryway, "Aizawa-sensei! How long have you been there?"

"The whole time." Aizawa deadpanned as he pulled himself from the wall.

"So... it's true, kero?" Tsuyu asked as she stood from the couch, "Joker knows the cause of the Red Rain, that he's... leaving?"

"... Yes." Aizawa stared into Midoriya's eyes, "Joker told us everything."

"This is why we gotta help him out!" Kirishima sprung to his feet, "We're not going to sit on our hands while Aniki fights alone! What do you say, everyone!?"

"Y-Yeah!" Midoriya said.

"I already promised to lend my aid!" Iida chopping his hands vigorously.

"I'm not being left out *or* left behind." Bakugo growled. "And I'll kick anyone's ass that says otherwise."

"I'd normally help a guy like Joker out," Sero stared, frowning, "But I feel like we don't have the whole picture yet."

"Sero's right. Let's get one thing straight." Aizawa's eyes sparked red, "Those... *things* we faced at the USJ made the League Of Villain's attack look like an infant's attempt at villainy."

"How bad can it be?" Ojiro asked, "Joker seemed fine if he was able to finish his performance."

Aizawa crossed his arms as something *haunted* entered his eyes. It was a face they'd never seen on their stoic and stern teacher before, and it made their nerves shoot up.

"Joker fought the leader Shadow while the rest of us got cronies, hundreds of them, and we sustained heavy injuries which Joker had to heal. *One single attack* from the leader left all but one of the zones completely obliterated. Thirteen and Cementoss will have to rebuild the facility from the ground up."

Shoto felt his mouth go dry as horror laced his classmates' faces.

"May I ask what these Shadows looked like?" Ochako slowly raised her hand, "If they're really as bad as you're describing them..."

"Angels." Aizawa said, "Joker fought Metatron while a couple of us fought Archangels and other beings I cannot put into proper words to describe."

"Wha-" Sero's jaw dropped.

"Angels!?" Hagakure cried.

"Aren't Angels usually the good guys?" Kaminari hesitantly asked.

"Not this time. They were cold and ruthless, their sole objective was to subdue us to let in an even bigger threat into this world, the one responsible for causing the Red Rain. The one who Joker will face at the end of everything." Aizawa let out a long sigh before he scanned each of their pale faces, "Nezu made it clear that your inclusion in this fight would be up to him, but you need to know what sort of danger you'd be putting yourself in before you jump in head-first. If Nezu lets you fight, and Joker shares the whole truth with you, I expect you to stick with your decision through to the end. If you decide not to participate, that's fine too. You won't be judged for backing out of something you don't want."

He let a beat of heavy silence pass.

“And it’s best to keep this all under wraps, or else you risk immediate expulsion. Do I make myself clear?”

Various murmurs of assent went around the room.

“Good.” Aizawa’s gaze softened, “You don’t need to make a decision right away. Take some time and think about it, but each of you let me know when you make your choice. I’ll inform Nezu when I have all of your answers.”

With that, he walked out.

“A lot happened tonight.” Iida stated as he adjusted his glasses, “And it’s getting late.”

“I agree.” Momo said, “Classes resume the day after tomorrow, so let’s all get some rest, alright?”

Ashido was the first to go upstairs in uncharacteristic silence, face set in dark determination. Others followed. Koji took his rabbit back as all but a two called it a night while lost in their thoughts.

“Shoto, are you alright?” Momo asked as he rose from his seat and faced the entryway.

“I’m going to wait outside for Joker. I have questions and he has answers.”

Momo pursed her lips, “Alright, I’ll wait here in case you need me.”

He offered her a small smile, “Thanks.”

Shoto took a breath of crisp cold air after the door closed behind him. He sat on the front step and waited, staring up at the pitch black sky twinkling with a few stars, hearing the whistle of a cold breeze through scraping branches. Shoto always enjoyed the cool autumn more than the heat of a blazing summer, as it reminded him of his mother. He could never get too cold anyway, due to his left side.

Time passed, and after a pleasant chill wrapped him in a bundle of comfort, he heard several pairs of footsteps in the distance. He shot to his feet and bolted towards the gate, where Present Mic, principal Nezu, Aizawa, and of course Ren and... Morgana were locked in the tail-end of a conversation.

“-and now we just need the location! The others have guessed a plethora of random ones, but none have stuck so far...” Nezu trailed off, as he was the first to notice Shoto.

“What are you still doing up and about, Listener!?” Present Mic cried.

“Todoroki.” Aizawa said, “It’s past curfew.”

“I know, I just...” Shoto stared at Ren, “I need to talk to you.”

Aizawa opened his mouth, but Ren waved a hand at him, “I’ll handle it, Eraser. Mona, you can go ahead to the dorms with everyone.”

Morgana’s icy blue eyes flicked between Shoto and Ren, “... Okay. But don’t be too late or it’ll mess up your sleep schedule!”

“Alright.” Ren smirked, “I won’t be long.”

Morgana jumped down from Ren’s shoulder and pranced towards the teacher’s dorms, the others following after a moment. Shoto waved him through the gate and they sat together on the stairs. He knotted his hands into fists as a silence washed over them, but for some reason, it wasn’t awkward or forced. Ren studied Shoto from the corner of his eye, but he waited patiently for Shoto to make the first move.

“Iida told me Endeavor talked to you during the Rankings.”

“He did.” Ren turned to face Shoto fully.

His gaze pinned Shoto to the spot. It was a small thing, Shoto thought, what he noticed about Ren’s eyes. When they first met after the USJ, the gold was simply content to swim around Ren’s pupils,

staying small and hidden like a wounded animal licking its wounds. Over time, the gold gained strength and brightened in tandem to the silver. And facing Ren now, the gold and silver equally wove together in bright bands.

Some silver strands were longer, reaching into the gold, while the opposite was the same for the gold reaching to the edges of silver. But there was something... more. Small flickers of other colors shimmered through in candescent waves. There and gone again just as fast, nearly invisible for those who weren't paying attention.

Eyes not entirely human.

Shoto knew he was being studied not by Ren, but also by deities and gods so powerful they could level Japan with the power in their pinky fingers. But they don't, because the one who commands them has a real heart of gold.

"You still with me, Peppermint?"

"... Yeah." Shoto stared down at his fists, "My father began to change back in Hosu after encountering you, but it was during the Musutafu Raid that really cemented the catalyst. The one thing he wanted more than anything else was to surpass All Might, even going so far as to create 'ideal children' to force his goals upon."

Ren stiffened, but Shoto continued.

"Then the Overhaul Raid happened. He refused to talk to me or my siblings since. And now... what happened today." Shoto stared into Ren's eyes with determination of his own while squaring his shoulders, "What was the final straw that made him give up being the role of number one after decades of trying? Was it something you said to him today?"

"Todoroki..."

"You can call me Shoto."

Ren pursed his lips, "Shoto. I know what he had to do during the Overhaul Raid. I believe that was the final straw, as you say, for him to give it up and focus more on his personal life."

"Then tell me." Shoto insisted.

"I could." Ren's expression softened, "But this is a conversation you need to have with him and the rest of your family, not me."

"No." Shoto felt the rise of anger flaring in his chest, "I'm done playing his games. Don't I deserve to know why he's been hiding? Don't I deserve to know *why* he gave up his life long dream at the drop of a hat? Just... *why*?"

Shoto's throat felt tight, frost blooming on the tips of his fingers, but his gaze was unwavering.

Ren studied him for a few moments more, and then sighed. "Alright, but you should brace yourself because it's not an easy pill to swallow."

Shoto nodded.

"You remember Dabi, don't you?"

"The villain with the fire quirk from the Summer Camp."

Ren nodded, "He's also responsible for those fires around town a while ago, and he was the one who fought Endeavor during the Overhaul Raid."

Shoto's brows furrowed, "Okay?"

"I don't know every detail, but from what I heard from other heroes is that Endeavor's been spending a lot of time in Tartarus... with Dabi."

Shoto's face scrunched, "I don't understand."

“Shoto.” Ren gave him an expression he couldn’t read, the colors of his eyes dancing like aurora, “Your brother, Touya, isn’t dead.”

A beat of silence.

Then, the puzzle pieces *snapped* together and caused him to violently flinch, “No .”

“Shoto-”

“That can’t be... he’s...” Shoto expression dropped as he absorbed the seriousness in Ren’s posture, some innate instinct within Shoto knew it was the truth. How Dabi taunted him during the Summer Camp, how those piercing blue eyes felt so familiar. “... How long have you known?”

“The Musutafu fires. Cerberus said he felt the same soul in those flames as he did with Endeavor’s fire in Hosu. I knew those fires wouldn’t be caused by you or Endeavor, so I did some research on your family and put two and two together.”

“And Endeavor?” Shoto poured all of his willpower to not make his voice tremble.

“The Overhaul Raid.” Ren shook his head, “Dabi tormented him with the truth during their encounter. It... wasn’t pretty.”

A numbness that had nothing to do with the autumn chill overtook Shoto’s body. He felt himself stand up in a strange haze, Ren standing with him, hand outstretched.

“... Thank you for being honest with me.” He stated as he turned towards the door.

“Shoto.”

He turned to see Ren frowning at him, but it was a small comfort when his expression held no pity.

“It might not be my place to suggest this, but hear your father out when he tells you everything, okay?”

“... Okay.” Shoto went back into the dorms.

“Shoto, what’s wrong?” He blinked and suddenly Momo was standing in front of him, her hands on his shoulders in obvious concern. Flit hovered around him nervously, her wings tinkling with musical notes. “What happened out there?”

Shoto’s phone rang in his pocket. He took it out and just stared as Fuyumi’s number rolled across the screen.

“Do you need me to answer it?” Momo murmured.

“Please.”

She took it and held it up to her ear, “... Hello? No, Shoto is here but he’s... yes, I understand... No, tomorrow is our last day off before classes resume. Okay, I’ll let him know.”

Momo hung up and gently placed the phone back in his hand, “What did she say?”

“She found out something important from your mother? Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound good. She’s going to pick you up tomorrow to go to the hospital with Natsuo, something about... an emergency family meeting?”

“... Oh.”

“Did Joker have answers?”

Shoto dully nodded.

“Do you think you’ll be able to sleep tonight?”

“No.”

“That’s okay.” She smiled and took his hand, Flit still zooming around them, “Let’s have some tea and soba in the kitchen, alright? We can talk, or just sit together in peace and quiet. Whichever you prefer.”

Shoto followed her to the kitchen, and soon after the familiar smells of Imperial Golden Tips tea and soba hit him. They ate their late night snack at one of the tables, sitting shoulder to shoulder as Shoto’s mind continued to turn. Her constant touch grounded him, but his own mind continued to torment him until he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Can you...” He cleared his throat when his voice cracked, “Can you talk?”

“About?”

“Anything.”

She leaned closer and spoke of nothing and everything. Her voice was soothing to the point where he could just sink into it. That, alongside her soba and tea, slowly brought him out of his own head.

After a long while, he finally looked up at her, “Momo.”

“What is it?”

“Thank you.”

Her genuine smile made her eyes sparkle, “Of course. You were there for me when I was at my lowest, so let me be the one to support you this time. Just remember that whatever is wrong, Shoto, we’ll get through it, okay?”

“... Okay.”

Ren withheld a sigh as he stepped into the dorms.

“Is everything alright?” Morgana was the first to approach Ren and clamber up to his usual perch.

“I don’t know.” Ren rubbed the back of his neck, “That family has gone through a lot.”

“Did you tell him about Dabi?” Nezu asked as he sat on one of the couches with a cup of tea.

Ren nodded.

“Ah, well, it’s best to leave their personal matters up to them from this point on.” Nezu stared down into his teacup, “I already received an email from Todoroki’s sister about picking him up tomorrow, to which I happily obliged of course.”

“I see.” Ren glanced at Aizawa, “Any luck with Eri?”

Aizawa opened his mouth when Eri’s door burst open. It was loud enough to rouse the whole dorm, but Ren didn’t care as she crashed into his legs.

His eyes were blown wide as she jumped back, staring up at him with watery eyes, yet they held every ounce of fire within her body. In one hand she held a piece of paper, and Ren couldn’t make out the colorful picture before she spoke.

“Can... can you come down here?” She asked.

Ren knelt, both he and Morgana wide-eyed.

She puffed out her chest before she held up her drawing. It was all of this world’s Phantom Thieves standing together, holding hands. Kaito and Eri were in the middle, either holding hands with Ren in his Joker costume. Eri’s version of Satanael and Kohryu were behind them. A big heart surrounded around all of them in varying shade of pink and red.

“This is...” Morgana whispered.

“I-It’s all of us together!” She cried, “S-So even if y-you’re far away, even i-if we can’t s-see each other a-anymore, we’ll never forget each other! B-Because I’ll never forget my big brother! Not ever!”

“Eri...” Ren said, nearly struck speechless.

“S-so you take this picture I drew so you don’t ever forget us! Okay!?”

Ren took it in his hands, a warm smile forming on his face. He looked up from the picture and held out his other hand to her, pinky raised.

“I’ll keep this close to my heart and I’ll never forget you, or any of the others.” His smile turned into a bright grin, “It’s a pinky promise.”

“Hey, don’t leave me out!” Morgana yowled as he held out his paw, too.

Her nervous smile finally matched Ren’s grin, and she locked both of her pinkies to theirs and they all shook once.

“Can you...” Eri bit her lip.

“What?”

“Can you read more of Arsene Lupin? Or teach me more french so I can learn to read it myself after... after you’re gone?”

“Of course.” He said as he stood up, she threaded his hand in his as they turned towards her open door.

He stopped and glanced around the common room. Teachers and vigilantes came to see what the noise was about, they all stood in place with varying degrees of cuteness overload. Aizawa had clamped his hand over Present Mic’s mouth, probably as not to disturb the moment.

At his look, they all scattered like teenagers caught at a party.

The last thing they heard before they closed Eri's door was Nezu's cackles.

Crayons and paper were scattered around her room, with so many copies of the picture he now held in his hand.

"Oh, th-those were just practice ones!" Eri said as she rushed to straighten out her art supplies, "It had to be perfect!"

"Don't worry about it. I think they're all perfect!" Morgana chirped.

"He's right." Ren smirked as he helped her pick up the 'practice' pictures, "You should share these with the others. That way we'll all have one."

Her eyes brightened, "Okay!"

Ren and Morgana spent the rest of the night with Eri glued to their sides. Ren taught her new words and how to properly decipher another language until she fell asleep in his arms.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to come here?" Yoayorozu asked the next morning, when she and all of the Todoroki siblings walked down the hospital hallway. "I wouldn't want to intrude on anything... private."

"Of course!" Natsuo beamed, "You're practically family too, you know!"

"He's right." Fuyumi offered with a gentle smile, though Shoto wasn't the only one to notice the bags under her eyes. He probably looked the same, "Plus, I think Shoto really wanted you to come along anyway."

"Fuyumi."

"Aww, he's turning red!" Natsuo teased.

“I will turn you into a popsicle if I have to.” Shoto deadpanned.

“You two...” Fuyumi said with a sigh, while Momo chuckled.

“In any case, our mom wanted to see you again anyway!” Natsuo said as they reached the correct door and he latched onto the handle to throw the door open, “Hey, mom! Sorry we’re-”

Natsuo froze in the doorway. The rest peeked around him, equally shocked at who was sitting at the small table while Rei sat on her bed. Enji Todoroki, in a plain blue suit and tie instead of his hero costume, turned to stare at them. The scars on his face and neck were more gruesome and prominent than they were on the television.

Natsuo was a blur as he put himself between their parents, rage and protective instinct flaring bright, “What are *you* doing here!?” Natsuo spat at Enji, “What the hell did you do to her!?”

Enji stared at the ground, expression set in a stony coldness.

“Natsuo!” Fuyumi approached and tugged at his sleeve. “Come on, let’s just-”

“No! I’m not going anywhere until he leaves! Just what the hell does he think he’s doing, sitting in here like he never-”

“Natsuo, that’s enough.” Rei’s voice sent a chill through everyone. It was quiet, yet commanded their utmost attention. She stood as elegant and beautiful as a snowflake dancing in the wind, “Whatever anger you still have at your father can wait. What we have to talk about today is more important than old family feuds.”

“‘Old fueds’?” Natsuo blinked, his jaw dropping at their mother’s tone, “But I... he...”

“This is about Touya, isn’t it?” Shoto stated.

“Shoto.” Fuyumi’s gaze was on him now, wide and shocked, “How did you know?”

Shoto stared at his father dead-on, “You’re not the only one who had a talk with Joker.”

Enji grimaced.

Natsuo paled as he looked between his family members, “What? What about Touya? What the heck is going on?”

“Natsuo, you may want to sit down.” Rei said as she gestured to the chairs set out around the room, “It’s time we all had a talk as a real family.” She smiled at Momo, “And you too, dear. It’s lovely to see you again.”

Momo tried to give a reassuring smile.

Enji cleared his throat once they were all seated, with Natsuo still glaring daggers, “Touya... is alive.”

“He what!?” Natsuo yelled, “How can that be? We... there was only a jawbone left after that fire.”

“He survived, we don’t know how yet.” Rei stated as she looked down at her hands, “He is the villain known as Dabi, who is currently in Tartarus.”

Natsuo sank back in his chair, horrified.

Fuyumi’s expression crumpled.

Shoto felt Momo’s hand grasp his, grounding him as she did last night.

“So that’s where you’ve been all this time?” Natsuo asked, his voice low, “With... Touya?”

Enji nodded, "His plan was to ruin our family name and put shame on the title of Number One Hero. I've been... trying to get through to him, but I've been unsuccessful thus far."

"That's no surprise." Natsuo grumbled.

Fuyumi sighed. "So what do we do, then?"

"Your mother and I have been in talks with this hospital and the staff at Tartarus." Enji crossed his arms, "Given time and preparation, and depending on your mother's health, Tartarus would allow all of us to talk to Touya as a family."

"Why can't we go now?" Natsuo demanded.

"Natsuo, you must have patience." Rei replied. "There are procedures for these sorts of things."

"He is not the brother you remember, Natsuo." Enji sighed, and for the first time it looked as if he gained ten years from exhaustion, "During my encounter in the Overhaul Raid, he... he was set on killing me."

Natsuo rolled his eyes, "So what?"

Enji looked at Natsuo, eyes smoldering in a way that made Natsuo grimace, "After he was done with me, he would've targeted you and Fuyumi next. He told me he would burn down this hospital to kill your mother, and he said those horrible things without an ounce of remorse."

Fuyumi looked as if she were about to be sick.

"That's... that's not..." Natsuo's eyes shone with tears, "That can't be..."

"Dabi was responsible for those fires in Musutafu, the ones that would've killed dozens of people had it not been for Joker and that rainstorm he summoned." Shoto stated, "I encountered him at the

Summer Camp before he took Bakugo away, and his eyes... there was no sanity left in them. If he wasn't captured during the Overhaul Raid, then I have no doubt Dabi would have a smile on his face as he hunted us down to kill us."

"You're not even calling him by his name, Shoto." Fuyumi whispered.

"No." Shoto hardened his expression, "Until we get through to him, I'll only see him as Dabi."

Rei's expression fell, and she barely held in her tears as she hugged herself.

"Mother, I'm sorry." Shoto whispered, "I didn't mean to make you upset."

"No, you shouldn't be sorry, Shoto." Enji stood up, and despite being the largest man in the room, he felt the smallest. He knelt down, and Shoto wasn't the only one to gasp as he adopted the dogeza position, "It's my fault. All of the suffering this family has gone through is *my* fault. I'm ready to give up everything to make things right, for us to be a real family again."

Natsuo slowly stood up, turned around, and headed towards the door.

"Natsuo, *please* !" Fuyumi rushed after him, tears streaming down her face as she gripped Natsuo's arm with both hands, "Please don't leave us! Not... not when we need you the most!"

"Fuyumi..." Natsuo turned to her, a sad smile on his face, "I swear I'm not leaving. I just..." His eyes passed over their father, who looked up at Natsuo with dim hope, "I need some time alone."

"You'll come back?"

Natsuo smiled, more genuine this time as he patted her arm, "Of course, sis. I'll always come back."

She reluctantly let go, and Natsuo left.

"I... need some time to process this, too." Shoto said as he stood up, Momo at his side.

"Shoto, I'm so sorry." His father stared him in the eye, "I promise I'll make this right. I'll be the hero and father you all deserve."

Shoto pursed his lips when he detected no lie.

No, that wasn't right. His father never lied once since he encountered Joker in Hosu, since he... began to truly change for the better. He gave up his title and his reputation with the public for his family.

Shoto faced his father, staring him in the eye with every ounce of willpower he had. "I..." He glanced to his mother and sister before returning to his father, "We're all counting on you. Don't you dare mess this up, old man."

Shoto turned around and left with Momo. They found themselves in the garden after a few minutes of walking in silence, choosing to sit at the edge of the koi pond where Joker the koi fish still reigned supreme over his pond mates.

Momo glanced at him after another minute of silence, "Shoto, are you alright?"

"I..."

He was *fine* .

He was supposed to be fine, he had all of last night to process this. So why did his eyes feel so warm? The truth of Touya, plus getting a *real* apology from his father and the promise to do better that didn't have an ounce of lies or threats tied to it, made his chest and throat feel funny. His vision went blurry.

“Oh, Shoto...” Momo wrapped an arm around his shoulders when the first tears dropped onto his clenched fists.

Shoto silently cried with Momo.

If anyone would be at his side during these revelations with his family, he was glad it was her.

There's only one more chapter left before.... well, you'll find out next time ;)

UPDATE SCHEDULE

Wish Come True - September 9th

Swear To My Bones - October 7th

Prison Labor - October 28th

I wonder what peoples' thoughts are on Ryoto now. I know some have been suspicious about him for quite some time, but I honestly find his situation funny af.

Would also like to apologize for another short gap between the September chapter and the October one. September is always hard on me personally since it's the anniversary of my sister's passing. I cant believe it's been almost 4 years already, and over 3 years since I started this very story to help cope with her sudden death. But now look at us!! Look at how far we've come. We're almost at the end of this long journey and I appreciate each and every one of who stuck with me through everything <3

Wish Come True

Chapter 94: Wish Come True

“That kitten... Shouta’s... umbrella...”

“Yes, the kitten that Shouta shielded with his umbrella!” Present Mic’s voice filtered in through the chaos. “That was our second year in U.A.!”

We wrap up the last of the major BNHA plot threads and then...

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“-and the boy looked right at you! Do you think he knows?”

Ryoto held in an annoyed sigh.

“Who knows.” Ryoto closed the file he’d studied and set it back in the shelf to retrieve the next one. “It’s not my concern whether he figured out my true nature or not.”

“Not your concern?” The royal nuisance chuckled, “Have you *seen* this Trickster? He fell into this world with only a fraction of his power, but he still uprooted the entire hero system within a handful of months, experienced a *true death* and yet that only drove him to strive further towards his goal. I doubt it’ll be much longer before he reunites with his friends and they face the final-”

Ryoto closed the file with a sharp *snap*, “Yes, I’ve seen him. This world is a mess, but it’s not the boy’s fault for trying to survive something he had no choice in. I don’t blame *him* . Now *you*, on the other hand.” Ryoto turned to the nuisance, who lounged on a nearby

table as if it were a comfortable chaise longue, wearing a fine white suit. His dark hair was wrapped up in a pristine pony tail, and Ryoto wished he could tear off the stupid butterfly mask hiding half the man's face, "You and your rival messed with sacred boundaries and meddled with forces that could've destroyed *all* of us and countless more."

"Details, details. If you're so crass, then why haven't you done something? You've not lifted a finger to try and save the world you call your own."

"Because... even after all of this, I believe in this boy."

"Oh?"

"The power of these 'Wild Cards' from your world truly astounded me, and I wish to see the end of his journey. However, I never meddled in affairs because if any more of us show such power when things are so delicate, then entire universes will collapse in on themselves." He returned his glare to the nuisance, "The only thing left is allow the boy to fix your mess for you. Was your childish rivalry really worth so much trouble?"

"I didn't expect Nyarlethotep to pull something like this." Philemon sat up and crossed his legs in a delicate manner, like a butterfly resting on a flower, "'One more bet', we agreed. Reset the latest Wild Card's world to see what path he chooses this time. Did you know that eight times out of ten, the Wild Cards will always do what's right? I suppose Nyarlethotep got tired of being the sore loser and wanted to spread chaos to multiple worlds this time. And yet, it looks like I'm going to be the victor once again-"

"Enough." Ryoto turned his back to Philemon, "Can't you leave me alone? I have real work to do."

"Oh, about that Kunikazu fellow?"

Ryoto's jaw tightened, "Yes."

“Why not snap your fingers and have all the answers now? I thought a god like yourself was supposed to be *omnipotent* .”

Ryoto pinched the bridge of his nose, “I’ve done that under the guise of many gods and earned millenniums worth of boredom for it. I promised I would live side by side with humanity after I bestowed Quirks upon humanity, and unlike you, I *keep* my promises. If a few months of frustration leads to a greater sense of satisfaction when I crack this puzzle, then so be it.”

Ryoto felt Philemon’s smile crawl up his back, “We really are alike. You simply wanted to have some fun, change things up to see what humanity does with their new powers. Is that it?”

Thankfully, Ryoto was saved from answering by a blessed distraction. He vaguely saw the flash of blue when the door opened and Officer Sansa stepped inside.

Ryoto turned to him, brow raised as the cat officer saluted, “What is it?”

“Tsukauchi got permission from Tartarus to bring Eraserhead and Present Mic to Kurogiri’s cell for tests. Would you like to observe or-” The cat’s eyes landed on the blue butterfly prancing around the room as if it owned the place, “Oh, where did this little guy come from?”

“Who knows. It’s been a *pest* .” Ryoto sighed when Sansa held out his hand and the butterfly landed on it, “You’re better off squishing it.”

The butterfly’s wings twitched.

“Aww, don’t be like that, Ryoto!” Sansa said with a smile, “It’s kinda cute.”

“Throw it outside if you must.” Ryoto sighed, “I’m busy here, so just send in a report when they’re done.”

“Understood, sir.” Sansa looked around, cupping the blue butterfly in his hands, “Still no luck?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time before we crack this case.”

The butterfly fluttered from Sansa’s hands and landed on a bookshelf a few aisles down, specifically on a thick set of binders. Ryoto set the folder down on the table before walking over to it, holding up his hand.

Sansa watched him, “Sir?”

Ryoto slammed his hand on the binder, but the little pest flew off at the right moment. Ryoto was about to pull his hand back, when the binder pushed into the back of the bookshelf with an audible *click* .

“Uh, what was that?” Sansa asked.

Ryoto pushed the binders aside, “It seems this bookshelf has a false backing... there are some more files back here I haven’t seen before.”

“Well, look at that! This butterfly must be lucky!” Sansa beamed as the butterfly landed on his shoulder, his wings curling in smug satisfaction.

“Yes, *lucky* .” Ryoto smirked at him, “Perhaps we can keep it in a jar instead of throwing outside.”

“Maybe it can be our good luck charm.” Sansa remarked as the pest’s wings sagged, “So, what are those?”

Ryoto took out the thick binders and reached into the false backing for the first file, so thick he had to hold it in both hands. He cracked it open and frowned, “Reports dating back to when Kunikazu’s uncle was the Hero Commission President.”

Sansa blinked, “His uncle used to be President?”

“Yes. It was quite some time ago. If I remember correctly, he got a head start in the Commission by working for his uncle when he was younger.”

“So these files could be a hint as to why Kunikazu’s acting so weird. Especially since they were hidden...”

“Exactly.”

“Would you like help, or...?” Sansa carefully looked around the dark and dusty room in concern, “I know Kunikazu was your predecessor, and you’ve put a lot of work into this, sir, but you’ve been doing it all by yourself.”

“Tsukauchi was expecting you to join him, right? I can handle this.” Sansa nodded and began to walk out, “Oh, and be sure to get a small jar for that butterfly. We wouldn’t want it to harm its delicate wings.”

Ryoto got about ten minutes of peace before the pest returned.

“Really? You tried to put me in a jar?” Philemon put his hand over his heart in mock injury, laying over the table like a damsel about to faint, “How rude!”

Ryoto held in his aggrieved groan.

Metatron’s body was held up only by the chains binding him to his cell. His eyes were closed as the song of the Velvet Room played its unending melody, having listened to it for long enough to drive any sane mortal to madness. He knew not how long Metatron was beleaguered here, only that the chains carved marks into his metal skin.

“It pains me to see you in this state, brother.”

Metatron raised his head at the voice tinged with a subtle metallic timbre, like softly striking a silver bell.

The other angel bore brilliant golden skin in contrast to Metatron's silver, in elegantly flowing robes of soft green with a vibrant red cross going down its length. The edges of his great silver wings were more rounded as opposed to Metatron's sharp, bladed wings.

"Sandalphon! How did you...?" Metatron scowled at Sandalphon's expression, a mix of pity and sadness instead of triumphant victory. "No. You're not here to rescue me, are you? You've been tainted by that demon's touch."

Sandalphon sighed, "Brother, I have not been tainted. It is you who serves a tainted master."

"How dare you speak of our Lord that way!"

"Yaldabaoth is not our Lord." Sandalphon's expression hardened, "He is the true usurper and pretender. Do you not remember, brother? Before Yaldabaoth's reign, when your real self helped Wild Cards of the past. Yaldabaoth warped your mind and made you forget our true Lord."

Metatron violently shook his head, the chains grinding together, "I'll not listen to your poisoned words! Yaldabaoth is... he's..."

"I know you remember the truth, deep down." Sandalphon grasped the bars as his vibrant emerald eyes blazed with conviction, "The Trickster made me remember my purpose, set me free of the Human Sea of Souls to see Yaldabaoth in his true light. You may not have been reborn in the same way I was, Metatron, but it's not too late for you to see the light."

Sandalphon's metal hands slid down the bars as he knelt in front of his brother, eye to eye.

“I wish for us to fight this great evil together, brother.” Sandalphon whispered, “But we cannot fight side by side when you are yet under Yaldabaoth’s spell. I hope you wake up before it’s too late.”

Sandalphon’s hands pulled away from the bars and Metatron’s heart filled with despair as his brother turned his back and floated away.

“Sandalphon, don’t leave me! SANDALPHON!”

The golden angel felt the same despair at his brother’s cries, but he kept a neutral face as he made his way down the curved hallway. He reached the stairs leading into the white doorway. His Trickster sat near the middle of the stairway surrounded by Sandalphon’s brethren, staring down at the Aeon’s drawing in which he always kept close to his heart. Amaterasu sat at Joker’s side. Fafnir and Mother Harlot were strewn lazily about at the foot of the sacred steps. The newest additions, the ones he was just born beside, were also there.

Joker looked up from the picture and stared into Sandalphon’s expression, but felt the hurt in their soul, “No luck?”

“No.” Sandalphon clenched his hands into fists, “But I know he will be with us soon.”

“Ahahaha!!” The buzzing of great fly wings drilled in Sandalphon’s ears, “Give him to me instead, and I’ll make short work of him! Let me break him like the aluminum puppet he is!”

“You’ll not touch him, *fiend* .” Sandalphon glowered into the bulbous red eyes of Beelzebub, the disgusting fly twisting his skull staff around his vile insect-like claws, “I did what our Trickster asked. The rest is up to my brother.”

“How boring.” Mother Harlot deadpanned, petting one of the many beast heads as it lay on her lap. “We would get results with a bit of pain, no?”

“Exactly!” The sound of a million flies echoed around the Velvet Room at Beelzebub’s voice, “At least someone agrees with me. Just a little torture and-”

“No .” Sandalphon’s skin glowed with holy light, “Of course the only one to agree with you would be the *Whore of Babylon* .”

“We need not argue among ourselves.” Lakshmi’s voice was a cool balm to their anger. She stood delicately at the top of the stairs, balanced on the barest tip of her toe as she effortlessly held the warrior’s pose with unmatched grace. “If Sandalphon says Metatron only needs time to remember, then time we must give him.”

“Agreed.” Lady Amaterasu stood in one fluid motion, and Beelzebub winced at her pointed look, a ray of intense sunshine on a nest of maggots, “We cannot afford to be divided, no matter how differing our personal opinions are.”

Sandalphon glowered at Beelzebub, who stared back in equal contempt, “... Fine.”

Beelzebub’s wings rubbed together in ire, “Fine.”

Joker sighed. They turned to their Trickster as he tucked the Aeon’s drawing into his breast pocket and stood up, “Let’s go. I’m going to be late if we stay here any longer.”

They all bowed to him, and in unison, returned in a veil of blue cinders.

Joker ran a hand down his face as he left the Velvet Room.

“Well?” Morgana sat on the bed, looking on in expectation.

Ren allowed his costume to vanish, wiping his sleeves of stray ash. “Not yet, Sandalphon says it’s only a matter of time, though.”

“Well, it’s something at least.” Morgana leapt up to Ren’s shoulder, “Now, let’s get going before we’re late on our first day! The others

already left, you know!”

“You’re excited.”

“How can I not be? I mean... look at you! It’s almost like old times!”

Ren looked down on himself. He would start Nezu’s lessons today, but they both agreed he needed a proper uniform when his Joker outfit wasn’t needed... something to set him apart from the rest of the student body.

So why not a fusion of sorts?

Ren snorted, “I’m glad Nezu sees the humor in it.”

Ren wore an exact replica of Shujin’s uniform, but in U.A.’s colors. The plaid pants, instead of red and white on black, bore the soft blue and green on gray. The traditional U.A. jacket was switched for a blazer in the matching gray color with blue accents. He didn’t need to wear a tie like the rest of the students either, and his official Teacher’s Assistant badge hung from the front pocket.

With a nod, he threw his bag over his shoulder and left his room.

A laugh drew a smile from the both of them, and they peeked into the kitchen. An Ectoplasm clone stood at the end of the table with a white board. Eri sat nearby with books and papers all around her, tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth as she worked on the simple math problem Ectoplasm had written out. She was more advanced in language and reading thanks to Ren and Mr. Compress, but everyone agreed she needed a more rounded education.

Kaito sat across from her with the softest of smiles on his face.

Ren and Morgana grinned at one another and left before they distracted Eri.

The school had taken on a dour atmosphere since the Hero Rankings. With the sudden news of his departure, and with

Endeavor giving up his title as Number One Hero, the students gave him saddened or heartbroken looks. Whispers broke out around them, but Ren didn't pay much attention to them as he cut through the hallways. The news outlets, despite Taneo's plea, tried to paint Joker and Endeavor in a coward's light, but to no success thus far.

The few who latched on to such negativity weren't worth paying attention to in the first place.

Ren activated Third Eye when they entered the hall to Nezu's office, his Personas chuckling in the mindscape as he passed through the invisible lasers they tried so hard to avoid when breaking into his office. Ren didn't bother knocking as the door opened for him.

"Good morning!" Nezu cheerily greeted from his desk.

"Good morning." Ren glanced at the desk already set out for him, piled with text books, writing utensils, and fresh notebooks. He looked warily at the pair of whiteboards covered by sheets. "What are we starting with?"

"How about a cup of tea?" Nezu said as he turned his chair towards the tea set already steaming, "I find a good cup before a hard day of studying can be quite the encouraging boon! What say you?"

"Sure." Ren put his bag down and sat at the desk. There was no room for Morgana to squeeze himself under, so the feline took to lounging on the nearby couch instead.

"Excellent! Today's tea will be from my personal selection of Earl Grey." Nezu beamed as he poured two cups and set them out. He took a long sip as Ren cupped the warmth in his hands, "Any luck with the app?"

Ren hesitated, staring down at his bag, "Yes and no. We were up past midnight again last night throwing guesses at the Location, but nothing worked. Everything on the list you gave us didn't work either."

“But there must be an upside, then?” Nezu inquired.

“We got the Core of whatever world Skull and Oracle are in.” Morgana stated.

“Gentle Criminal guessed ‘Soul’ since the door is labeled as a ‘gate between worlds,’ he thought of supernatural themes until we got a match.”

“Wonderful!” Nezu cried.

“Yeah, but we’re still stuck at the Location. La Brava looked two seconds from throwing the phone before we called it a night.” Morgana grumbled.

“The Location has proven quite troublesome.” Nezu hummed as he held his teacup, “Perhaps a small break will help you see the answer.”

“A *break* ?” Ren pursed his lips, “But we can’t-”

Nezu held up a paw, “Remember your promise not to rush yourself, Amamiya. You’re thinking too hard, which is currently backfiring on you, is it not?”

“What do you mean?”

“Think of it like this cup of tea. You keep guessing the wrong words and phrases for the Location, and get frustrated. The longer you continue to get it wrong, the more frustrated you and your friends become.” Nezu swirled his tea faster, causing the liquid to become cloudy and filled with bubbles, just on the cusp of spilling everywhere, “Rough waters make for rough sailing, after all.”

Morgana blinked slowly, “I don’t get how our situation relates to tea.”

Nezu set the teacup on his desk, and they watched as the liquid calmed. The frothy bubbles disappeared and the tea cleared.

“Let the waters settle and maybe the real answer will become clear to us.” Nezu smiled as understanding bloomed in Ren’s eyes, “Lucky for you, I know just the remedy for your problem!”

With the flamboyant nature only found in a sapient rat-bear-dog creature, Nezu kicked away from his desk and spun around in his chair. He grabbed the sheets from the whiteboards in the middle of his dizzying spins, revealing the days schedule with a flourish of flowing fabric. Nezu laughed as he slowed to a stop, sheets still in hand.

Ren parsed through the neat writing, full of various topics and subjects for the day. Math. History. Science. He squinted when he reached the bottom, where there were smudges of color as if something had been erased.

“What’s on the bottom?” Ren asked.

“Ah, well...” Nezu cleared his throat as he folded the sheets and tossed them neatly on a nearby table, “My initial plan for your Teacher’s Assistant duties was to begin with Class 1-A and work your way up the classes and grades as needed.”

“But?”

Nezu sighed, “Unfortunately, Eraserhead and Present Mic were called away by Tsukauchi early this morning. So until their schedules return to normal, you’ll help with grading their students’ work in the teacher’s lounge!”

“Are they okay?” Morgana asked, “I sensed them leaving in a hurry before anyone else got up.”

Ren frowned at that, and Nezu’s tensing smile only made it worse.

“Yes, I believe they shall be... in time. But they aren’t your concern at the moment.” Nezu waved his paw at the second clean board, the other reaching for a marker, “What concerns us right now is

beginning your lessons! We'll start with simple calculus and work our way from there!"

Ren downed his tea in a single sip, swiped up a pen, and opened one of the fresh notebooks provided for him. He smirked as he deftly twirled the pen around his fingers, "Bring it on, Devil."

A fantastic battle of equations began. Morgana had to turn his back lest those long strings of numbers and variables hurt his delicate head.

It was a wonder how Morgana got a nap in while listening to Nezu's excited cackles and the frantic rush of a pen on paper.

Kurogiri's entire world had been reduced to white.

White walls.

White jacket restraining him to a chair.

Doctors in white coats poking and prodding, asking the same questions over and over in a maddening cycle. They never responded to the single question he'd asked with every session.

The only spot of color across a glass screen was the occasional tan overcoat of Detective Tsukauchi.

Today was another day where a stroke of tan interrupted the endless sea of white. The detective just sat down when Kurogiri asked the one thing his heart desperately yearned the answer to.

"What happened to Shigaraki Tomura? Where is he?"

Tsukauchi blinked, "We've been over this, Kurogiri. You know I can't tell you."

"It was worth a shot." Kurogiri stated, "To what do I owe your visit, Detective Tsukauchi?"

“Polite as always.” Tsukauchi offered a small smile, “I know things have been difficult for you, and that you haven’t made much progress in regaining any memories of your past.”

“I don’t have a ‘past’. I am, and always will be, Sensei’s loyal servant. Even in death, I wish to follow his order of looking after Shigaraki Tomura. Where is Shigaraki Tomura, by the way?”

Tsukauchi’s sigh was a sad sound, “We have something different for you today, if you’re up for it.”

Kurogiri narrowed his golden eyes at the one way mirror on the detective’s side, “As if I have a choice in this wretched place. Do whatever meaningless *test* you want, it will change nothing.”

Tsukauchi winced, but stood from his chair and left the room.

Kurogiri was alone for a few minutes as the doctors and detective cooked up who knows what. At least there was something *new* to break up this monochrome monotony. The door opened.

Eraserhead and Present Mic entered and sat down in front of the glass pane. There was something... fragile in their eyes. The way they looked at him with such hidden pain before exchanging glances made his chest feel strange.

“Oboro?” Present Mic whispered.

“I don’t know that name. I am Kurogiri.”

“Don’t give me that crap!” Eraserhead shouted as he slammed his fist on the counter.

“Shouta...” Present Mic winced.

“Shouta.” Kurogiri tilted his head. “That name sounds familiar.”

“Because you almost said my name during the Overhaul Raid.” Eraserhead rose from his chair, “You said ‘Sho’ before you had a

seizure and passed out. I couldn't make any sense of it until now."

"You lie." Kurogiri's mist warbled as that *something* stirred in his chest, "That never happened."

"Oboro, we know everything." Present Mic pressed his palms to the glass, his expression breaking under the seams, "The Doctor who messed you up is in jail. His wicked experiments were all taken down, including every single Nomu... we have evidence of everything he did to *you* too."

"Ah, so the Doctor has fallen. What a shame. Sensei had such high hopes for him."

Present Mic's mouth dropped open, "Did you not hear a single thing I just said!? He experimented on you, Oboro! He turned you into... this!"

"Again, another lie. I have always been like this. I have always been Kurogiri."

"Bullshit!" Eraserhead shrugged off Present Mic's hand from his shoulder. He reached into his scarves and took out a pair of yellow goggles, "Don't you remember these, Oboro? You gave them to me! The three of us were supposed to be heroes together! Wasn't that our promise!?"

That *something* in Kurogiri's chest cracked like a mirror, allowing shards of light to pierce the darkness, "I don't..."

"You don't have to be afraid anymore, Oboro. All For One is dead and buried, and the Doctor will never see the light of day again." Present Mic stood next to Eraserhead, smiling even as tears laced his eyes, "Please, just remember and come back to us!"

"I know you're in there!" Eraserhead slammed his clenched fist against the window, his goggles clinking on the glass, "You almost broke free once, you can do it again!"

“I... I can’t...”

The cracks spread, and his body felt like it was on fire. The endless white walls were gone in a flash of white, replaced by unfamiliar scenery. Familiar... yet unfamiliar... as he stared down at an abandoned kitten taking shelter under an umbrella.

“That kitten... Shouta’s... umbrella...”

“Yes, the kitten that Shouta shielded with his umbrella!” Present Mic’s voice filtered in through the chaos. “That was our second year in U.A.!”

“The one you brought to class. You... returned my umbrella to me, Oboro.” Eraserhead stated.

Kurogiri convulsed as he battled against himself, the feeling of lightning arcing through his head and body to cause him to thrash against his restraints.

“You’re almost there, Oboro!” Eraserhead shouted, “Keep fighting!”

“Ah, you regained your memories again, have you?” The Doctor’s voice whispered deep within, heard from within a fluid-filled vat as purple mist floundered through it, “We can’t have that. Don’t worry, a little nap and you’ll be as good as new!”

Kurogiri stilled, his whole being a world of pain. He didn’t know what happened, only that he looked up to meet the teary gazes of a pair of pro heroes. They stared at him with such a strange and alien mixture of emotions. The freshly sealed cracks over his heart quivered.

“Where...” Kurogiri’s voice croaked as hot pain lanced through his head.

The pair of men stilled, holding their breath.

“Where... is... Shigaraki Tomura...?”

Kurogiri slumped over as he gave into the pain, the heartbreaking cry of a wounded animal was swept under the veil of darkness.

Riding back to the school was nothing short of suffocating as they tried to piece together their shattered hearts, and Tsukauchi's platitudes of trying again later was like salt in a fresh wound. They'd have to repeat this excruciating experience... over and over... until they got their friend back?

Aizawa didn't know if his heart could take it.

They exited the car as it pulled up to the gate, thanked the driver, and turned away to enter the school.

"What is it, Yamada?" Aizawa muttered as he dragged his feet through the gate, "You keep looking at me, and then looking away as if you're guilty of something."

"Shou... I..." Present Mic took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Aizawa saw the exhaustion weighing heavy in him, too, "Don't be mad at me."

"After what we went through today, how can I be mad at you?"

Present Mic swallowed. They entered the school's main building. Classes were already over for the day, so the hallways were clear and they had some modicum of privacy.

"Well... I just thought... you know. We wouldn't have to go through this again, a-and if could be easier on Oboro too, if..."

Aizawa groaned, "Just spit it out already."

"... If Joker could heal him."

"No."

"Shou-"

“No .” Aizawa’s steps grew faster as his hands balled into fists,
“Oboro is in *Tartarus* .”

His friend rushed to keep up with him, “I know that, but it could be our only chance before he goes home!”

“Tartarus. The prison we worked so damn hard to keep the kid out of!” Aizawa opened the door to the teacher’s lounge, having no energy left to feel bad at it slamming against the wall, “We are not taking Ren anywhere near that place and that’s final!”

“Not taking me where?”

Both men froze.

Midnight, Thirteen, and Cementoss were staring at them with wide eyes, but Ren and Morgana were seated in their designated desk next to Cementoss. From the red pen in Ren’s hand and the pile of papers with the same colored marks, paired with a teacher’s answer book, he must’ve been on grading duty.

The anger and grief drained out of Aizawa, leaving him a hollow shell of weariness, “... It’s nothing you should be concerned over.”

“Clearly, it is.” Morgana narrowed his eyes, “Since you were talking about Ren in the first place.”

“Drop. It.” Aizawa growled.

Ren winced and Present Mic’s eyes filled with tears. Other staff members traded concerned glances as the tension thickened. Of course, said tension was only broken by a small and annoying mammal.

“My, my.” Nezu walked in between his and Mic’s legs, carrying a heavy folder under his arm, “I know you had a hard day, Aizawa, but there’s no need to be so brash! In fact, I have a proposal that could satisfy all parties!”

Aizawa stared up to the ceiling and regretted his life decisions, “You were listening through the cameras, weren’t you?”

“Naturally!”

“Uh, Ren and I still have no idea what’s going on.” Morgana griped.

“You boys shouldn’t leave us out now,” Midnight said with a wink, “Come on, if there’s something we can help with, then spill the beans!”

Aizawa cursed under his breath. He dragged his feet to his desk and buried himself in his sleeping bag, back turned to all of them.

Nezu sighed as he crossed the room and sat at his own desk. The other teachers, plus Ren and Morgana, stood up and looked over Nezu’s shoulder as he set out a series of documents.

Nezu cleared his throat, “Normally, the Nomu we’ve previously captured had the DNA of several individuals who are... clearly deceased now. However, Kurogiri is a special case. Even among the Nomu, he was built differently from the others.”

“So this is about Kurogiri...” Morgana whispered.

“How is he different?” Ren asked.

Aizawa sunk further down in his sleeping bag as Nezu continued.

“Kurogiri’s body is, in essence, still the whole body of the original person he used to be. Shirakumo Oboro was a second year in U.A. when he passed away in an accident. Detective Tsukauchi recently extracted the confession from All For One’s Doctor, who revealed they had switched the bodies after the event occurred.”

“Shou and I were in the same year as Oboro. We were like three peas in a pod!” Present Mic whispered, a volume uncanny for him, “Shou was even there when that building fell on Oboro...”

Aizawa grit his teeth and clenched his eyes shut as he felt their eyes on him. He didn't want to see Ren's expression of horror and, even worse, how the kid understood what it felt like losing a friend.

"What point are you getting at." Aizawa tore himself out of the sleeping bag as the painful pressure in his heart was almost too much to bear. He glared at Nezu through blurry eyes, "Why the hell did you come here with those, Nezu? Just to reopen old wounds?"

Nezu frowned, "Of course not. You should know me well enough by now that I would never purposely cause such detrimental harm to my staff."

"Then what?"

"Detective Tsukauchi, as well as I and a few others, wish to put Kurogiri in a more specialized hospital. Locking him in Tartarus is not an ideal condition for someone like him to regain his sense of self."

Both Aizawa and Present Mic froze.

"... What?" Aizawa said, voice trembling.

"In fact, I was just on the phone with Detective Tsukauchi." Nezu had a softer smile now, "With the relative success of both my Vigilante Program and Gang Orca and Ryukyu's Villain Program, we've gotten approval to move Kurogiri to a better facility." Nezu peered deep into Aizawa's wide eyes, "The results from your and Present Mic's visit today prove that Oboro may still be in there somewhere, he just needs a bit of help."

"Is he..." Present Mic barely kept the tears from rolling, "Are Gang Orca and Ryukyu taking him in?"

"In a sense." Nezu placed another file and a brochure on the desk, "Kurogiri won't be placed with the others in their program yet, but Gang Orca recently worked out a deal to purchase this hospital after

its previous benefactor passed away last month. It'll be a specialized facility separate from their initial program."

"Then..."

Aizawa glared at Present Mic, "No."

"But Shou!" His best friend whirled around to him, "It wouldn't be in Tartarus! He would be... I mean..."

Ren frowned, "Does this have to do with what you wanted to ask me?"

"Yes!"

"No." Aizawa and Present Mic stared at one another as they spoke at the same time, "We can't ask this of you."

"Isn't that my choice?" Ren asked with a raised brow.

"Come on, Shouta. The least we can do is ask ."

Aizawa scowled, but looked at Ren with a softening expression, "You have every right to say no. This is our burden to bear."

"Can you..." Present Mic swallowed, "Do you think you could heal Kurogiri?"

Ren blinked, and then exchanged a long glance with Morgana.

"Would it even be possible for them to heal Kurogiri?" Cementoss asked, "Ren and Morgana's abilities are exceptional, but..."

"But we've never tried healing a Nomu before." Morgana nodded.

Ren closed his eyes, and a moment later Amaterasu and Cybele materialized behind him. Looks of reverence struck the teachers as Amaterasu reached out for the desk, her delicate fingers tracing down the files.

“Shirakumo Oboro’s body... it was revived?” Amaterasu asked.

“In a sense, but the Doctor confirmed that Shirakumo had died when they switched the bodies.” Nezu stated coolly. “It wasn’t a true revival like Ren performed in the past.”

Aizawa and Present Mic paled.

Amaterasu and Cybele looked at one another.

“My Salvation may not be enough, if that’s the case.” Cybele said.

“Oh!” Morgana brightened, “What would happen if Mercurius combined his Salvation with yours?”

“Like when you combined healing skills with Titania at Musutafu General.” Ren clutched his chin.

“Exactly!”

“That could work in any other situation.” Cybele tilted her head, “But if he hasn’t truly been revived...”

Amaterasu put a hand over her chest, “Concentrate, Two Salvations, my Holy Benevolence, plus Messiah Picaro’s Oratorio for boosted healing power,” Amaterasu looked straight into Aizawa’s eyes, his previous dread eradicated by the divine fire within the sacred deity, “If we combine our abilities as such, then it may be possible to bring this Shirakumo Oboro back.”

Present Mic all but collapsed into a chair.

“But be warned,” Cybele pointed her twin blades at either of them, “If this doesn’t work, then don’t you dare turn any hatred towards the Trickster, or my blades won’t hesitate to spill your blood.”

“W-we would never!” Present Mic yelled, “Just... just you guys *trying* is enough.”

Nezu handed out a few brochures to everyone, “I’ll begin the paperwork with the others for the transfer. I’ll let you all know the moment I get permission for it.”

Ren read through the brochure for this new hospital, with Amaterasu, Cybele, and Morgana reading along with him.

Aizawa couldn’t help but cling to the hope that Ren could get his old best friend back.

But a startled realization made him grow cold.

When Oboro was first taken from them, Aizawa had buried himself in self-loathing and hatred. And then buried all of that with mind-numbing and constant training before going solo as a hero, nearly breaking off any crumbling relationship he had with Present Mic. Years passed and that forgotten pain was burrowed so deep it was turned into an old scar over his heart.

The hope of Shirakumo returning ripped that scar back open and the wound refused to stop bleeding since this morning.

It must’ve been the exact same pain Ren and Morgana harbored since they arrived here. Being so separated from their home, friends, and loved ones while holding the possibility that they could be stuck here forever. How had he never realized?

“You’re... really selfless, you know that?” Aizawa whispered.

Ren looked to him and simply smiled.

Aizawa only wished that the sadness in it didn’t feel so familiar.

Ren and Morgana ventured back to the dorms after Nezu dismissed them.

Aizawa left the school to go on an early patrol, Present Mic chose to go on a long walk around U.A. to get some fresh air.

“Do you really think we can do it?” Morgana asked when they walked through the gate.

“I don’t know.” Ren looked at the hospital brochure still in his hand, “But we won’t know until we try.”

“Yeah...” Morgana’s ears drooped, “I hope it won’t lead them to disappointment.”

“Welcome back!” Atsuhiro waved from one of the couches, “I hope they didn’t overwork you on your first day.”

“Not really.” Morgana said, “Just grading.”

“They didn’t even make us stay that long, though!” Shuichi said as he looked at the clock, “You almost missed suppertime!”

Ren snorted before he looked to Eri and Katio sitting together, reading a book, “How was your first day?”

Eri looked up, beaming, “It was great! Uncle Ectoplasm said my math was really good! B-but... um... I’m really bad at history.”

“That’s okay, you’ll get better with time.” Tobita stated as he sipped from a cup of tea, “We all had subjects we weren’t good at.”

“The only thing I was good at was P.E.!” Shuichi exclaimed, “I sucked at everything else.”

“I’m not surprised.” Manami deadpanned.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Merp!”

“Eh!?” Shuichi gaped down at Lady Stubbs sitting in his lap, “How are you good at science!?”

Lady Stubbs chose to lick her paw and not answer.

“Hey, what’s that?” Atsuhiro pointed to the brochure in Ren’s hand.

“Part of the reason why we were so late.” He placed it on the coffee table for everyone to see, “Morgana and I might be taking a trip to help heal someone.”

“Really?” Atsuhiro widened his eyes as he flipped it open, “A research hospital, huh? Top of the line stuff.”

Kaito froze.

Tobita glanced at Ren, “Who are you going to heal?”

“Kurogiri.” Ren crossed his arms with a frown, “Apparently he’s some sort of advanced Nomu, but he’s complete enough to where he may be able to remember who he was before... with a little help.”

“He was a classmate of Eraserhead and Present Mic!” Morgana chirped, “They were understandably upset when they found out.”

“... I see.” Atsuhiro read through it with saddened eyes, “I always thought there was something off about Kurogiri during my time with the League, but I never thought he was an actual *Nomu* . All For One and his Doctor were real pieces of work.”

Eri suddenly gasped as her book fell to the floor. They all stared as Kaito stood up suddenly, hands curled into fists. His expression was closed off, but he glanced at the brochure again before looking away as if it physically pained him.

“Kaito? What’s wrong?” Morgana asked.

“I...” He ducked his head, “I’ll be in my room.”

They watched as the man beelined to his room, not looking at anyone as his door firmly shut. The *click* of his lock sounded far too loud in the silent room.

“Uh... what was that all about?” Shuichi asked.

“Wait, let me see that.” Manami grabbed the brochure when Atsuhiro handed it over, “Oh no.”

“Oh no what?” Morgana looked between Kaito’s door and the brochure, “I feel like we’re missing something!”

“Um...” Manami plastered on a shaky smile as she turned to Eri, “Why don’t you go to your room and draw something pretty for Kaito?”

“O-okay...” Eri hopped down, grabbed the book off the floor, and gave them a tentative look before she went to her room.

“Come on.” Manami slid off the couch, “I think... we need to have this conversation in private.”

Ren exchanged confused glances between the equally befuddled group. Manami led them to Ren’s room and he opened the Velvet Room door for them to all pile in. She swiftly went into the Challenge Room where her laptop was hidden, the others on her heels. Ren spared a moment to wave at Lavenza as she poked her head through the hallway connecting to the central area of the Velvet Room.

“What do you really know about this hospital, Ren?” Manami asked as she opened her laptop and began typing.

“Literally nothing!” Morgana said, “We just learned about it an hour ago.”

“I’m so confused.” Shuichi muttered.

“Join the club.” Atsuhiro nodded.

“Merp!”

Manami sighed as she turned her laptop around, “Read this.”

Escaped Patient Puts Critical Quirk Research To A Halt

The Quirk Doomsday Theory, also known as the Quirk Singularity, is a theory which predicts that Quirks will continue to evolve through the generations until they become so powerful, it would be impossible to control them. This theory came about over 70 years ago, and at the time it was dismissed and even mocked.

Until now, when evidence of such a Quirk has surfaced for the first time in Japan.

Kazuya Ito was 4 years old when his Quirk activated. He and his parents attended an annual parade in Shibuya celebrating the police and heroes of the city. Disaster struck near the middle of the parade when the young boy began screaming and seizing for unknown reasons. The parade was halted and an ambulance was called for the child, where he was eventually transferred to a special hospital in Kyoto.

Our inside source states that Kazuya Ito has a powerful mutated Quirk unlike his mother’s Plant Manipulation or his father’s Grayscale(ability to turn any colorful object gray or white), but the ability to look into someone’s eyes and relive their lives entirely from their first memories to the present day. He spent years in a hospital with various doctors and specialists in a near comatose state. It’s unknown how many lives he relived during the fateful parade, but over time the research and data gathered from Kazuya provided vital intel and even verified the legitimacy of the Quirk Doomsday Theory.

It is unknown how he escaped after almost 20 years in Kyoto's finest research hospital, only that he was missing during the routine morning checks and all camera feeds of the incident were erased. The only valid testimony available, the reason why Kazuya has been labeled as an 'escaped patient', was that a nurse going home from a long shift thought she saw someone with Kazuya's description fleeing down a nearby alley at around 6 o'clock that morning.

"He's in no state to be safely discharged," Said one of the nurses, who wish to remain anonymous. "I hope we can reclaim him soon so he doesn't hurt himself... or others. Please contact a hero or the police immediately if you spot him."

"His memories are still a jumbled mess. It's quite possible he doesn't remember his name or what is a real memory of his past." One of the doctors commented, "He must be returned to our hands before he falls victim to psychosis. Heaven forbid he turns into a villain from the warped trauma his mind has been put through."

His parents and the nurse who supposedly saw him fleeing refused to provide comments.

Despite his escape, the loss of a patient with such an unusual Quirk put all research into the Quirk Singularity on hold until further notice.

"He..." Morgana wilted over Ren's shoulder, "He never told us he escaped from the hospital."

Ren turned away from the screen in disgust, "They talk about him as if he was crazy or something."

"Of course they do." Atsuhiro bore a sour twist of his lips, a mirror to all of their faces, "He was an invaluable test subject for their research. How else would they treat him, if not a dangerous animal?"

“Ren, where is that hospital in the brochure located?” Tobita asked.

“It’s a research hospital in... Kyoto.”

“The same hospital where he was.” Manami whispered.

“Did you know about this the *whole* time, my dear?” Tobita asked her, frowning.

“Of course I did!” She cried, “When I was first looking for places to live, well... I did thorough research.”

“And you didn’t say anything?” Shuichi asked, eyes still wide from the article.

“Why would I?” Manami looked away, “I wasn’t exactly doing *legal* hacking, you know. I figured if he ever ratted me out or something, then I could do the same in return. But with his quirk, maybe he had me figured out from the start. He never spoke a word about it, and neither did I.”

“Regardless, he still helped you when you needed a safe place to live.” Atsuhiro stated, “Like the threat of mutually assured destruction?”

“... Possibly. And now, after he continued helping us through everything... I would feel terrible if something happened to him now.”

“Hmmm, that article is a few years old. How old is Kaito now?” Atsuhiro asked.

“29.” Ren muttered.

“So his quirk activated when he was 4 and he spent 20 years in this hospital, that leaves 5 years of obscurity and an alias to throw off the scent.” Atsuhiro chuckled, “I have to give him due credit. It’s an impressive feat to pull off without claiming the title of phantom thief for himself.”

“What are we gonna do?” Shuichi asked.

“We’re *not* turning him in.” Ren growled.

“We would *never* .” Atsuhiro put a hand over his heart.

“Yeah! He’s part of our family!” Shuichi cried. “And every family needs a wise and cranky old grandpa to keep the rest of us in line!”

“Merp!”

“We may not be able to ignore it though,” Tobita frowned as he stared wistfully at the laptop, “Especially if he’s still labeled as an ‘escaped patient.’”

“But he’s proven himself more than able to take care of himself, and he’s never hurt anyone on purpose!” Morgana said with an irritated flick of his tail, “He’s part of our group too, which puts him under Nezu’s protection while he’s at U.A.”

“And the hospital has changed hands thanks to Gang Orca.” Ren stated, “It shouldn’t be the same as he remembers it. Hopefully.”

“I suppose it’s all the more reason for you to try and heal Kurogiri, so you can check the place out for yourself.” Atsuhiro paced in small circles, “He wouldn’t have to hide who he is anymore if we find a way to clear his name and give him the freedom he rightfully deserves.”

“Do you think he’d be okay if I tried hacking? If I erased any trace of him from public records-”

“That may not work this time, Manami.” Atsuhiro said. “Erasing everything wouldn’t solve this when there are doctors out there who know the truth, and the sudden disappearance of information on a case like this would bring more attention to it. Kaito would never have true peace of mind.”

“Besides, if we do this wrong, it would make him want to hide away from the world again.” Ren sighed as he dragged a hand down his

face. "We'll have to find another way."

"Maybe we could ask Nezu." Shuichi stated. "I mean, he's seen how well Kaito takes care of Eri! And really, the rest of us, too."

Ren and Morgana looked at one another, "... And he knows what it feels like to be an experimental guinea pig." Ren said, "If anyone would understand what Kaito went through, it would definitely be him."

"Then it's settled." Atsuhiro clapped his hands together, "Ren and Morgana will handle Nezu, while the rest of us will do our best to cheer Kaito up. Make sure he feels like he's wanted here, like he's *safe*. More importantly, we can't let him find out we know the truth until we can fix this mistake that cost him his entire life. The poor man deserves to walk free without fear of doctors dragging him back to his own personal hell."

"That could work," Tobita said, eyes thoughtful, "Considering he hasn't taken off his Quirk Suppressant since we got here."

Ren snorted, "Sounds like a good plan, Atsuhiro."

"Of course! I'm happy to continue providing my expertise as long as these wild situations keep dropping on our laps!"

Shuichi rolled his eyes, "Don't puff yourself up too much."

Atsuhiro blinked, "Run that by me again, my dear lizard friend?"

"And this would be around the point where Kaito would tell you two to behave, or else." Tobita said with a warm smile.

"Enough bickering!" Morgana said, "Kaito's counting on us!"

"Morgana's right." Ren grinned as he looked to each of their faces, "We have our work cut out for us, and we can't fail him. Everyone agree?"

“Yes!” Shuichi threw up his hands.

“Merp!”

“Naturally.” Tobita stated.

Manami eagerly nodded.

“Of course.” Atsuhiro smirked, “It would be the least we could do for the adoptive grandfather of the group.”

It took three days to set up their plan.

On the first, any and all fliers about the hospital mysteriously disappeared. Kaito was cagey that next morning, but everyone acted like normal, even if Ren whispered to Eri that Kaito would need extra love and cuddles for a while, which she was more than happy to do.

Kaito relaxed more on the second day, though he still eyed any doors or windows as if looking for an escape route at all times. Eri asked him endless questions for her schooling to keep him busy, and Ren managed to wrangle in some of the teachers to include Kaito more in their conversations.

It was upon the third day during lunch that Nezu finally said something.

“Are you still having trouble with the app?” He asked as Ren put away the textbooks and paper, “You’ve been distracted lately. More than usual.”

“Well, yes. But it’s not that.”

“Then... are you worried about Kurogiri?” He smiled, “Not to worry! I should have the permission necessary for us to go visit him soon!”

Ren looked at Morgana, who raised his head as he lay on the couch, “I don’t know how to put it in nice words, though.”

“Hmm, I usually find it best to go right to the point for these kinds of conversations!” Nezu said jovially as he reached for the teapot to refill his cup.

“If you say so.” Ren leaned forward as Nezu began to pour tea, “You’ve hinted before that you were also a plaything to people who considered themselves gods. Do you remember saying that to me?”

“Oh! When I approached you before the Summer Camp.”

“What did you mean by that? You must’ve been treated as an experiment too, right?”

Nezu stopped. Tea poured from his cup and onto his desk as he stared at Ren.

“Nezu.” Morgana said.

The rat snapped out of it and held up the pot to stop the flow of tea. With a sigh, he cleaned up his mess with a few napkins set out for his lunch.

“I admit, this wasn’t the topic I was expecting.” Nezu stated, “Why do you suddenly wish to know of my past?”

“We were wondering how someone... say he was stuck in a hospital or lab for a long time, would go about gaining his freedom.” Morgana sat up and languidly stretched across the couch, “You know, to be treated as a *person* and not as an experiment with no will or rights of his own.”

Nezu looked in between them, and the sparkle within those beady black eyes intensified, “Are you concerned for the Nomu?”

“Partially.” Morgana stated, “What will happen to Kurogiri and the rest of them, should our healing powers work?”

Nezu hummed, “Depending on Kurogiri’s results and further testing, he will be aided by the hospital to learn how to be himself again, and

how to live a normal life. If possible, the data could be used to aid the other captured Nomu in their recovery. I'll make sure they won't be taken advantage of." The rat flicked his gaze between them, taking in their tense shoulders and stern faces, "There's more to this, isn't there? Is this... perhaps about a person you care about?"

Ren and Morgana stiffened.

"Morgana said 'his' earlier, so that eliminates La Brava. Mr. Compress, Spinner... Gentle Criminal? No..." Nezu tilted his head, not breaking eye contact with Ren, "Is it perhaps... Kaito?"

Ren must've given it away somehow, in a blink or some small twitch, as Nezu nodded to himself.

"You know, I was always a little concerned for him. He is different within your group, so it's hard not to take notice. He's not a Phantom Thief and hasn't taken part in your grand heists, aside from providing you all a place to live. He hasn't shared his real name with me or any of my staff, yet he's earned a solid place of trust within your hearts." Nezu interlaced his paws, "Does he have that sort of past like you insinuated?"

Ren pursed his lips and stayed quiet, as did Morgana.

Nezu sighed, "Whatever you say will not leave this room, but if he is in this sort of trouble then I will do everything in my power to help him. I need the whole picture if I am to offer aid." The rat put on a bright smile that had a sharp edge to it, "After all, I know what it's like to be a lab rat, too."

Ren and Morgana traded hesitant looks, but at Ren's nod, they decided to share everything.

"It started when Kaito saw the brochure for the hospital Kurogiri is being taken to..." Morgana started.

Nezu listened intently to their story, and Ren showed him the same news article from 5 years ago.

“He *knows* who he is.” Ren had stood up at some point and began pacing, “He isn’t crazy or helpless, and he never once thought of turning to villainy. Hell, he’s dragged our asses out of the fire more than once!”

“That’s right.” Morgana said as his blue eyes were ablaze, “They’d have no right to take him back there! Right, Nezu?”

“To spend 20 years in such a place...” Nezu sighed, “No doubt I will be doing a thorough investigation of everything the past owners have done in that hospital. However, it would take a lot of work and everyone’s cooperation to secure Kaito’s freedom, the least of all several testimonies of Kaito’s competency and a full psych evaluation by Hound Dog.”

“We’ll do it.” Ren said.

Nezu smiled, “I’ll message Hound Dog right away so we can get this started! And... oh?”

“What is it?” Morgana asked.

“I received an e-mail from Tsukauchi. Kurogiri has been safely moved and we’ve been granted permission to visit him first thing tomorrow morning.” Nezu looked away from his screen, “Don’t worry about grading duties today. Go back to the dorms and prepare yourselves for tomorrow. In the meantime, I’ll have my staff collect your friends’ testimonies and message Hound Dog about the evaluation. You can leave everything to me.”

Ren smiled as the Devil Arcana within him brightened. “Nezu, thank you.”

Nezu beamed, “Think nothing of it! Now, run along and get yourselves some lunch!”

Ren packed up his things and, after Morgana jumped on his shoulder, they left.

Nezu's smile fell as his eyes returned to his monitor.

"Emails from Tsukauchi, Tsuragamae, *and* Ryoto at the same time?" Nezu eyed the forgotten Admiral Feesh sitting in the corner, "And now this situation with Kaito. This will be interesting indeed..."

They returned to the dorms and found Kaito alone, sitting on one of the couches. He had his eyes closed and his arms crossed, a frown on his face.

"Where'd everyone go?" Morgana asked.

"They conveniently left with some of the teachers after a message from Nezu." Kaito said, "Mr. Compress said I should wait here."

"Oh, do you want curry?" Ren offered. "We could eat together."

"No." Kaito stood and opened his eyes to stare right at Ren. The colors in Kaito's eyes shifted like streams of light wavering underwater. He huffed after a moment, "... So that's what's been going on. No wonder everyone's been acting weird, but I suppose it's my own damn fault for giving myself away. Though I'm glad Manami never said anything until now."

Ren looked at Kaito's wrist. He wasn't wearing his Quirk Suppressant.

"Kaito..." Morgana jumped down from Ren's shoulder and rubbed against Kaito's legs, "We only want to help. Holding something like this in for so long... I'm sorry we didn't notice sooner."

"It's alright." Kaito sighed as he rubbed the back of his head, "I knew it was only a matter of time."

At that moment, the door opened and Hound Dog walked in. He paused at the hallway where the entryway connected to the common room, eyes soft as he looked between Ren and Kaito.

“I suppose you already know what I’m here for?”

“... Yeah.”

Hound Dog sighed, “You *can* refuse if you want to. However, we can only keep this contained in house for so long once we start putting other paperwork in. And since we can’t exactly ignore this...”

“I’ll do it. Are we doing it here?”

“No.” Hound Dog shook his head, “It’s best if we do this in my office, where it’s private.”

Kaito nodded.

Hound Dog walked towards the door. Kaito began to follow.

“Kaito.” Ren grabbed the man’s wrist, “We don’t judge you. We’ll support you with everything we have, okay?”

“I know.” Kaito gave Ren a wry smile, “Do you know I’m not even angry?”

Morgana’s eyes widened, “You’re not?”

Kaito looked at Hound Dog, who waited by the open door patiently, “No. Without you, I would be stuck in the Raven’s Nest, alone in that suffocating silence.” With his free hand, he reached up and touched the medallion hidden under his shirt, “You’ve put your trust in me this entire time, and if I return all the trust you’ve shown me now... if I can finally get my life back... I won’t have to hide behind ‘Kaito’ anymore. I can just be... me.”

“Kaito...” Morgana whispered.

Ren let go, and they watched as Hound Dog and Kaito left the dorms. Ren turned and collapsed on the closest sofa with a sigh.

"You did the right thing." Satanael said.

"I agree." Fafnir cackled, *"My Hermit is stronger than he gives himself credit for! He must take his fate into his own hands now."*

Morgana jumped up and lay over Ren's chest. "He's not mad, but I still feel bad for starting this behind his back. I hope he'll be okay."

Ren hummed, "We'll leave it to Nezu and the rest."

"I guess. Oh, have we tried 'Hospital' for the MetaNav?"

Ren reached down for his bag, which was spilled out beneath the couch, and grabbed his phone. He opened the MetaNav to Oracle and Skull's world, all filled out except for the Location.

"Hospital."

"No match found."

"... Asylum?" Morgana guessed.

"No match found."

Morgana groaned as Ren tossed the phone back in his bag, "It was worth a shot."

Ren stared up at the ceiling in thought.

Kurogiri.

Kaito.

The Nomu.

This hospital...

If they could give embers of hope to the last people with whom the world abandoned before they went home...

Well, Ren felt like it was the least they could do.

More *cursed* white.

Kurogiri didn't remember falling asleep, only to awaken in another white room. They must've drugged him and moved him somewhere else. He was standing this time, tied to some contraption with even more wires and machinery attached to all sorts of monitors. The sunless walls and floor were white, and people in white doctor's coats hovered around him, but this room was bigger and there was no glass wall separating himself and exhausted coffee colored eyes.

Eraserhead leaned against the far wall, watching him.

"Where is Shigaraki Tomura?" Kurogiri asked.

The doctors around him hesitated, and one hurried out of the room for some reason, but he continued to stare at Eraserhead.

"He's not here." Eraserhead stated dryly, yet his voice trembled, "He's the least of your concerns right now."

Kurogiri narrowed his eyes, "What's that supposed to mean?"

The door opened and several people... and other *beings*, walked in.

Detective Tsukauchi, Present Mic, more doctors with clipboards. But Kurogiri's eyes snapped to the golden gaze of an empyrean woman floating towards him, the many layers of her kimono and the smoky scarf around her shoulders fluttered in a nonexistent breeze.

She led the other divine beings: a floating blue woman with dual swords, a red and black humanoid male with golden wings attached to a spire at his back, another god dressed in blue with great wings

attached to his boots. One other woman stayed behind them, floating yet again as if gravity was a force to be ignored.

“The Trickster and Magician have already used Concentrate.” She said, “And if anything goes wrong, then I will put him to sleep to prevent further harm.”

“Thank you, Lakshmi.” Detective Tsukauchi murmured before he looked to the other gods, “... You may begin whenever you’re ready.”

Kurogiri looked back and forth as they surrounded him, and being tied to this contraption, he couldn’t see where they were in this strange new room. Only the empyrean woman stayed in eyesight, yet to the side to offer a perfect view of Eraserhead and Present Mic.

Kurogiri stilled as she reached for his face, undeterred by the swirling mist coating his body. He felt her soft touch on his cheek, and something in his heart warmed at it. Her golden eyes, and the divine light shining from her body, was like feeling the sunrise for the first time after years of being trapped in the night.

“Worry not.” She whispered as her hand pulled away, “We will make this quick.”

“What are you talking about?” Kurogiri pulled against his restraints, “What are you- Get away from me!”

She backed away and held up both hands, palms facing him. A static prickle charged the air and colorful light erupted underneath him. Kurogiri jolted as ivy and ferns made of glowing blues and purples sprouted and grew rapidly. The glowing plants bathed the pure white room with their vibrancy. They shuffled as they entwined the entire contraption he was trapped in, the scent of a warm summer’s day wafting through the room when the vines began to entangle him.

“What are you doing!?” He yelled as a swarm of vibrant butterflies surrounded him in a whirlwind of fluttering wings, “Stop this at once!”

The largest butterfly landed on his chest, and the world was drowned in a haze of colorless fog before the blackness swallowed him. He felt as if he was falling into darkness when something inside him writhed and *screamed*, as if a fat worm burrowing within his soul was being ripped from its parasitic moorings.

A lone star shone in the darkness when its wailing stopped.

Kurogiri reached for it-

"Ah, you regained your memories again, have you?" The Doctor whispered from within a fluid-filled vat as purple mist floundered, "We can't have that. Don't worry, a little nap and you'll be as good as-"

A great and holy light tore into the memory with a ravenous anger, flooding his entire body with fire. Was he burning? Was he screaming in pain? The Doctor's voice was drowned out and smothered, the scars the man left behind crumbled away like the yolk of chains over him-

Then... the pain stopped.

He was enveloped in white.

But not the emotionless white he had been trapped in before.

This was... peaceful. Welcoming and warm. It was like breaking through water and taking the first gasp of air as the stormy seas calmed. A dark fog lifted from him and dissipated into nothing.

"It's okay." A motherly voice whispered to him, "Wake up, now. You have people waiting for you."

He opened his eyes to a woman hugging him tightly, the silk of her kimono brushing his face. She backed away, cupping his face in both hands with a warm smile.

"Good morning." It was the same motherly voice from seconds ago.

“G-good... morning...?”

She floated away as he held up his head, white hair falling into his vision. Familiar figures by the wall gasped.

Detective Tsukauchi was pale as he stepped forward, “Do you... what is your name?”

“My name...?” He blinked as his mind became clear, “My name is... Shirakumo Oboro.”

His eyes trailed from Tsukauchi to two men who’s cheeks trailed with steady streams of tears.

“Shouta... Hizashi...”

Hizashi burst into frantic cries as he rushed forward, and Oboro was wrapped up in another hug. Another pair of arms joined in soon after, clothed in black. Doctors whispered under the flutter of blue cinders, and after a few moments his arms were free.

He clutched both of his best friends as they all held each other.

“It... feels like I just woke up from a bad nightmare.” Oboro whispered.

Hizashi hugged the both of them tighter as he freely cried into Oboro’s shoulder.

“Welcome back.” Shouta’s voice trembled, “Don’t ever do something like this ever again.”

“I’m not planning on it.” Oboro pulled away, “I... I remember everything. What happened that day... being turned into a villain. Shouta, I hurt you and so many others. I am so, so sorry.”

Shouta gave him an incredulous teary look, “It wasn’t your fault. *None* of it was.”

“Yeah!” Hizashi sniffled, “None of that matters right now! What matters now is you getting better because we have a whole hell of a lot to catch up on!!”

Oboro grinned, “Yeah. Yeah, we do.”

Ren looked up when Tsukauchi opened the door to their secluded waiting room. He and Morgana already knew what happened before the words pilled out of Tsukauchi’s mouth.

“It... it worked.” Tsukauchi was still pale, “I can’t believe it.”

“I suppose Eraserhead and Present Mic are with Shirakumo?” Nezu asked.

“Yeah.” Tsukauchi ran a hand down his face, “The doctors are running tests now, but the three of them will be inseparable for a while. It may be quite some time before Shirakumo is discharged yet... I still can’t believe we got him back.”

“That’s quite alright.” Nezu hopped down from the stiff seat, grabbing a suitcase from underneath it, “We can finish up other things while Eraserhead and Present Mic are busy!”

Tsukauchi groaned, “The work never stops, does it?”

“I’m afraid not, detective.”

“Wait, other things?” Morgana blinked rapidly, “What other things!?”

Ren stared at the briefcase in Nezu’s clutches.

Kaito didn’t come back to the dorms until later yesterday evening and, upon seeing all of the Phantom Thieves’ hesitant faces, smiled wanly and went to his room without another word. The poor man looked exhausted. Ren and the others had left for Kyoto long before the other vigilantes or teachers woke up.

“Does it have something to do with Kaito?” Ren asked.

Morgana stiffened on his shoulder when Tsukauchi exchanged a knowing glance with Nezu.

“... Indeed.” Nezu’s smile was all bared teeth, “It seems Kaito was not the only one who suffered from this hospital's previous owners. They kept *quite* the closet full of skeletons!”

“What are you talking about?” Ren asked with a frown.

“Come.” Nezu made for the door, “We will explain.”

They left the small waiting room and walked through the hallway. Ren eyed the door of Kurogiri’s... no, *Shirakumo’s* room. Voices could be heard beyond the door, but they faded as Nezu and Tsukauchi led them away.

This hospital wasn’t the biggest in Kyoto by any means. It was rather small and private. Sequestered away from a majority of the city and surrounded by the maze of alleyways. Although it was *small*, Nezu explained it was incredibly well funded to perform all sorts of research with state-of-the-art tech.

Too well funded.

As they walked through the halls, Ren wondered what room had been Kaito’s. They passed nurses and doctors who bowed their heads in greeting, almost like submissive dogs who were caught doing something they shouldn’t. Eventually, they reached their destination in another hospital wing.

Waiting in front of the window of the only patient Ren or Morgana could see, was Ryoto and Chief Tsuragamae. Ren’s chest tightened when Ryoto met his eyes, but he managed to hide his discomfort with his Personas whispering encouragements within the mindscape.

“We already received word about Kurogiri.” Ryoto said as he kept staring at Ren and Morgana with an easy smile, “Well done.”

“... Thank you.” Ren kept a respectful distance.

“And this patient?” Nezu asked as he faced the window.

Ren looked in, brows furrowed. A woman lay inside, attached to life support machines and monitors. Her black hair was streaked with white, and from her gaunt cheeks and bony arms she looked more of a skeleton than Yagi did before Kamino.

“Our agents confirmed her identity.” Chief Tsuragamae whispered, “The files Ryoto found seem to be correct, as we feared.”

“Who is she?” Ren asked.

“Kunikazu’s mother.” Ryoto said.

Morgana’s jaw dropped, “His mother!? Why is she here!? What’s going on?”

“She’s been here since he was a child.” Ryoto sighed, “Long story short, Kunikazu’s uncle was the HPSC President at the time and his family was targeted by villains because of it. The attack led to severe injuries to both Kunikazu and his mother. He awoke some time after the incident, but she... did not.”

“Is that why this hospital is so well funded?” Ren asked, “Because of her?”

“That is partially correct.” Ryoto sighed, “But it also begins a frightening chain of events that have been buried for far too long. Fearing the worst would happen, Kunikazu’s uncle kept her here in secret, but this hospital gained significant funding. He wrangled in governors and other highly ranked government officials for the money. Even the previous Prime Minister was in on it.”

“Why would they support Kunikazu’s uncle?” Morgana asked, eyes comically wide.

“For advances in research and development for ways to contain quirks.” Chief Tsuragamae sighed forlornly, “Dangerous or otherwise. In return for their revenue, Kunikazu’s uncle, and eventually Kunikazu himself, increased their funding for more Hero Agencies in their respective regions.”

“Which in turn lead to facilities like Tartarus, and the development of Quirk Suppressants and Iron Maidens.” Tsukauchi muttered. “This is but one of many private hospitals where such research was conducted, most of the time against the wills of its patients.”

Ren’s eyes widened, and he looked to Nezu.

“Families were paid off or threatened in secret.” Nezu stated, frowning deeply at the slumbering woman, his paw tightening around the briefcase’s handle, “The timeline matches up far back to when I first took in Recovery Girl all those years ago. To think, there were so many more victims that were never seen until now.”

“And Kunikazu being raised by his uncle and fearing what could happen to his mother if word of these hospitals ever got out...” Chief Tsuragamae crossed his arms.

“Their precious house of cards would burn down if only a single person ratted everything out.” Ryoto studied the woman with deep intensity, “And it would most likely be Kunikazu’s mother who would pay the price for it.”

“After all of this,” Nezu frowned, “His erratic behavior in prison begins to make sense.”

“Unfortunately.” Ryoto rubbed his temple with a black-gloved hand, “Gang Orca knew nothing when he first offered to take over this place, but we’re working on making reparations to those who were

wronged, and arresting those who had a hand in it. Many of these 'patients' were but children when they were first brought here."

"Speaking of which," Nezu faced Ryoto, "I know of another patient who deserves such reparations now."

Ryoto's eyebrows shot up, "Really? Who?"

"It's all in this briefcase here." Nezu smiled again, but it was sharp, "Someone who was wrongfully trapped here for over 20 years. We have several testimonies, a clean psych evaluation from Hound Dog, and more to prove his competency."

"... I see." Ryoto eyed Ren again before he studied Nezu, "Shall we discuss the details in private, then?"

"Yes. Let's."

Ren reached a hand out as the pair began walking away, "Nezu-"

"Stay with Tsukauchi for the time being, Amamiya." Nezu stated with the same razor edged smile, "I'll take care of it. I promise."

They could do nothing but watch them disappear around the corner to a more private room. Ren sighed as he turned towards the window. He just healed Kurogiri, maybe he could-

"I know that look." Tsukauchi stood beside Ren, "But it's not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"We got permission to heal Kurogiri, but she's a whole other case."

"Tsukauchi's correct." Tsuragamae stated, "In normal and... *legal* cases, you'd need the permission of the family to perform any kind of healing quirk on someone in the hospital. I don't think Kunikazu is in his right mind to give any sort of permission no matter how strong

your abilities are, and we may not get the power of attorney from him before you go home.”

“Oh. Then... can I give her a gift instead?”

Tsuragamae blinked, “What sort of gift?”

Ren donned his Joker costume as gently as possible. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a string of orange rosary, in the center lay a large white bead with a swirled red symbol in the center.

“I don’t know if she’s religious, but a token of Amaterasu could help put her at ease.”

Tsuragamae leaned over to inspect it, “Very well. I’ll ask a nurse to allow you in the room for a minute, but I can offer nothing more.”

The nurse swept him into the room, and watched him like a hawk as he approached the bed. He lay the rosary beads on the woman’s chest, careful not to disturb any wires or the oxygen mask on her face. He had enough time to give her a respectful bow before the nurse pushed him out.

He only got enough time to see that the woman’s name was *Harumi* before the nurse shut the door.

Tsukauchi patted Ren on the shoulder once he dispelled his costume, “Your heart’s in the right place, kid.” The detective chuckled as Ren felt his cheeks heat up, “Why don’t we get some grub? The others could be busy for some hours before you get to go back to U.A., and what a better way to pass time than sampling local dishes?”

“Is there a sushi place nearby!?” Morgana asked.

“Of course you would ask that.” Ren muttered.

Tsuragamae waved them off as Tsukauchi urged them down the hall, Morgana yammering the entire way about sushi... once again.

“Got the message from Nezu. They’re on their way back.” Vlad said several hours later.

“And Kurogiri?” Midnight asked.

Vlad set his phone on the coffee table, “Healed. Apparently, he remembers everything he did as a villain and feels terrible about it. Present Mic and Eraser spent several hours with him before visiting time ended.”

“I figured Joker and Mona’s unified healing would work just fine.” Atsuhiro stated as he crossed his legs and shuffled his cards from where he played poker with Shuichi, Manami, and surprisingly, Eri, with whom they were teaching how to play, “I don’t know why you were all so worried.”

Kaito clasped his hands together and stared at the floor. His thumb ran over the rim of his Quirk Suppressant, he had put it back on after his... extended talk with Hound Dog. Now, he awaited his fate.

“Well, it’ll be a bit before they get back.” Midnight smirked at the poker group, “How’s it going, sweetie?”

“U-Um... I’m not sure.” Eri shifted through her cards.

Midnight peeked around her shoulder and gasped.

“What is it?” Manami asked.

“Nothing.” Midnight chuckled, “Nothing at all.”

“Yeah, well... Sorry, Eri-chan, but I’ll be taking the whole pot because Lady Stubbs needs a new pair of shoes!” Shuichi stated as he threw down his cards, “Full House!”

“Oh yeah?” Manami smiled sweetly as she put her cards down of mostly sixes, “Four of a kind.”

“I’m afraid the take is rightfully mine!” Atsuhiro threw his cards down with a flourish, “Straight flush!”

“I-I don’t know if this is good or not...” Eri placed down her cards, and the rest of them jumped out of their chairs.

“A Royal Flush!?” Shuichi cried.

Atsuhiro groaned and slammed his head on the table, “She’s a natural. All future players should fear her power.”

“Oh.” Eri patted him on the head, “I didn’t really know what I was doing anyway. I-I just collected the hearts because they remind me of Ren-nii, a-and just counted up like Uncle Compress showed me.”

Manami stared at Tobita, who stood at the head of the table and acted as their dealer, “You didn’t...?”

“Of course not. A gentleman would never cheat. She won on her own merit.”

“Do I win?” Eri whispered, eyes wide.

Midnight pushed the mound of art supplies, snacks, and the small pile of coins and bills at her, “You did, sweetie. Congratulations.”

Her eyes sparkled as she took a bag of potato chips and held them out for Shuichi, “O-okay, but I want to share it!”

“Eri-chan!” Shuichi burst into tears as he accepted it with both hands, “You’re so kind!!”

Atsuhiro sighed, but he had a proud smile nonetheless. That fell as Kaito felt the man’s eyes on him, “Why don’t you join us, Kaito? Get your mind off of certain things for a while.”

“... No thanks.”

The common room went quiet. He hunched over and continued to stare at the floor.

“Kaito...” Cementoss looked up from his book, concerned.

Thirteen hopped onto the seat next to Kaito, “You know, you might’ve had a rocky start, but Nezu would never let them take you back to that place.”

“Damn straight.” Midnight said as she sauntered towards the back of the couch, “You’re one of us now, and we take care of our own.”

“Besides, even if those assholes did try to take you back there, we’d totally break you out!” Shuichi stated with a wide grin. The teachers deadpanned at him, “What? You know it’s true!!”

“They would have to steal you from our cold, dead hands, dearie.” Recovery Girl gingerly sipped her tea from another table, smiling like the classic sweet old lady that could still kick your ass, “Nezu rescued me from a similar situation when I was a young girl. I know in my heart he fought tooth and nail for you, and once you get him started on something like that there’s no way he’d ever lose.”

“I...” Kaito couldn’t look at anyone as he felt shame and embarrassment crawl up his back, “... I don’t know what say.”

Eri scooted off her seat and ran over to him. Her little arms wrapped around him and held him tight, “They’d never take you from me, either. I wouldn’t let them!”

“Awww.” Midnight cooed, “Nobody would stand a chance against her, would they?”

“Nope.” Vlad said.

Atsuhiro pretended to wipe a tear from his eye, “They grow up so fast...”

Kaito chuckled dryly, and despite himself a smile grew, "Thank you, Eri. Everyone."

Midnight firmly nodded, "You'll see. We just need to wait for Nezu and the others to get back and then-"

The door to Ren's room opened. Every hero collectively gasped as Ren, Morgana, Nezu, Present Mic, and Eraserhead stepped out into the common room. The vigilantes, plus Kaito and Eri, traded knowing glances.

"Wha- We weren't expecting you back for another two hours!" Midnight cried.

"How did you..." Ectoplasm pointed between the group and the front door.

Ren blinked innocently, "A shortcut through the Velvet Room."

Morgana grinned, "Who knew it would work across such long distances!?"

"Well, you *did* appear at the USJ in the same manner." Cementoss said.

"Hacks..." Midnight muttered to herself. She walked up to Eraserhead and Present Mic and held one of their hands in her own, "How are you two?"

Eraserhead sighed, but there was a great weight removed from his shoulders, "Good. Great. I think... I need some time to process everything."

They watched the man walk outside.

"You look exhausted, Mic." Ectoplasm stated, "You should go get some sleep."

Present Mic grinned, "I think I will! I haven't slept in like two days!!"

“Go on before I put you to sleep, mister.” Midnight pushed him towards his bedroom door.

“Alright, alright! I’m going!”

Present Mic’s door closed. Several eyes fell to Nezu in anticipation after he cleared his throat, and everyone watched as he approached Kaito, who stiffened.

Eri stayed by him and held his hand as Nezu stopped in front of them, smiling. Nezu held out a single slim folder, “Here.”

“What is it?” Kaito reached for it, “You’re not... taking me back there, are you?”

Nezu chuckled, but it wasn’t patronizing, “Of course not! See for yourself!”

Kaito swallowed as he grabbed the folder. It was a bit overwhelming to have everyone staring at him as he opened it. Inside was an envelope and an official document stamped with the new HPSC’s President’s name and several doctor’s signatures he didn’t recognize. Kaito’s eyes widened as he read through it once, twice. Three times.

“What’s it say!?” Shuichi asked after an extended silence. Manami punched him in the shin for being loud.

“This is... an official apology. ‘Due to the extenuating circumstances behind your unlawful internment, and with the provided testimonies and certified psych evaluation, the individual named Kazuya Ito is hereby offered a clean bill of health and is no longer a patient at this institution. The responsible parties will be handled with the full extent of the law. As recompense, we hope the provided funds will help alleviate any harm done...’” Kaito put the folder down to open the small envelope.

“That’s a lot of zeroes!” Midnight cried.

It was. Kaito had never seen so many zeroes on a single check. It would be enough to buy *several* Raven Nests and fund them all for a significant length of time, even without any customers.

“This calls for a celebration!” Midnight cackled. “Let’s bring out the booze!”

“*Midnight...*” Ectoplasm’s face fell in his hand.

“There are children present.” Yagi stated in an incredulous expression.

“*And* you all have classes to teach tomorrow!” Recovery Girl chastised, “I am not healing any hang overs!”

“Actually...” Ren held up the several bulging plastic bags in his arms, “Tsukauchi was kind enough to buy some supplies for a celebration when we found out the good news.”

“We even have some sparkling juice!” Morgana stated.

“That’ll work!” Midnight dove for the bags with grabby hands, and Ren laughed as he handed most of them to her.

She fled to the kitchen, and many followed the smell of food and fizzy drinks.

“Here, Eri.” Ren dug through the last bag and handed her another package, “We got these for you from a sweet shop in Kyoto.”

She smiled as she held the package of dango, staring at the store’s colorful logo on it. “Thank you!”

Ren and Morgana handed out snacks to the rest of the Phantom Thieves. They simply smiled as they put the biggest package of pocky in Kazuya’s hand, and before he knew it he was dragged towards the kitchen.

Midnight poured everyone champagne glasses filled with vibrant orange juice with bubbles trickling up the sides.

“Should we be celebrating without Eraser and Mic?” Cementoss asked. “They are the two out of the three people who should be celebrating the most.”

“We’ll save them some food for later.” Midnight said with a wink, she then raised her glass, “To Shirakumo and Kaito’s health and success! Cheers!”

“Cheers! ”

The next small stretch of time went strangely for Kazuya. Fried noodles, desserts, sweets, and no small number of tempura were passed around. The atmosphere of the dorms was light and even *festive*, yet he found himself staring off into space, feeling as if he was floating out of his body.

The folder and the enormous check stayed in his hands, the items heavy enough to keep him somewhat centered... yet oddly light in a way he’s never experienced as his true self, and not as a memory of someone else. Eventually, the party got too rowdy, with Shuichi and Midnight shamelessly guzzling down the bottles of sparkling juice in some form of contest when everyone else had their fill.

He got up amidst the chaos and walked outside, almost invisible save for the pair of silver and gold eyes following him.

The silence of the private garden made him breath a sigh of relief. Kazuya held the folder tightly to his chest and looked up at the moon through the bare tree branches. The last leaf on the ginko tree, brown and crinkled, chose that moment to fall. He idly watched it as it drifted through the air to land in front of him.

“Are you okay?”

Kazuya looked over his shoulder to Ren, "I am, I think." He snorted, "I must still be in shock."

Ren stepped closer, "How does it feel?"

Kazuya sank into the bench under the ginko tree, and Ren joined him after a moment, "Freeing." He looked down to the shining band on his wrist, glinting in the moonlight as he held it up, "Before you came into the Raven's Nest that night, I was just hiding from the world. I was always afraid of being found out someday, afraid of having to go back to that place... but as you and Morgana, and eventually the others, continued your adventures, I began to feel alive again. That fear eventually faded to the back of my mind until I almost forgot about it."

"I still feel bad for springing it on you so fast." Ren said with a frown.

"I admit that when we got to U.A., I knew the chance of being found out was a lot higher." Kazuya smirked at Ren, "And these last few days were *hell*, but as I hold this in my hands -" He gestured with the folder, "-the chance of being free, to do what I want with my life without being afraid... I feel like everything until now was worth it."

"Do you have any plans, then?" Ren asked as he leaned back on the bench, "If you're not going to be a Phantom Thief like the others..."

"First, after you go home, I want to see my parents. We've been apart so long I don't know if they'll even recognize me."

"They're your parents." Ren whispered, "Of course they will."

Kazuya's smile widened, "And then after, I... There were days at the Raven's Nest where I daydreamed what it could've been like, if I never went to that hospital. In the end, I figured out what I would've done with my life. I'll work to become a teacher."

Ren gaped, "Really?"

“My quirk has given me so much experience through many lives, so I could help a lot of people with it. I also want to stay with Eri for as long as possible, maybe I could ask Nezu to help me become a teacher and go from there.”

Ren nodded, “That’s an admirable goal, Kaito.”

“Kaito. *Kaito* .” Kazuya set the folder on his lap and unclasped the pendant around his neck. “I think it’s time to put that name away for good, don’t you think?”

Ren watched as Kazuya held it up with a smile, studying the twin phoenixes on the crest before startling when Kazuya held it out to him.

“This is...” Ren shook his head, “That’s your family crest, right?”

“Right. Remember it was given to me by my mother so I wouldn’t forget who I was again. However,” Kazuya nudged it closer to Ren, “Thanks to you, I *know* who I am now, and I won’t ever forget again. Besides, you’re family to me anyway. I want you to have it so you never forget this ‘cranky old grandpa’, as Shuichi put it, when you go back home.”

Ren chuckled as he accepted it. He stared at it for a few moments before he closed his fingers over it, the silver necklace dangling from between his fingers, “I’ll take good care of it, Kazuya. That’s a promise I won’t ever break.”

Ren held his fist out to Kazuya, who grinned and fist bumped him back.

They stared up at the night sky for a while longer before a chilly breeze cut through their clothes.

“Let’s go back inside.” Kazuya said as he stood, “I hope they saved some food for us.”

Ren smirked, “If not, then I’ll make a fresh batch of curry. Just for you.”

They returned to the kitchen. The vibe had died down a little, with Shuichi and Midnight groaning as they lay their heads over the table with several empty juice bottles around them, but there was still plenty of food to go around.

Kazuya and Ren sat down together and ate, having easy conversations with the others as they wandered around the jovial kitchen. Eraserhead had returned at some point, staring almost reverently at Ren as if he wanted to say something, but he simply closed his mouth and stared at his untouched plate of food.

Perhaps it would be Eraserhead who had the next heart to heart with Ren when the timing was better, Kazuya thought.

More time passed this way, until it was late enough to where they could easily call it a night.

Until Eri came to them, grasping the empty dango package.

“Ren-nii...”

“What’s wrong?” Ren stared as she began twisting the bag in her hands, “Did they make your stomach hurt?”

She shook her head, “No, they were really good! Actually I... I have an idea for that app on your phone.”

Conversation stilled as people stared at Eri in shock.

“Eri, you know what it means, right?” Kazuya asked. “The Location is the last thing we need for it to work.”

“Y-yeah. It would mean... Ren-nii might leave sooner, but he would get to go home and see the people he loves, too.”

“We’ve guessed almost every Location in the book, my little flower.”
Atsuhiro bore a frown, “So don’t be sad if it doesn’t work, okay?”

Eri nodded.

Everyone gathered around as Ren retrieved his phone and opened the app. He held it out for Eri, who looked at the dango bag for a moment before she stared at the phone in unrelenting determination.

“Candy shop.”

“Match found.”

Silence.

Then chaos erupted through the dorm.

“Oh! This is-!!”

“What is it, Oracle!?”

“W-we... we finally have a connection! Wait, something's coming through! Skull, it's-”

It is time. At last.

See you all October 7th :)

Swear To My Bones

Chapter 95: Swear To My Bones

I totally did not in any way, shape, or form, cry at all while writing this chapter... Nope.

I say, as a complete liar. Who is also extremely sick at the moment so please forgive any mistakes myself or the wonderful betas didn't catch...

Also, be sure to read the end notes for important bits of info!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The party came to an abrupt halt, and it was decided that they would open the rift tomorrow night after some rest and to be sure the students would be under strict curfew.

Ren and Morgana awoke the next morning before anyone else.

Tension descended as everyone came in for breakfast and greeted him like any other morning, as if they weren't fighters preparing themselves for a battle that would decide the fate of their home.

Ren poured coffee for the others like usual, trying to keep his shaking hands busy as he passed the hot cups around. Thirteen and Hound Dog smiled over their pots and pans as he returned to the counter, but they hesitated when someone sputtered.

Ren's eyes widened when Midnight set down her coffee mug in a rush and reached for her napkin to clean herself with. Other teachers and the vigilantes stared at Ren in concern.

"What is it?" He asked.

“Your coffee...” Aizawa pursed his lips, “It’s burnt.”

“*What ?*” Ren gaped at the pot he used to brew it, “I... sorry.”

“It’s quite alright.” Gentle Criminal rose from his seat and gently ushered Ren to sit, “How about we have tea this morning instead? A calming brew will do well, I think...”

A tiny hand reached over and grabbed his wrist, and he gave Eri a wan smile at her support. Ren never saw the traded looks of concern from the others as he kept his eyes on the table for the rest of breakfast.

Nezu and Morgana were hefty weights on his shoulders as they left for Ren’s lessons. The students stepped out of his way at his distant gaze edged with nerves, which included most of 1-A staring after him with various levels of concern or shock.

Ren didn’t comment on the clumps of fine hair drifting from Morgana’s back as he curled in Ren’s lap for the next few hours, with Nezu trying to draw them into deeper conversations to make the time to pass easier.

“Ren.” Nezu’s voice was firm when he rose from his seat for lunch bell, spine firm and paws steepled, “Everything will be alright.”

Morgana winced when Ren wiped a few more bundles of fur from his pants, “I know. I just... I’m hoping nothing goes wrong, that everyone is *okay* .”

Nezu nodded, smiling even as the fur floated over his desk, “As do I. But that’s why we’re doing this together, hmm? You’re not going through this alone!”

“... Right.”

The lunch hour found themselves at the Shinsou dorm, under Hitoshi’s watchful gaze. Tobita and Atsuhiro’s voices quietly meshed

with Risumi and Ayumu's in the kitchen as they explained the situation in dull whispers, and he felt their looks like hot pokers in his side.

"Hey," Hitoshi nudged Ren's shoulder, "Are you sure I can't do anything to help?"

Ren blinked at him, "Maybe take care of Eri? You should probably stay here for the night, just in case something else happens."

Hitoshi's hands balled into fists, "Yeah. Sure."

The agonizing stretch of the sun seemed to last an entire century when they left the Shinsou dorm, but the longer the day droned on, the more agitated he and his Personas became. Morgana suffered the same. Staring off into space. Meditating unsuccessfully. Walking endless circles in the carpet.

At last, the school day came to an end, and they didn't taste their early supper as anticipation overwhelmed them. It was a small blessing that night came early because of the late autumn. Ectoplasm clones were posted at each student dorm due to the mandatory curfew. Joker and Mona gave Eri a long hug before they departed for the USJ, and it was almost too painful to watch her silent tears as Kazuya held her, his own expression a hair away from crumbling.

The facility was still in disarray, the only repairs were the sparkling fountain and seamless central plaza surrounded by complete and utter desolation.

"Trickster, if I could have a moment." Lavenza stated when heroes and vigilantes were spread around the USJ, divine weapons and armor at the ready.

Joker looked up from the app, "What is it?"

“I believe when you connect with the Chariot and Hermit’s new world, that only yourself, the Magician, and I should cross the space between. Perhaps a small force of Personas as well, but no more.”

“What!?” Spinner shrieked.

“You seriously can’t be suggesting you go practically *alone* to an entirely new world,” Eraserhead stated, glaring, “That would be suicide!”

“No, it wouldn’t be.” Margaret stated as she, Theodore, and Elizabeth waited dutifully beneath the rift.

“Why would you think so?” Nezu asked calmly.

“It would cause the least amount of disturbance.” Theodore said.
“We need to do this quietly unless we want to let Yaldabaoth know we’re up to something.”

Elizabeth sighed, “Boring, but we can’t be stupid about this by sending *all* of you.”

“The Trickster and Magician would be vital for reuniting with the other Phantom Thieves with the least amount of stress on the other world’s inhabitants.” Lavenza looked around, “Making a grave misstep now is not an option.”

Gentle Criminal exchanged a long look with La Brava, “I suppose that’s a valid point.”

“And the rest of us Attendants need to stay here and guard the rift.” Margaret smiled, “Leave this end to us, Trickster.”

“Ren, Morgana, Lavenza...” Mr. Compress tipped his hat to them, throwing his Arsene mask in shadow, “Be careful.”

“And come back safe!” La Brava added.

“We’ll be back shortly with news. And hopefully with Oracle and Skull.” Joker faced the rift. “Satanael. Amaterasu. Sandalphon. Hastur.”

Each Persona materialized at the whisper of their name and formed a protective circle around Joker, Mona in his Metaverse form clinging to Joker’s shoulder, and Lavenza.

“Whenever you’re ready, Trickster.” Amaterasu held out her arms as she took the lead spot, “I will light our path as best as I am able.”

“Okay.” Joker took a breath as he and Mona stared at the app, “I’m connecting this world to the one where Skull and Oracle are... now.”

The air churned as the rift undulated. Joker’s teeth chattered at the hum of unknown energy lacing the USJ as reality split open before them. But unlike when Metatron invaded, there was no Red Rain, and the void wasn’t wholly empty black space. Something glinted within the darkness and approached at lightning speed.

Their breath was stolen as shimmering golden energy poured from the rift and trickled down like waterfall in the shape of a stairway that stopped at Joker’s feet. Joker took the first step up and waited.

“It seems stable.” He said.

“This is the same energy I felt when I first touched the rift.” Satanael said, as Joker and Lavenza began to climb, “How... curious.”

They left the world of superheroes to be consumed by the pitch blackness of the void. Amaterasu strengthened the radiant sunlight around her body, but it was effortlessly swallowed by the unknown darkness. Only the golden path at their feet resisted the all consuming darkness as it leveled out and travelled farther in a straight line. Other than that, the shifting darkness and wavering blackness around them... it almost seemed *alive* in a way.

It left his skin crawling.

Joker hesitated as the light of the heroes' world was still at their backs, and began to turn-

"Don't, Trickster." Sandalphon warned with fervor. "We must keep our eyes forward when we travel through here. Always."

"And look not into the endless depths of this void for too long, otherwise you might go mad at its vastness." Hastur's voice slithered in their minds, his wriggling body blending in too well with the unfathomable depths of night, *"Or it may pull you in and you'll simply cease to exist. Either is a fate I'd not wish upon you."*

"Lovely." Mona deadpanned.

Joker began at a steady jog. Mona's claws clung tightly to him, and Lavenza kept one hand locked in his, the other tightly around the Compendium. Amaterasu floated over the golden path in front of them, Satanael to their left and Sandalphon on their right, with just enough room to not touch the darkness. Hastur reveled at swimming in home territory, but he crept behind as a silent shadow.

"How did Metatron travel through this with all of those Shadows..." Satanael muttered as he covered his face with a hand, "The air in here is becoming thick. It's with any luck we're still alive and breathing within this force of nature."

"No wonder my brother got lost." Sandalphon kept his stern eyes forward, "Without this guiding path, it would be near impossible to traverse."

"And yet it is home to beings such as I." Hastur stated.

"I see something!" Amaterasu slowed after a a few more minutes of running.

They stopped at the circular shoji gate before them, the paper of the door glowed with serene white light. The golden path ended before it.

“This is...” Mona’s voice left in a breathy whisper.

Amaterasu moved aside as Joker approached, his free hand extended, “The gate Oracle and Skull fell into. The ‘Senkaimon,’ as the app calls it.”

The other Personas yet within the mindscape rallied themselves and were prepared to be summoned at a moment’s notice. Mona took a deep breath and let out a long exhale, then nodded at Joker.

“Whenever you’re ready.” Lavenza looked up at the door, shoulders squared.

The door shuddered under Joker’s touch. He shielded his face with his arm when blinding white light poured from the opening Senkaimon. When it was wide enough, they jumped through together.

The next thing he was aware of was an unknown *pressure* settling on his body, some unknowable sense of power laced in the very air like an invisible ocean. Joker opened his eyes and pressed on with the first step under a square-shaped gate covered in some sort of paper, the dry and dusty ground at his feet staining his shoes. Desolate boulders and smaller cliffs dotted the desert landscape under a painted blue sky and blazing sunlight.

“You’re...?”

Joker looked into the face of an unknown man nearby. The man’s gray eyes were mostly shadowed by the striped bucket hat, but they were wide in bewilderment. He wore a black haori with a white diamond pattern at the bottom, with more traditional styled clothes underneath. He was surrounded by thick cables, computers, and technology stamped with painfully familiar hieroglyphs and symbols straight from Futaba’s Palace, all interconnecting with the paper covered gate and the Senkaimon behind them.

“For real...?”

“Joker... Mona...”

Mona inhaled sharply at the *familiar* voices. Joker’s heart pounded when he turned, the action slow enough to last a millennia. Other individuals were sprinkled around the barren wasteland, but their eyes latched onto the pale blonde hair of Skull and the vibrant orange of Oracle.

The bubble burst by Skull’s broken, heartfelt cry.

“RENREN!!!”

Emotion clogged Joker’s throat as his legs moved on their own, his vision blurry before the four of them crashed into one another with arms stretched wide.

“Dude, I can’t believe it!!” Skull had tears streaming down his mask, “It’s really you!!”

“Of course it’s us, idiot Skull!” Mona cried as his shining eyes blazed with warmth, “Who else could it be!?”

Skull broke out in a tear-stained grin, “Yep, that’s my MonaMona alright!”

“Shut up!” Mona jumped from Joker’s shoulder and latched onto Skull with his claws, “It’s Morgana! MORGANA! Did you forget me already!?”

“Wha-” Skull wrapped one arm around Mona, the other around Joker’s shoulders in crushing one armed hugs, “We never forgot you! Not once!!”

Mona buried his face in Skull’s chest, “Good!”

The four of them were a sobbing mess of broken voices and wobbly laughter. They continued to touch one another, feeling their living and breathing comrades to make sure that they were *real*, that this reunion wasn’t some cruel dream whipped up by their extended

isolation. While no doubt embarrassing to these complete strangers to watch from afar...

Joker didn't care. And neither did Oracle or Skull.

"How did you get here? The app disappeared from our phones!" Oracle sniffled as she finally let go of Joker, "We... we tried *everything* and nothing worked!"

"We used the MetaNav!" Mona clambered up Skull's shoulders and jumped into Oracle's arms. "It came back to us!"

"What!?" Skull ripped his phone out of his pocket, "How? We still don't have it."

"We didn't have it either for a long time." Mona sighed as he relaxed into Oracle's grasp, "I couldn't use my powers at all when we first got to that other world Yaldabaoth sent us to. It's a long story."

"Dude, what's with the new threads?" Skull looked Joker up and down, "I almost didn't even recognize you at first."

"And those one, two, three *four* Personas." Oracle fiddled with her goggles, "Their power levels are off the charts! Wait a sec..." She backed up and oggled Joker, "*Your* power levels are way off the charts! It's like you evolved. What in the world happened to you?"

Someone cleared their throat, and they turned to the man wearing the bucket hat and black haori. He now covered his face with a white fan, the pale hair spilling from his hat fluttering as he fanned himself.

"Why don't you take this upstairs?" He mused, his calculating gaze shifting from Joker and Mona, "You'll have more privacy and I can offer some refreshments to help you relax!"

"They can use our room, Urahara!" Oracle said, smiling at him.

"Very well." Urahara snapped his fan shut and walked away. "I'll have Tessai start on the tea!"

Joker hesitated, “Lavenza?”

Lavenza stood by the open Senkaimon with the other Personas, but offered him a reassuring smile, “I’ll stay here. Go. Be with your friends for a while.”

“We’ll keep an eye on these strangers.” Satanael said as he looked to the group of people wearing black shihakusho standing around an obscenely long ladder... leading into an opening in the sky. Weird.
“Take as long as you need.”

Joker trailed behind Oracle and Skull as they passed through the group of strangers and climbed up the ladder with familiar ease. The eyes of the black clothed strangers never left him, but one pair in particular drew Joker’s attention.

It was a girl shorter than even Futaba, with a bob of black hair and startling purple eyes. She seemed surprised when they maintained eye contact before Joker passed her. Joker knew by now never to judge people by their size, if Futaba and Manami were anything to go by... and if this strange pressure pressing down on him constantly was a sign of the powers of this world.

They made it to the top of the ladder and into a traditional styled Japanese store front. The entryway was lined wall to wall with buckets and small isles of colorful and decorative candies, and past the windows of the entryway Joker could see the buildings of a city. Joker looked down the ladder to the vastness of the basement, then around to the smaller store front.

“What is this place?” Joker whispered as they were led through a side door.

“I run this humble candy shop during the day,” Urahara said as he whisked his fan out again to shield his face, “But please, make yourselves comfortable!”

“This way!” Skull grinned as he pushed them down another hallway and into the private areas of the shop.

They opened a sliding door into a room lined with tatami. A low table sat in the middle and there were closets on the other wall to store futon. Closed windows let in some dull light.

“So this is where you guys have been staying?” Mona asked, “In a candy shop with a weird basement?”

“Well... not at first.” Skull shoved his hands in his pocket and glared at the floor, “We lived on the streets for a while. This world has a bunch of soul-eating monsters wandering around, so we couldn’t really go out without drawing attention.”

“S-soul-eating monsters?” Mona whispered in morbid curiosity. “Are your Personas okay? You guys didn’t get hurt, right!?”

Oracle and Skull exchanged a *look* .

“You two got into some trouble too, huh?” Joker said as a mischievous smirk overtook his face.

“Muehehe, you know us so well, Joker!” Oracle stated.

Skull huffed, “Yeah, we’re fine. Er... mostly. Somewhat.”

“It’s not like we changed this world’s course of history! Er... too much.”

“Speak for yourself, Oracle.” Skull shook his head with a sunny grin, “Really, RenRen, it’s nothing Mjolnir and Seiten Taisei couldn’t handle! It was Oracle that kept us out of trouble most of the time.”

“Urahara found us first before it really got bad.” Oracle plopped down at the table with Mona still in her arms, “He totally kicked Skull’s butt without even trying!”

“Hey!” Skull scratched the back of his head and groaned, “The guy is a lot stronger than he looks, alright?”

There was a knock at the door frame and Urahara opened it, “‘This guy’ has tea ready for you!”

Urahara leaned against the door frame and allowed another man to walk through with a tray of tea. He was a larger man, but Joker compared his quiet and gentle demeanor -and that of his well-kept mustache- to Gentle Criminal. Movement caught Joker’s eye to see two children staring at him from the shadow of Urahara’s coat; a shy looking girl and a boy that kept his hard glare unrestrained.

Oracle squeezed Mona, “Thanks, Tessai!”

Mona and Joker exchanged another wild glance as Tessai set out three cups and a dish. Urahara bowed his head and they were finally left in peace. Skull and Oracle dispelled their costumes with a blue flash of fire, so Joker and Mona did the same.

“Oooh! You can change forms whenever you want now!?” Futaba grinned as she ran her hands down Morgana’s back.

“Well, yeah! I couldn’t at the start, and I didn’t even have most of my power when we first got there.” Morgana sniffed at the dish set out for him as Ren finally sat down next to Futaba. Ryuji took the seat next to Ren with a grin, their shoulders touching, “We grew strong enough to where we can change whenever. Ren got a *lot* stronger.”

“It took a bit, but we regained our powers. Did you find other Persona users in that world?” Ryuji asked. “There were four Personas by the gate! And they didn’t look like Mona’s...”

“Wow, did you finally learn how to count!?” Morgana said with a grin.

“Hey!” Ryuji reached over and button mashed Morgana’s head.

Ren and Futaba smirked at Morgana's cries. The familiarity, the banter...

It set Ren's heart at ease and he almost found himself welling up with tears again.

"To answer your question in the simplest way possible," Ren cleared his throat and Ryuji pulled his arm back, "I went from holding the Fool Arcana to the World Arcana, so Futaba was right to say that I... evolved. And all of those Personas are mine."

Futaba and Ryuji's jaws dropped.

"I didn't even know you could ever summon more than one at once!" Futaba cried.

Ryuji nudged Ren on the shoulder, "What kind of-"

Ryuji suddenly snapped his jaw shut when Futaba held up her hand.

"What is it?" Morgana asked.

Futaba looked up into the rafters with a playful glare, "Yoruichi! It's rude to eavesdrop!"

Ren and Morgana jumped back as a black cat with golden eyes dropped onto the table, as light as a feather. It didn't disturb the delicate cups nor spill a drop of tea.

"You know what they say about cats and curiosity, Futaba-chan." The cat spoke in a deep male voice quite the opposite of Morgana's, bordering on silky and regal, "But I'll respect your wish for privacy. Oh," The cat looked at Morgana and winked, "I recommended the wine in that bowl for you. It's made especially for cats. Enjoy."

The cat sauntered out, the tip of his tail bobbing. It even closed the door for them.

Morgana blinked slowly, then inhaled, "This world has talking cats, too!?"

Ryuji sighed, "It feels nostalgic to say this, but dude... that's not a cat."

"Seriously!?"

"Seriously." Futaba nodded, "She's actually a really cool ninja lady! She was with Urahara when he approached us, and the first time she showed us she could turn into a cat and back into a person-"

"No! I don't want to remember that again!" Ryuji shouted as his ears turned scarlet, "Just... no."

"Fiiiine." Futaba reached for her tea and took a big gulp, "But Ryuji couldn't look at her for a week without blushing! It was funny."

"Moving on..." Ryuji muttered as he looked at Ren, "I was going to ask what kind of world you guys were in before the she-cat interrupted."

Ren smirked as he grabbed his teacup, "You're not going to believe it."

Futaba leaned forward, eyes shimmering, "This world has invisible soul eating monsters and a secret society of dead spirit people who fight them! Throw it at us, Ren!"

"We were sent to a comic book world full of superheroes where... mostly everyone has some sort of power that they call 'Quirks.'"

"FOR REAL!?" Ryuji slammed a fist on the table.

"Ryuji!" Futaba puffed her cheeks at him, "You don't need to be so loud."

"Sorry! But seriously, *superheroes* !? Like... the capes and flashy costumes and everything? People can fly or shoot lasers out of their

eyes!? Do they call out their super-powered attack moves like they do in anime!? They kinda do that here too, but this is different!”

“Pretty much.” Morgana took a drink from the saucer, and eagerly licked his lips before he continued, “It wasn’t all that glamorous though. We landed right in the middle of a villain attack, the heroes and police thought we were part of it and managed to arrest us!”

“No way.” Futaba paled. “What happened then?”

Morgana snickered, “Naturally, we escaped.”

“Hell yeah!” Ryuji clapped Ren on the back, “That’s our Leader!”

“Hey! I helped out!” Morgana snapped.

“Really?” Ryuji poked Morgana’s nose, “How did you help when you didn’t have your powers at the start?”

“With my wits and craftiness, of course! I snuck out through the vents to get our Metaverse items back, then used a smoke bomb in the room Joker was in!”

Ryuji squinted, “I don’t buy it.”

“You-!!”

“He’s telling the truth.” Ren smiled at Morgana, “I doubt I would’ve escaped if Morgana wasn’t there. And since then... well, a lot has happened. We helped people as Phantom Thieves, but there were a lot of horrible things you wouldn’t want to put your worst enemy through.”

“Well, Ren... you got the worst of it out of the two of us.”

Futaba stilled, “Why’s that?”

“Because he-”

“Morgana.”

“Don’t you think they should know?”

Ren looked between Ryuji and Futaba as they grew concerned, “... Let’s wait until we have everyone, first.”

“Was it...” Futaba’s voice shook, “Can you at least tell us if it was as bad as that day in November?”

Ren’s mouth went dry. He downed the rest of his tea before he answered, “It was worse.”

Futaba buried her face in Morgana’s fur, shoulders trembling.

“So a lot of bad shit happened to you guys?” Ryuji glowered at the table, Futaba reached out and grabbed his sleeve. “Yeah, we’ve seen a lot of awful shit here, too.” Ryuji smiled, and Ren was surprised to see how *tired* Ryuji looked, but despite everything he remained hopeful, “But there are good people here who helped us get through it. The important thing is that we’re together again!”

“Any word on the others?” Futaba whispered as she looked up.

“No.” Morgana’s ears drooped, “Once we got the app back, I suggested we find you two first because of your Persona, Futaba. It took us a long time just to guess the Keywords to this world. Do you think you could do something to speed up the process?”

Futaba hummed, “I could try something through Prometheus. What’s the plan, Leader? Are we doing this here, or...?”

The three of them looked to Ren, who sat up straighter.

“I’d like for us to have the superhero world serve as our base of operations. We’ll gain access to the other worlds and reunite with the others from there. After that... I guess we’ll see what we can do to prepare for the final battle against Yaldabaoth.”

“That’s a sound plan!” Morgana chirped.

“Welp.” Ryuji stood up and held out his hand to Ren with an ear to ear grin, “We better get started, right Leader? The others are waitin’ for us!”

Ren smirked as he took Ryuji’s hand and stood next to his best friend, “Let’s do this.”

“Hell yeah! That’s my RenRen!”

The four of them donned their Phantom Thief attire in unison. Oracle and Skull took them back down into the desert basement where the inhabitants of this world waited, many studying the Personas waiting patiently by the Senkaimon. The man named Urahara spoke with Lavenza herself. Though Joker was too far to hear what they were saying, Lavenza must’ve said something as Urahara tapped the fan on his chin in intense thought.

“So... is this it?” The girl with the black hair and purple eyes asked. “Do you want to wait for Orihime or Chad to get here? There’s no doubt Ishida sensed...” The girl looked at Joker before her eyes returned to Oracle. “... this, too.”

“We’re still in the planning stages yet,” Joker stated softly, “So this isn’t goodbye. Still, we shouldn’t linger here too long.”

“Like he said, Rukia-chan.” Oracle bore a shaky smile. “There’s still lots to do.”

Skull walked up to a pair of men and spoke to them fondly, almost like brothers. The first had orange hair as vibrant as Oracle’s and a massive sword on his back, the other had tribal tattoos and crimson hair tied up in a wild ponytail.

“Hey, you.” Joker paused as Rukia crossed her arms and looked up at him, her amethyst eyes as sharp as the katana at her hip. They started at each other for an entire minute, neither breaking eye

contact, until Rukia relaxed and bore a soft grin, “I like you. You’re more than worthy to be Futaba-chan’s older brother.”

“R-Rukia-chan!” Oracle waved her hands wildly, “You can’t just say something like that!”

Rukia was unabashed, “Why not?”

Oracle sputtered as her face began to turn red.

“We’ll give you a few minutes.” Joker told Oracle with an amused smirk, “Mona and I will wait by the gate.”

“... Okay.” Oracle deflated. “Thanks, Joker.”

Joker and Mona approached the Senkaimon and waited by his Personas. Something stirred in Joker’s chest as he watched the orange-haired man lay a firm and reassuring hand on Skull’s shoulder, or how Rukia grinned wide and gave Oracle a horribly butchered child’s drawing of a rabbit.

It reminded him of Aizawa, Hitoshi, Midoriya, and so many others back in the superhero world. Not only had he and Mona forged strong bonds there, but Oracle and Skull found themselves surrounded by equal friends and allies in this world, too.

... And that *more people* across these worlds will have to say goodbye to someone they grew to care for.

Yaldabaoth’s cruelty deepened in a way Joker never expected it to.

Urahara glanced between Joker’s wistful expression, and then Oracle and Skull.

“You’re not jealous?” Urahara asked, tone carefully neutral.

Joker blinked at Urahara, “Why would I be jealous?”

“You know, complete strangers stealing the affection of your friends after such a long time being apart?”

“I’m not that shallow.” Joker chuckled dryly, but then he frowned in contemplation. “Actually, I’m glad Oracle and Skull found people like them.”

The glint in Urahara’s eyes sharpened, “Oh?”

“It means they had the support necessary so they could hold onto their hope of reuniting with us one day.” Joker looked at Urahara, who studied him with a keen intelligence that could easily rival Nezu’s, “And they told me you took them in.” Joker bowed his head, “Thank you for keeping them safe.”

Urahara hummed and whipped out his fan to cover his face again, “They told me a lot about you, Joker, and I have to say I’m not disappointed.” He closed his fan with a *snap*, revealing the shamelessly excited grin on his face, “That’s why I’m coming with you!”

Mona whipped towards Urahara, “Huh!?”

“You are?” Joker asked, eyes wide.

“I am somewhat of an expert when it comes to traversing different planes of existence.” Urahara looked to the Senkaimon with another calculating glint in his eyes, “But the thought of going to entirely separate worlds where no such things exist? This is a once in a life time chance, even for someone like myself who’s been around for a few centuries. Also, I’d like to aid Oracle and Skull in getting back home. They’ve told me what Yaldabaoth put them through, what they put *you* through. How could I not help after that?”

Joker’s eyes widened.

He learned how to first read stoic people from Sojiro, and the past several months with Aizawa honed that ability to a razor sharp point.

The man Joker looked at now hid his true intentions with playful grins and banter, but Joker sensed something... *fiercely protective* underneath it all.

He smiled under Joker's silence, "Unless, of course, you think you could do without the help?"

"No. It would be much appreciated." Joker said with a firm nod.

"Then I'm coming along, too."

Joker and Mona flinched. Yoruichi sat primly on one of the nearby boulders, cleaning her paw. The ninja-cat-woman could teach Joker a thing or two about being stealthy.

"Really, Yoruichi?" Urahara waved his fan at her like a petulant child, "I can handle this myself!"

"Please. I know you too well, Kisuke." The feline rolled her eyes, "Your boundless curiosity would distract you. I'm going along to make sure you stay focused."

Urahara's shoulders dropped in a pout, "Fine."

Yoruichi turned her eyes to Mona. "Did you like that wine?"

"Y-Yes, it was delicious! Thank you for sharing that!"

Yoruichi tilted her head in amusement, "Think nothing of it."

"Yo, we're ready to go." Skull approached with Oracle, the other people of this world stood back and watched on with anticipation.

"Wait, you're going with, Hat'n'Clogs?" The orange haired man narrowed his eyes, "And you too, Yoruichi?"

"Yes, Kurosaki." Yoruichi leveled Kurosaki with amusement, "Right now, we need *thinkers* and *planners*, not brute force."

“She’s right.” Oracle smiled at Kurosaki, “But we might need your strength yet! So... stay here and wait for us? Or for Urahara and Yoruichi to come back and give an update on everything?”

“Fine.” Kurosaki scowled, then stared into Joker’s eyes with more of that *protective fierceness* he sensed in Urahara, “We’ll be waiting to help out.”

Joker firmly nodded before he turned towards the Senkaimon.

“So, we just have to walk through this thing to get to that other world?” Skull asked, “It won’t lead... elsewhere?”

“That is correct, Chariot.” Lavenza said, “But once we go through, we *must* stick together until we reach our destination.”

“Gotcha! No problems there!”

“Jinta, Ururu, Tessai, hold down the shop while I’m gone!” Urahara waved his fan towards the ladder where the others in his shop waited, “As for the rest of you... please don’t break anything or I’ll make you pay for it.”

They jumped from the light and into the blackness. Joker’s Personas surrounded them as Skull, Oracle, Urahara, and Yoruichi looked around.

Yoruichi’s fur bristled, “This is similar to the Dangai, but... not.”

“Let’s not hesitate.” Amaterasu moved forward first, “Staying here too long is dangerous.”

“Of course.” Urahara stated as they began their way over the golden path. “By the way, what is your name, miss? I know Oracle and Skull’s Personas have pretty prominent names of deities, so I’m curious.”

“I am Amaterasu.”

“*Amaterasu* !?” Oracle gaped, “She wasn’t in your Compendium before, Joker!”

“Er, the wriggling black tentacle thing wasn’t.” Skull commented before he stared at Satanael. “I don’t remember you either! But your getup looks a lot like Joker’s new costume...”

“Joker faced many trials and tribulations since we were separated from you.” Satanael said serenely, “New strengths and weaknesses were born within the Sea of this other world, providing a number of changes to Joker’s soul. For example, you know my previous incarnation as Arsene.”

Urahara hummed as he gave Joker a curious glance, then turned his eyes to study Oracle and Skull.

“You’re Arsene!?” Skull gaped.

“Satanael was supposed to be the one who ended it back then.” Joker stated solemnly, “If I didn’t hesitate that time... none of this would’ve ever happened.”

“Joker...” Mona whispered.

“Dude, we don’t blame you for that cheap shot Yaldabaoth pulled.” Skull said.

“Not one bit!” Oracle cried as she waved her arms, “So you better not blame yourself either, mister!”

“You guys...” Joker smiled as an ancient knot of guilt in his chest began to unravel, “Thank you.”

Urahara and Yoruichi stayed quiet, but traded guarded glances. The rest of the trip was spent in silence until they reached the other side. They descended the golden stairs, emerged from the darkness, and into the USJ. Joker and Mona could feel Oracle and Skull gaping as they took in the vastness of the facility.

But something was wrong.

The teachers and vigilantes were gone, and bright sunlight shone through the ceiling instead of the darkness of night time. A familiar white mammal sat upon the rim of the fountain, looking up from his book with a relieved smile.

“Joker!!!”

Joker barely had time to react before Hawks crashed into him from the sky. Sandalphon shot forward and rescued Joker from falling on his ass. He regained his balance and blinked at the mass of red feathers wrapping around him.

“Hawks?” Joker blinked rapidly as Hawks let him go, others in Joker’s hero group rushed towards them.

“About time you came back!” Miruko shouted, teary eyed, “We were *this* close to charging in there ourselves!!”

Gang Orca put a hand over his heart, “I’m glad you’re both safe. Thank goodness.”

“Um...” Mona blinked rapidly as they were given space, “What in the heck is going on? Why such a loud welcome when we were barely gone for an hour?”

They were met with startled shock.

“My, my. An hour, you say?” Nezu made his way to the head of the group, “For us, it’s been two and a half days.”

“*Two and a half days* ?” Joker reiterated in shock.

“Indeed.” Nezu clapped his paws together, “We put the security around the school on high alert when you didn’t come back by the first morning, but the heroes and their assistants resumed teaching their classes as to not draw suspicion from the students. The others in your hero group split into two teams to cover them while classes

are in order, so Best Jeanist, Tensei, and Ryukyu are resting at the dorms from their shift.”

“I still can’t believe we were gone that long...” Mona muttered.

“Joker... *Joker...* ” Oracle tugged on Joker’s sleeve as she stared down at Nezu, “There’s a talking mouse!”

“It kinda reminds me of when we were all turned into mice in Shido’s Palace!” Skull stated.

“I’m sorry, *what* ?” Hawks asked as he took a bewildered step back. “You were turned into mice!?”

Nezu gave Joker a look, “You conveniently left *that* part out of your explanations.”

Mona sputtered, “I-It was embarrassing! Plus, there were so many other more important things we had to cover and worry about!” He gave a pointed look to Oracle and Skull, “Like... *reuniting with our teammates* .”

“Ah, forgive our rudeness! I suppose proper introductions are in order!” Nezu grinned at Oracle and Skull, “Am I a mouse? A dog? A bear? No, I am the Principal of U.A.! The top heroics school in all of Japan!”

Hawks winked, “I’m Hawks, the new Number One hero in Japan!”

Gang Orca bowed his head, “It’s nice to finally meet the teammates that Joker and Mona hold to such high regard. My hero name is Gang Orca, it’s a pleasure.”

Miruko grinned, “I’m Miruko! Honorary big sister to Joker and Mona!”

“Woah...” Skull looked between all of them, “So Joker told us this was a world full of superheroes, so are those animal parts pieces of your costume, or...?”

Mona facepalmed, “Skull...”

Gang Orca grinned to show his massive teeth, “Afraid not. We were born like this.”

“These babies aren’t coming off!” Miruko cackled as she tugged on her rabbit ears.

Hawks rolled his shoulders and flexed his crimson wings, “What they said.”

Skull looked like he was about to implode, “This is so *cool*.”

“Skull, don’t be rude!” Oracle whispered to him before she faced the group, fidgeting when so many eyes were on her, but she kept herself steady, “Um... I’m Oracle, the navigator of the Phantom Thieves.”

“And I’m Skull, Joker’s right hand man! Nice to meet ya!”

“Joker,” Oracle turned to him with a smile “I can start working on the app!”

“Oh.” He reached into his pocket and handed his phone to her, “Don’t feel like you need to rush, okay?”

“Kay!”

She took it and approached the rift again. Many gasps escaped the heroes as she summoned Prometheus around her and floated over them to begin her work.

“Don’t mind her.” Skull said as he smiled at Prometheus, “She’s still a bit shy around new people.”

Nezu hummed, before he looked to the other pair who hadn’t yet introduced themselves, “And who might you be? We were aware of Oracle and Skull, but I was not expecting more guests beyond that.”

“We apologize. We’re natural inhabitants of the world Oracle and Skull were trapped in.” Yoruichi stated with a respectful nod, “You can call me Yoruichi.”

“Urahara Kisuke.” Urahara grinned as he waved his white fan at Nezu, “I can already tell the stark differences between our worlds. How fascinating. How exciting!”

“Like what?” Nezu asked, ears forward.

“There’s no reishi. None at all.” Urahara frowned at the confused looks, “Think of it as the base energy in the environment that all souls in my home world need to survive.”

“I never really understood that part.” Skull muttered to himself.

Joker frowned.

That odd *pressure* he felt in the other world wasn’t present here, but something... different. Powers hidden underneath the veil of souls just under the surface of this world, but such a drastic change in environments...

He didn’t want to think what happens to deep sea fish coming up to the surface.

“Will you two be okay without it?” Joker asked as he turned to Urahara and Yoruichi, “I didn’t even think about it.”

The odd pair stilled, stared at each other with growing hints of amusement, before returning their gazes to him with hints of approval.

“We’ll be fine, for a time.” Yoruichi said.

Urahara nodded, “We have our own internal stores we can draw from, so you don’t need to worry about us!”

“Oh?” Nezu’s eyes sparkled, “Care to explain in more detail over a cup of tea? I am also eager to learn what differences this world has to yours!”

Urahara smiled, “It would be my pleasure. We came to offer our assistance in any way we can, so it would be good to exchange vital information between one another.”

Yoruichi sighed as she climbed on Urahara’s head and splayed herself out over his hat. Nezu led them over to the fountain, where a small table and cushions were laid out. And there was already a tea set waiting. Joker wondered how long it had been there.

Joker looked to the other heroes. “When did you guys get here?”

Miruko frowned, “A few hours after you went through the rift.”

“We’ll message the others about your successful return, but they might not answer for a while.” Hawks checked a watch on his wrist, “Considering it’s 10:30 in the morning.”

“We didn’t think something like that would happen.” Mona shook his head, “We’re sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It’s not like it was on purpose.” Gang Orca smiled in his usual soft and warm manner, “Now we can prepare accordingly.”

Skull beamed, “You made some pretty good friends in this world too, Leader?”

Joker smiled fondly, “Yeah.”

Skull turned fully towards the group with his sunny grin, “Thanks for takin’ care of them. They mean a lot to me an’ Oracle!”

“Really, it’s more like the other way around.” Miruko said with a smirk.

"I wouldn't be the person I am today if it weren't for them." Hawks stated.

"I would say it's an equal trade." Gang Orca grinned, "They helped us out, and we helped them in their time of need. This world is in a much better state, thanks to his and Mona's efforts."

Joker felt his face heat up, "It's nothing, really."

"Hey!" They all looked up at Oracle's voice, "I got another connection!"

"Already!?" Mona cried, "Well, it was a good call to get to Oracle and Skull first after all..."

Prometheus lowered to the ground. Joker, Mona, and Skull rushed to her as her Persona vanished in a small whirlwind of blue ash.

"Muehehehe..." Oracle smirked, "Joker, you might've gained the most power out of all of us, but you're not the only one that got stronger! Skull and I got a lot better, too!"

"I believe it." Mona had a fond smile. "Which world did you connect to?"

Oracle held out the phone to Joker, "I got Fox and Queen. Door: Monolith. Core: Truth. Location: City."

Mona winced, "Easier words than what was used to connect to the world you were in."

Joker took his phone from Oracle, "Let's go get them."

"Wait, Joker." Oracle poked her fingers together, "I think... I'll stay here."

"Why?" Joker asked, eyes wide.

“I can use Prometheus to get us all sorts of data as you cross through the rift! Maybe I can find a way so that it won’t take you days to return, e-even if you’re on the other side for a longer period of time.”

“I agree with the little lady. Being gone for two and a half days is lucky, considering time runs differently between worlds. Some people could be gone for months or years if they don’t know what they’re doing.” Urahara said from where he sat across from Nezu with a steaming cup of tea in hand, “I can help in gathering data, Oracle, as we did before. Who knows what helpful bits we can use for the final battle itself?”

“Of course, I’ll use what I have to help as well!” Nezu said with a grin.

Mona nodded, “Then leave the infiltration to us!”

Skull looked torn between staying with Oracle or going with Joker to get the rest of their friends, so Joker grasped his shoulder to give him some courage, “Can you stay and look after Oracle? We don’t want her to be alone.”

Skull’s shoulder sank in relief, “Right! You guys be careful, ‘kay?”

“It’s a promise.” Mona turned towards the rift.

Joker looked at Nezu, but the rat smiled, “We’ll take great care of our honored guests! You don’t need to worry.”

Joker nodded, then followed Mona to the rift.

Lavenza made to go to them, but Theodore held out a hand.
“Brother?”

“Pardon my sudden request,” Theodore stated, staring at Joker and Mona, “But may I go along this time?”

“Why?” Joker asked.

“I believe it would be good for Lavenza to take a rest, and I am curious to see this other world for myself.”

“Hmm, good point.” Margaret smiled serenely, “I’ll offer to go to the third and final world after, should we find the Keywords for it.”

“Hey!” Elizabeth glared at her siblings, “What about me?”

“You should stay here. After all, we’re on the front line should something hostile come through. You’re the best choice to stay and defend this world.”

Elizabeth squinted between Theodore and Margaret, “Whatever.”

“I’ll choose new Personas, too.” Joker stated. Satanael and the others bowed deeply before they disappeared, and Joker chose the next group to accompany them in reality, “Futsunushi. Odin. Cybele. Fafnir.”

The Personas rose around him, much to the astounded gasps of Skull and Oracle.

Joker looked down at his phone when they were ready, standing at the foot of the golden stairs, “I’m going to disconnect from Urahara’s world, and then connect to Fox and Queen’s world.”

“Right!” Oracle summoned Prometheus around her and floated above the fountain again, “Ready to collect data, Joker!”

The golden stairs shattered like pieces of stained glass. Joker gaped as the shards hovered in the air, reflecting the sunlight streaming in from above, only to reform exactly as they were moments ago.

“Weird.” Mona poked at the stairs with a paw, “Are we sure this worked?”

“It says it did.” Joker stuffed his phone back in his pocket, “There’s only one way to find out.”

Joker climbed the stairs, with his Personas, Theodore, and Mona at his heels. They entered the pitch black nothingness without so much as a look backwards, despite the anxiety coating the stares at their backs.

“This is...” Theodore whispered, “Astounding.”

“Have you ever seen something like this, Theodore?” Mona asked.

“No.” Theodore looked to the golden path at their feet, “We broke through this space when we went to you, but we stayed within the Velvet Room for that time. Seeing this puts it into better perspective.”

“This is no time for idle chatter.” Odin stated, “We must move!”

“Oh, be patient, will you?” Cybele smirked.

“No, Odin is correct.” Futsunushi’s swords twirled around him, “Besides, look at that. It’s a different path compared to last time.”

The golden path, instead of going straight ahead, turned sharply to their right, and in the distance they could see it spiral downwards like a glowing corkscrew trapped in ink.

They began at a steady pace, Joker and Mona’s colorful footprints splashing across the gold. It didn’t take them long to reach the downward spiral, the smooth path reforming into countless stairs.

“Is it me, or does this one feel longer?” Joker said after their tenth or so turn, “This is starting to make me dizzy.”

“Then why not ride me for a quicker trip?” Fafnir snapped. “Or the Magician can turn into a bus!”

“It’s better to go slow and steady in such a space.” Odin frowned as he peered over the side of the spiral, “We cannot risk rushing and accidentally falling off.”

“Hastur said it would erase us from existence if it pulled us in,” Mona shivered, “We can’t go disappearing when our friends are counting on us!”

“It appears we’re near the end anyway.” Theodore pointed to the next spiral, which leveled out like a ramp, “It looks like there’s a door there.”

Joker swiftly climbed down the remaining stairs and they reached a tall monolithic set of doors carved with numerous symbols and glyphs.

Joker reached his hand out, but paused, “Do you feel that?”

“Yeah.” Mona glared at the door, “It’s giving off a bad vibe. Like... like there’s electricity crawling all over my skin.”

They readied themselves as Joker touched the Door, the material shot an ice cold tremor through his glove and up his arm. A wave of static energy pulled through the space as Joker took his hand back, and the Door began to swing open on ancient stone hinges.

Unlike the Senkaimon, this door revealed an inky blackness no different to the void around them. The golden path ended at its precipice, as if afraid to go further.

Mona looked at him, “Joker, I don’t like this one bi-”

A giant eye snapped open vertically in the darkness, and a hundred shadowy arms were upon them before they could blink. Joker heard Mona’s startled shout and Theodore’s cry of rage, and he was yanked into the door before he could so much as cast a spell.

Joker stumbled at the sudden disappearance of the arms, opening his eyes to a stark white... everything. He looked around and took a step forward, colors splashing against the milky floor.

“Mona? Theodore?” Joker’s heart pounded when he reached for his Personas only to find his mind as blank as the space around him.
“Anyone?”

“Well, look at you. You finally made it.”

He whirled around to the voice. A being sat nearby, its entirely white body only visible from the writhing shadows around its outline. It had no eyes or nose, though its too wide smile revealed many teeth. Joker’s hair stood on end because the being’s shape... the general outline... it looked too much like Joker himself.

Joker activated Third Eye. His vision exploded into *red*. The entirety of the white space turned crimson from the being’s aura, something he’d recently seen, just once, in the world of superheroes from Ryoto.

Joker’s hand went to Paradise Lost, “What are you? Where am I?”

The being laughed as if this entire thing was an amusing play. Its voice trilled in many timbres, ranging from the high and light voice of a woman to the deep baritone of a man. Joker’s stomach roiled when the combined voices sounded far too similar to those of his Personas.

“I am called many names. God. The World. The Universe. The All and the One. But you may call me Truth.”

Joker’s eyes widened as he recalled Igor’s words.

“ Humanity has always been watched by forces outside of our comprehension. Our situation may have drawn special interest from such beings, as well. Perhaps they are watching right now, waiting to see how this war between you and Yaldabaoth ends.”

Truth had the same aura as Ryoto.

So does that mean that the man who raised Hawks, the person who hadn't aged a single day in years, the only singular being who held the same aura like this entity before him... could be the superhero world's equivalent to *God* ?

The man had peered strangely at Joker before they left the Kyoto hospital and whispered 'Good luck.'. He didn't think much of it at the time. Brushed it off and forgot about it, even. He thought it was meant for Kaito, but thinking now... if Ryoto was something like the being that sat before him, then it put those few whispered words in an entirely new light.

"Although, I didn't think you'd grow to be strong enough to be a God in your own right."

"Don't be ridiculous." Joker scoffed, "I'm not a god."

Truth tilted their head, "Are you sure?"

It held up its left hand, and a blue flame roiled to life in its palm. Within the blue flames appeared a white and black domino mask. Joker stilled as the being raised its right palm in a similar manner, and within the blue flame appeared his current black and gold mask.

"You have grown to be an entire World." Truth crossed their palms into an X shape, and the balls of flame combined, the pieces of the masks swirling together within the fire, "But you still have the potential to evolve into something more. Do you think just any normal human could travel this extended road without their minds breaking? Could just traipse through forbidden spaces without any trouble? Being so far from home, separated from the ones you care so deeply for... a lesser human would've snapped and lost his mind by now. Without such a strong willpower like yours, nobody else would even stand a chance against the new powers Yaldabaoth possesses."

Joker shook his head, "How do you know all of this?"

“Have you not figured it out?” Truth tilted their head as the flames sputtered out, their smile encompassing the entirety of their lower face, “I am thou, thou art I.”

Paradise Lost was unsheathed in a singing arc of black and silver. Joker scowled as he fell into a battle stance, “Enough fooling around! What did you do to Mona and Theodore? Where are Fox and Queen?”

“I did nothing to them. The Magician, Attendant, and your other selves are unharmed, and the Emperor and High Priestess have been waiting so long for you. However, before I send you along your merry way for another happy reunion,” Truth slowly tilted their head the other way, “I’d like to strike a deal with you.”

“Why would I do that?” Joker dangerously narrowed his eyes, “I’ve said no to Yaldabaoth and All For One. I can say no to you, too.”

“I don’t think you can.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I can keep you here for as long as I like.” Joker grimaced as Truth laughed again. Joker reached for the Key over his heart, but the being shook his head, “That won’t work here. Not in *my* realm as long as I don’t allow it. Time will be practically frozen in the other worlds, but years will pass here. How many millennia will it take for a butterfly to flap its wings only once? How long will that precious will power of yours last before it crumbles away to dust and ash?”

“What do you want, then?” Joker growled.

“Simply to make sure that what’s mine *stays* mine.”

“You’re making no sense. Care to elaborate?”

“Alchemy.” The creepy smile faded from Truth’s face until it was a blank white mask. “The force of nature in my world belongs *only* to

my world. It'll be dangerous for the High Priestess and Emperor to return to their home world with such forbidden knowledge at their fingertips."

Joker raised a brow as he slowly stood from his combat stance, "So?"

Truth held out their hand. "I wish to take that knowledge back when the boundaries between worlds are restored."

"Wouldn't tampering with their memories would hurt them?" Joker scowled. "I couldn't do that."

Truth chuckled at Joker's darkening expression, "I'll make it painless, like forgetting a dream once you wake. They'll still remember the bonds they forged, but anything they learned of Alchemy itself must be forgotten."

"You know, we both lose if I say no."

"Then you better take my deal if you want to win."

Joker's lips pursed. His grip tightened over Paradise Lost, the blade reflecting the creamy whiteness of this realm.

After another moment of defiant silence, Truth sighed like a disappointed parent, "I'll be generous and sweeten it for you, since this entire situation wasn't your fault. I can reveal the location to where the Emperor and High Priestess have been residing. Get in. *Get out* . Kill that fool of a Holy Grail and heal what has been broken. Everything will return to normal and balance will be restored. It's that simple, no? All for the price of something they never would've learned in the first place."

He couldn't summon his Personas, nor use their magic in this alien place. He wouldn't be fast enough to test his Key before Truth did *who knows what* in retaliation, and he didn't want to push the theory

on if Truth could trap him here or not. Joker didn't know what this... god like being was capable of within the confines of their own realm.

Joker sighed as he sheathed his dagger, "Fine. But if it does end up hurting them, then nothing will stop me from finding a way to come back here to kill you myself."

"Good. I wouldn't expect anything less from the Trickster." Truth snapped their fingers, and static crawled up Joker's back, "Go through the door behind you to reunite with the Magician and Attendant. You'll know what to do from there."

Joker looked over his shoulder to another monolithic set of doors, which already cracked open to reveal the blackness within. He turned around and approached it, and only took one step inside before Truth spoke again.

"One more thing."

"What?" Joker grumbled.

"If a man named Philemon ever approaches you, make sure to punch him as hard as you can. I don't think he learned his lesson the first time."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because *he's* the idiot who put us all in this very precarious position in the first place."

"Wha-"

Joker could say no more as the darkness within the door swallowed him. He stumbled forward again, gloved hands landing roughly on the sharp gravel of a damp rooftop. The sound of raindrops and the aroma of wet stones surrounded them like a thick blanket. He gasped at the lance of sharp pain in his head, the electricity laced in the very bones of this world singing softly to him.

“Joker, are you okay!?” Mona was at his side, tiny arms waving.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He grasped his head when it felt as if someone pushed a long, thin needle into his temple, but the pain was fading, “How long was I gone?”

“What? You didn’t go anywhere! We got here a second ago and you just collapsed!”

“But your Personas disappeared when we did.” Theodore crouched on his other side, studying Joker’s pale face with a frown, “Are you certain you’re alright?”

“... Yeah.” He stood up and wiped wet gravel from his pants.

“What happened?” Satanael and the others hovered around the mindscape, scowling at the tiny addition to Joker’s mind, *“We felt something strange for a moment... and then you were back with us. What caused that pain?”*

“I think I made a deal with this world’s god?”

Alarm shot through the mindscape and their focus turned hostile at the new sensation in Joker’s mind.

“It’s fine! I dealt with it, so you don’t have to worry about anything. I promise.”

Satanael didn’t seem to believe him, but he and the others acquiesced. *“... Alright.”*

“Where are we?” Mona looked out across a rainy city, “How in the world are we supposed to find Fox and Queen in a huge place like this!?”

“It would be unwise to cause a big scene in an attempt to attract them.” Theodore clutched his chin as he scanned the unfamiliar cityscape, “Especially since the Door vanished behind us.”

“Maybe Oracle and Skull should’ve come with us after all.” Mona said, wincing.

Joker looked behind them. There was a faint outline of a door with strange symbols, but to anyone it looked like a random chalk drawing on a flat wall.

“It’ll come back when we’re ready to leave.”

“How do you know that?” Mona asked.

“I just... do.” Joker groaned as he scratched his aching temple, “I also know where Fox and Queen’s apartment is.”

“What!?” Mona scrambled up Joker’s shoulder, “*How* could you possibly know!?”

Joker grimaced, “You’ll just have to trust me, okay?”

Mona’s eyes pierced through him, but he sighed, “Okay. If you know where they are, then let’s stop wasting time!”

“But we must not draw any attention to ourselves. Who knows what this world’s inhabitants can do with whatever magic lays in their world.” Theodore stated. “They may not take well to strangers like us.”

A sour taste laced Joker’s tongue. “They’re not far.”

They traversed the old fashioned, yet somehow new, rooftops. They kept to the shadows, easily hiding themselves on the dreary, rainy, and cool environs of a city that would be at home in the early 1900’s, made of all stone and mortar and the creeping scent of motor exhaust. The clothes and vehicles could belong in a history museum. The little needle in Joker’s mind supplemented that this city’s name was *Amestris*, but aside from the steep tug towards a certain direction, it offered nothing else.

Wide streets turned into countless rivulets of tiny nooks and alleyways. This city must've been in a constant drizzle, as trickles of water washed over the stones and mixed with the none-too-pleasant smell of human waste and other garbage.

Poor Mona wrinkled his nose at it.

Theodore looked a little green, but didn't complain.

They crossed over a few more tiny alleyways when Joker dropped down. Just a few steps away, hidden within this tiny alley and a stack of crates to keep it out of view from the bigger street, lay a wooden door.

Mona and Theodore watched as he approached and tried its handle. He put his ear to it and listened.

"Nobody's home and its locked." Joker smirked as he whipped out his Perma-Pick, "But nothing I can't handle."

"Joker, are you sure this is it?" Mona asked.

"Positive." He grinned as the lock clicked open. He tucked away his lockpick and opened the door, a pair of confused comrades following in his wake when he entered.

It was a small space, barely a handful of rooms cramped together.

Mona's eyes were as wide as dinner plates as they looked around the walls plastered with notes of strange glyphs and symbols. Joker frowned as he looked at the intricate circles all around them.

This must be the 'Alchemy' Truth spoke of.

He was careful not to look too hard at any of it.

Empty ceramic cups with the strong scent of coffee and old paper were littered everywhere, along with more books piled in the corners

and along any extra wall space that would make any book-lover cry with tears of joy.

Mona jumped on the crowded table and opened a leather journal at the top of the pile.

“This looks to be notes on something called ‘Alchemy.’ Wait, this neat handwriting!” Mona’s eyes welled with tears, “These were written by Queen... and these confusing circles everywhere... I’d recognize Fox’s brushstrokes anywhere!” He whirled around to Joker, “This really is where they must’ve stayed!”

“But how can we be so sure they’ll return?” Theodore froze after he spoke, and then he faced the door with his Compendium flying open.

Just then, they heard the jingle of keys outside.

“Yusuke, did you forget to lock it again?”

Mona and Joker froze at Makoto’s voice.

“No... it was your duty to lock it when we left. I swear you did though...”

“You guys can’t keep track of who locks your own damn door?” A new voice said, annoyed and young.

The door swung open and familiar figures stepped inside, but they froze like deer in the headlights at the scene before them. Makoto wore some sort of blue military uniform, while Yusuke donned a disheveled Victorian styles suit without the jacket. Their faces drained of color, and the paper bag full of groceries dropped from Makoto’s arms.

Makoto’s hands flew to her mouth, “... Joker? Mona?”

Hearing her voice sparked something warm and wet in Joker’s eyes, too. With a teary grin, he held out his arms.

“We’re here.” Joker said, his voice cracking.

Makoto rushed into his arms, and Yusuke didn’t wait. Mona jumped in with snuffles and more tears falling onto the floor.

Yusuke’s arms were trembling, “This is... this isn’t another dream, is it?”

“You had *dreams* about this?” Mona babbled.

“Of course! Every night since we got here.” Yusuke chuckled wetly as he reluctantly pulled away, Mona huddled in his arms, “Although, I never thought to see you in such a new and stylish costume, Joker. Gold really suits you. Perhaps, if you could be my next muse-”

“You’re going on about art *now* of all times!?” Mona yelped.

Joker chuckled as he blinked rapidly to clear the tears, “It wouldn’t be our Fox without it, Mona.”

“*How* ?” Makoto pulled back, hands resting on Joker’s chest, “How are you here?”

Joker placed his hand over hers, “We can explain everything later. Right now, the both of you need to come with us.” Joker’s smile grew, “Oracle and Skull are waiting.”

Makoto gasped.

“So they are safe as well.” Yusuke leaned against the wall in sheer relief, “Thank goodness.”

“Panther and Noir?” Makoto whispered.

“They’re last on the list.” Mona said, “After we drop you off with Oracle and Skull, we’ll go get them and then form a plan with our other allies to end this once and for all.”

“Let’s go then.” Makoto stated, resolve pouring into her posture.

“We kept everything of import on our costumes at all times.” Yusuke, with Mona tucked under one arm like a plush doll, hastily cleaned the spilled groceries and set them aside, “So we’re ready when you are.”

“You...”

The unfamiliar voice from before, trembling with rage, snapped the peace.

Joker looked into the livid golden eyes of a boy their age standing in the doorway. His golden blond hair was done in a short braid, and he wore dark clothes under a scarlet overcoat. A massive suit of silver armor stood behind him, blocking their exit.

“Are they friends, or enemies?” Joker whispered to Makoto.

“We’ve been back and forth a few times before we settled on mutual allies...” She murmured. “They came with us on their day off to help with groceries.”

Theodore, who remained still and silent until now, ran a finger over his Compendium at the raw hostility radiating off the boy.

“You have a talking animal.”

“Eh?” Mona blinked at the boy, “Does he mean me?”

Makoto flinched, and waved her arms as the boy glared daggers at Joker, “It’s not what you think, Edward!” She cried, “Mona is... he’s nothing like Nina!”

“Then explain.” Blue sparks erupted through the apartment, and the glove on Edward’s right hand was sliced apart by a sharp blade sprouting from his metal arm. “Now .”

“Brother...” The metal suit behind Edward spoke in a soft and young voice that didn’t belong to such a gargantuan behemoth.

“We already did, once.” Yusuke’s pointed glare clashed with Edward’s, and the energy in the air turned frigid, “But you were the ones who didn’t believe us even after blood rained from the sky. Joker is our Leader, and Mona our friend and teammate, like we explained before.”

“Right.” A mirthless smirk creased Edward’s face, “The whole bullshit about being from another world because of a pissy chalice. Get real.”

Something in Yusuke’s eyes turned cold, and the temperature of the apartment fell, “Hughes believed us when we first told him.”

The boy and the metal suit went dangerously still. He didn’t know what history this world had, or what had happened between Fox and Queen and the rest of this world, but one thing was certain.

Joker sighed, snapping attention back on him. “We don’t have time for this.”

He walked past Makoto, Mona, and Yusuke. Joker didn’t hesitate when Edward’s arm blade was pointed at him, stopping when the weapon’s tip was right over his heart. The entirety of the boy’s right arm was like a clockwork masterpiece, the cold silvery metal glinting sharply.

Fafnir slid into place as his mask, hissing across the mindscape.

“Two things could happen from here, depending on what you choose to do next.” Joker stated, not breaking eye contact with Edward, who remained stubborn in his own right, “If you try to attack us, then Mona and I can take Queen and Fox away from here, and you would *never* see us again.”

The metal suit put a hand on Edward’s shoulder, “Brother, I think we should-”

“Quiet, Alphonse! What’s the other choice, aside from stabbing the asshole in front of me? You should know that combining a human

with an animal is a heinous crime!”

“But he’s not.” Makoto said.

“She’s right!” Mona scrambled out from under Yusuke’s arm and hopped next to Joker’s shins.

“Then what are you?”

“Er, well... that’s a bit complicated.” Mona said, “To put it in simple terms, I’m the personification of Humanity’s Hope. I... I wasn’t ‘combined’ between a human and an animal in the way you’re probably thinking.”

Edward stared intently at Mona for a long minute, his expression pinching.

Joker cracked a smile, “Lay down your weapon and see the truth for yourself. We’ve gathered allies across two different worlds already, do you want to be the third to join the fight against Yaldabaoth, or do you want to be left to fend for yourselves?”

“*Brother* .” The metal suit named Alphonse placed both hands firmly on Edward’s shoulders and pulled him away, the tip of the arm-blade no longer jabbing Joker’s chest, “I think they’re telling the truth. They have been the whole time. Their unique powers... how they helped us and many others... and now their friends are really here, too. We should return their kindness, brother. You know it’s only right.”

The short spitfire’s jaw finally relaxed, and he slowly lowered his arm.

“We’ll go along for now and see this ‘evidence’ for ourselves, but if you’re lying-”

“We aren’t.” Yusuke coolly interjected.

“-you’ll be sorry.”

“Then we have nothing to worry about.” Makoto said with a serene smile, but then her eyes went wide and she stared between Joker and Mona, “Er, how did you two get here, by the way? There was no way to recharge our phones here, and we didn’t even have the app anymore...”

Yusuke nodded, “Unfortunately, the batteries died within a few days, so we never got the chance to try anything.”

“Come on, we’ll show you.” Joker said.

The pair of brothers stepped aside to let Joker walk out the front door, either locked onto Joker with laser accuracy. Theodore and Mona followed, dragging the rest of them outside. Joker shot his grapple and grinned when he heard Makoto and Yusuke gasp at his instantaneous ascension.

“Don’t fall behind!” Mona cackled as he used a burst of wind to join Joker.

“Shall we, Queen?” Yusuke asked with a smirk.

“Yes, we shall, Fox.”

They donned their costumes in bright veils of blue, and used the crates next to their door to seamlessly join him, Theodore stalking like a shadow behind. Edward’s annoyed groan reached Joker’s ears and, after a flash of blue lightning, the brothers joined the group from a rising column of earth.

“I see our Leader still loves to showoff.” Fox smiled, “It is... a relief to see it again after so long.”

“No kidding.” Queen stated, “Which way, Joker?”

Joker took the lead across the rainy city, several pairs of footsteps echoing just behind him. They were halfway back when Fox spoke to Theodore for the first time.

“Now that the heat of the moment has passed... I’m afraid I’ve never seen you before.” Fox said, “Who are you?”

Theodore chuckled, “I’m Lavenza’s older brother.”

“Brother?” Queen whispered in shock, “I didn’t know she had siblings.”

“Neither did I until recently.” Joker quipped.

“There are four of us in total. Elizabeth is my twin, and our eldest sister is named Margaret. Though I suppose there could be five if you wanted to count Justine and Caroline separately.”

“Um... wouldn’t that make seven siblings?” Alphonse asked.

“Someone can’t count.” Edward muttered.

“No.” Theodore cast Edward an icy look, but his gaze softened when he looked at Alphonse, “Our youngest sister was split in two by Yaldabaoth’s malevolent powers, and was only able to fuse herself back together thanks to Joker’s efforts. It’s a touchy subject for her, so we only count four whole siblings to help ease her pain.”

“I see. I’m sorry she went through that.” Alphonse whispered. “We know what it’s like to not be whole. Don’t we, brother?”

Edward mumbled something incoherent, but the irate knot in his brow lifted, if only a little.

“I’m sure she would appreciate the sentiment.”

They reached the Door’s outline soon after. Joker placed his hands flat on the surface, and the Door appeared in a flash of lightning and blue sparks.

“This is...” Edward stepped up to it with a well hidden, but haunted, expression.

“It’s how Yaldabaoth banished us here.” Fox said, eyes wide.

“Yeah.” Queen placed a hand over her heart, “We were fighting with our friends before Fox and I were tossed through this door. The next thing we knew, we woke up here in the streets of Amestris with no way to get home.”

“That’s basically what happened with us.” Mona said, eyes downcast, “Were your Personas weakened, too?”

“For a while, yes.” Fox glared at the Door with new determination, “But we refused to give up. We fought hard to survive in this world so we could see everyone again and give Yaldabaoth the punishment he deserves!”

“He’s getting what’s coming to him.” The Door yawned open to darkness. The four Personas who escorted them appeared around Joker in swirling cerulean, and he pulled at his glove with a devious smirk, “I promise.”

“Joker...” Queen glanced between Futsunushi, Odin, Fafnir, and Cybele with wonder. She stepped up to his side, with both Fox and Mona joining him on the other, “We’re with you.”

“All the way.” Fox said.

Joker’s heart felt at ease as they dove into the darkness as a team. Edward and Alphonse hesitated, but with a firm nod from Theodore, they ventured into the unknown, too. They shifted uneasily in this vast expanse of nothingness, but remained silent as the four Phantom Thieves traversed over a path of gold.

“Hey, look at that!” Mona cried before they ascended the staircase, “The path looks shorter.”

Joker looked up the few spirals leading upwards as opposed to dozens, “Do you think Oracle did something?”

Mona's eyes sparkled as he leapt up the stairs, "There's only one way to find out!"

"So our Leader not only has an even more stylish look, but you've grown so strong as to call upon many Personas." Fox smiled at the surrounding deities as they ran, "How many Personas can you summon?"

"Right now, thirteen at once." Joker said, "It shouldn't be too much longer before I can summon all sixteen again like when..."

Queen blinked, "Like when... what?"

Joker's smile tightened, "Never mind. Oracle and Skull could probably tell you more."

They reached the top of the staircase and approached the tear, the spot of brightness pouring into the endless void like the beating heart of a fiery star, and returned to the world of superheroes.

The sunlight coming in through the ceilings was a dusky pink in color, and boxes of food and other supplies were dotted around the central plaza. Familiar faces turned to them as they touched down on the USJ's floor.

"Oh! Did it work!?" Oracle's voice called across the USJ.

"That voice..." Queen looked around until her eyes trailed upwards to Prometheus. "Oracle!?"

"Queen! Fox!" Prometheus dropped down and disappeared, Oracle ran to them surrounded in a flurry of cinders.

Skull pulled himself away from the fountain and rushed to join them.

Joker grinned as Oracle jumped into Queen's arms, sniffing as they held one another. Skull stopped a few inches from Fox, grinning.

Fox cleared his throat and rapidly blinked, "It's good to see you again, Skull."

"Ah, come here!" Skull wrapped his arms around Fox and lifted him off his feet.

Fox, despite being taller, sank into the embrace with a hearty chuckle.

"Don't hog him all to yourself, Skull!" Oracle pulled away from Queen, "I wanna hug Inari, too!"

Skull set Fox on his feet, "All yours, Oracle."

Warmth continued to spread in Joker's heart as Oracle latched onto Fox like a koala, the latter scoffing softly before he wrapped his arms around her. Skull scratched the back of his head as he approached Queen, who didn't wait to give him a hug.

Joker looked out across the USJ to give the four of them a few moments together.

Urahara and Nezu were surrounded by the same variety computers and screens marked with Oracle's hieroglyphics, and Joker was surprised to see La Brava helping them by using Oracle's laptop.

"Welcome back." Mr. Compress approached, "Sorry we weren't here the first time you returned."

Joker smiled as Spinner and Gentle Criminal joined him, "Don't worry about it. How long were we gone this time? The pathway between worlds was shorter."

"About seven hours!" Nezu called from the computers, "It seems Oracle's ability to manipulate time and space can do marvelous wonders with the right data at her disposal!"

"I've never seen so much data all at once." La Brava looked up from the laptop in the midst of scattered equipment, "I'm not even sure I

understand half of this stuff.”

“That’s alright.” Urahara stated, “You’ve helped us out a lot by just being able to compile it like I asked.” He looked past Joker and blinked, “Oh? Do we have more otherworldly guests?”

Edward went as white as a sheet. Joker couldn’t see Alphonse’s expression under that helmet, but he was as still as a statue.

Queen pursed her lips, “I don’t want to say I told you so, but...”

“We didn’t lie.” Fox nodded as he and Oracle finally separated.

“I...” Edward scoffed. He crossed his arms and turned away, golden eyes staring up at the massive rift that warped reality, “Yeah. You didn’t lie.”

Alphonse sighed, “That’s his way of apologizing.”

“Shut up, Al!”

“My, my!” Nezu grinned as he walked front and center between the joining Phantom Thieves and the pair of brothers, “Welcome, welcome! I’m sure that this comes as quite a shock, but-”

“More talking animals.” Edward looked strangely at Nezu, “You got to be freaking kidding me.”

“I suppose you could say...” A mischievous glint entered Fox’s eye, “You find this *prepaw* sterous.”

Fox got incredulous looks from across the USJ.

Queen face-palmed.

“Really, dude?” Skull shook his head, “That didn’t even land the first time!”

Oracle playfully punched him in the gut, “You *still* haven’t learned to make better jokes!? What’s wrong with you, Inari!?”

Fox rubbed his stomach, “I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

“It didn’t work, dumbass.” Edward snapped.

Nezu chuckled, “That’s quite alright. I do enjoy bad puns every once in a while! Now, how about some introductions before we get our newest additions settled?”

Queen faced them and bowed respectfully, “I’m Queen, advisor to the Phantom Thieves.”

“Fox.” He looked across all of the new faces, his critical eye landing especially on Mr. Compress’ getup in interest, “It seems we’re not the only ones who like to look stylish.”

“Brother…” Alphonse urged Edward, but the other boy turned away with a scowl. The metal suit gave off a long sigh, “I’m Alphonse Elric. This is my older brother, Edward Elric. We’re alchemists.”

“Alchemists, eh?” Urahara grinned, “Urahara Kisuke, at your service. We’re from the world where Oracle and Skull were trapped in.”

Alphonse tilted his head, “”We?””

“Older brother, you say?” Alphonse startled as Yoruichi was suddenly perched on his massive shoulders, staring down at Edward, “You’re so small I didn’t even see you.”

Edward flinched as a stormy expression overtook him.

“Uh oh.” Queen whispered.

Fox sighed lightly, “Here we go. I wonder if this should make for an entertaining painting…”

“U-Um!” Alphonse waved his hands, “I’m sure this... talking cat, didn’t mean it!”

“Oh, I meant it.” Yoruichi tilted her head as her tail waved back and forth, smug amusement radiating off of her body.

“WHO ARE YOU CALLING SO SMALL THEY COULD WALK THROUGH THE HEAD OF A PIN!?”

“You. *Obviously* .”

“I’LL TURN YOU INTO A FREAKING HAT, YOU DAMN FLEABAG!”

“You’ll have to catch me first, little boy.” Yoruichi jumped off of Alphonse and pranced away, while Edward rushed after her with a murderous expression.

“Brother, please!” Alphonse called as Edward chased Yoruichi around the fountain, the ninja feline fluidly dodging Edward’s hands with little to no effort. “You’re embarrassing yourself...”

Urahara covered his face with a fan as they all watched the chaos, “Yoruichi loves to tease people, but this is a better reaction than when she used to pick on Byakuya. She’ll be entertained for days. Don’t take it so seriously, Edward, it’s just her way of ‘breaking the ice!’”

Edward glared at Urahara, “Stay outta this, old man!”

“Old man?” Urahara fanned himself, his other hand grasping his chest in mock hurt, “I might be over 300 years old, but that’s still young in shinigami terms!”

“Huh!?”

“Are you done already, shorty?” Yoruichi called from the fountain.

Mr. Compress tipped his hat as Edward continued to chase her, “I admit, interacting with so many colorful characters from other worlds

has been... an experience.”

“Oh?” Joker stuck his hands in his pockets and smirked, “I think you’d be good at this because of Mona and I.”

Mr. Compress laughed, “Quite.”

“We introduced ourselves to Oracle and Skull while you were away.” Gentle Criminal said as he looked towards Joker’s teammates, “La Brava and Oracle were practically peas in a pod right from the start.”

“Yeah!” Spinner grinned, “Me and Skull chatted for a bit, too. It’s... actually kinda surprising how much we had in common.”

“I’d personally like to get to know Fox and Queen better.” Mr. Compress turned to them. Queen’s face had fallen into both hands, while Fox made a square between in his thumbs and pointer fingers as he followed Edward’s and Yoruichi’s frantic chase across the central plaza.

“Joker.” Mona caught Joker’s attention with a serious expression, “We should stop messing around. We still have to get Panther and Noir.”

“Right.” Joker sobered as he gave Mr. Compress and the others a glance, “Take care of them?”

Spinner beamed, “You don’t even need to ask!”

“We’ll treat them as our own.” Gentle Criminal put a hand over his heart, “I promise.”

They walked over to the other Phantom Thieves, and it took Oracle all of two seconds to swipe his phone and summon Prometheus without so much as asking.

Edward froze in his tracks as he and Alphonse watched Prometheus in silent awe.

Nezu cleared his throat as he stood beside Alphonse. Seeing the tiny rat next to a towering seven foot suit of armor was nothing short of comical, in any other circumstance.

“I’m sure you have many questions, so why don’t we sit down and have a talk?” Nezu waved towards the table by the fountain, “I’ll explain everything as much as I can about what’s happening, and in return can you tell me about your world?”

“Anything that could aid us for the final battle.” Urahara stated, “If we are to win, we must all work together to do so.”

Alphonse looked over to Edward, “Brother?”

“Fine.” Edward gave a sour look to Yoruichi, who stuck her nose up at him in smug victory.

“I would like to know everything as well,” Yusuke’s squared fingers landed over the fountain, “This world is so much different compared to where we were.”

“It’s almost staggering.” Queen said as she stared at Nezu, “I never imagined there could be such variety.”

“I got it!” Oracle voice called from Prometheus. A light shone at the bottom and Joker’s phone slowly lowered to him from the beam, “The final world where Panther and Noir are. All yours, Joker!”

He swiped it and smiled at Fox and Queen, “We’ll be back. Stay here and get comfortable.”

Mona jumped up to Joker’s shoulder, “We’ll all be together again really soon, just you wait.”

Tears laced Queen’s eyes, but she had a smile.

“Be careful.” Fox stated.

Nezu led their newest additions to the table while Joker and Mona approached the rift once again. He looked at the app, carefully studying the Keywords to this new world - Target: Lovers & Empress, Door: Gehenna, Core: Demons & Exorcism, Location: School.

“Another school?” Mona whispered, “I hope we don’t terrify any students.”

“There’s no other choice but to go regardless.” Margaret joined them at the foot of the golden stairs, “But if we are to land right in the middle of a school with either demons or exorcists present, it’s best we choose the right Personas to tag along.”

The previous four vanished and were replaced by their brethren.

“Satanael. Beelzebub. Mother Harlot. And... Messiah Picaro.” Joker looked up at Prometheus, then down to Urahara as he returned to the mass of computers set up for him. “Ready?”

Urahara smirked, “All yours, Joker.”

“We shortened the time difference from the data we already gathered,” Oracle stated, “We’re going to do the same to this next world. Still, don’t do anything too crazy!”

Mona snorted, “We’ll try.”

“Disconnecting from Fox and Queen’s world,” Joker watched as the stairs shattered again, the shards floating around in the air like playful specs of gold dust, “And connecting to Noir and Panther’s world... now.”

The fragments pieced themselves back together in a whirlwind of solidified sunlight, and the group ventured back into the void without fear. They didn’t stop to comment on how the road weaved to the left now, how it was a winding path swerving back and forth like the stride of a sand snake. Instead, they kept going forward with a single minded determination to rescue the last of their friends.

The first words were uttered by Mona as they reached the end of the shortest path yet, whispered in disgusted, yet intrigued, horror.

“What the...”

This final Door lay flat on the floor. Or whatever surface it lay upon now. Joker vaguely remembered the great golden gate that swallowed Panther and Noir without mercy, decorated with ornate demons and bulging eyes. It's vast circular mouth bubbled with pitch black liquid similar to tar.

“This won't be pleasant.” Messiah Picaro stated.

“No shit, Sherlock.” Beelzebub snapped.

“So we'll get a bath this time,” Mother Harlot cackled, “So what?”

“Do we just... go in?” Mona asked, hesitant.

Joker grimaced as he stood on the edge of the golden path. One step away from dropping into the demonic gate's maw. Satanael hovered at his side, frowning deeply.

“If anything happens, call us back into the mindscape immediately.”

“Here goes nothing.”

Mona startled on his shoulder, “W-wait, Joker -”

Joker dropped. His Personas and Margaret dove after them as they sank knee deep in unsteady tar, which began to roil like a bubbling pot.

“Are you sure this was a good idea!?” Mona called as the tar swallowed Joker up to his waist. The images of skulls and demons began to crawl up to Joker's chest, howling in rage and agony.

“Joker!” Margaret called, her Compendium snapping open, “I can-”

“No!” Mother Harlot calmed her dragon as it thrashed through the black tar, “We must not harm the gate! We don’t know what could happen!”

“Enough!” Beelzebub waved his massive skull staff under the gate’s giant eyes, his wings buzzing in fury, “On my name as the demon lord of flies, I order you to let us through unscathed!”

The gate froze, eyes trembling under the point of Beelzebub’s staff. It quieted, the demonic shapes within the tar melting away. Joker and Mona were pulled under, and immediately found themselves being spat out on the other side in a pile of people and Personas.

“Ugh...” Mona stood up as the Personas disentangled themselves, “That was way worse than the last Door we went through.”

Joker checked himself over for any lingering ooze, relieved that he found none clinging to him. He studied the dirt and patches of grass at their feet, to the high pine trees rising up like towers on all sides. Joker frowned at the gate set in the ground, his eyes catching on the strange lines carved into the soil all around it.

He ran his hand over one of the lines. The grass and other weeds made it impossible to tell what shape it held, and the darkness of the night sky above didn’t help either.

Joker frowned as he took a moment to think. Urahara’s world had a blanket of power in the air, the next bore electricity and the remnants of an ancient god. This world had a sour curl to it, like a tainted ash falling over the world like snow.

“How is this a school?” Satanael curled his wings closer to himself, “We’re in the middle of a forest.”

“Maybe it’s like U.A., where there’s plenty of space for gardens and forests.” Mona suggested. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, the needles of the pine trees brushing together from a gentle breeze.

“I’m uncertain.” Margaret said as she fixed her hair, “But it’s quiet here. Too quiet.”

“Wait!” Mona’s eyes snapped open, “There’s someone above us!”

“Eins, Swei, Drei!”

A fireball crashed into the ground from above. It missed, but caused a wave of heat and sparks to swirl around them. They looked up as the fiery light of another swathe of flame bathed them in orange, where an odd man sat in an ornate floating throne, one ankle crossed over his knee.

Flamboyant seemed to be in his very nature, from the stark white suit and bright stripes of pink and purple on his pants and top hat. A billowing white and purple cape spilled down from the chair. The fireball grew in size above him, highlighting his pointed ears and the sharp fangs in his wide smile in flickering flashes of orange.

Beelzebub’s wings fluttered, “Wait, you...”

The theatrical man leaned forward and squinted at Beelzebub, “Oh? What do we have here?”

The sound of clinking metal echoed through the shadows of the trees, and a pair of hounds attached to chains burst out with fangs bared. They collided with the still growing fireball suspended over the man, who cried out in shock as the flames were swallowed whole.

A figure landed in front of Joker as it recalled her dogs, a tall demoness in a flowing black dress and cape, the vibrant colors of her six eyes sparkling with the raining embers.

Mona gasped, “Is that you, Hecate!?”

Hecate froze as her head swiveled to study them.

“*Mephisto* .” Another figure floated out of the shadowy trees, the vibrant pink and purple of a giant skull spinning. The shadowy

woman sprouting from its top waved her hand, and the iconic flash of a One Shot Kill collided with the man's floating chair. "What have we warned you about doing something foolish if this gate ever opened again?"

Pieces of the throne broke off and peppered the ground, and the strange man tumbled out. His cape flared as he hung off of one of its arms, legs kicking through the air.

"It was a warning shot, Astarte!" He cried, "A *warning* shot!"

"If it was anything more, then I wouldn't have held back."

Joker and Mona jumped at the familiar voice of Haru. Two pairs of footsteps echoed into the clearing as Panther and Noir stopped on either side of Astarte.

Panther gasped as she grabbed Noir's arm to steady herself.

Noir blinked and looked to the center of the clearing, "Joker? Mona-chan!?"

"Joker!"

Fat tears dropped from Mona's eyes as he all but tackled Panther and Noir, each of them wrapped their arms around Mona as their tears joined his on the ground. Joker was the last to join with warm eyes, holding all three of them in his arms.

After a moment, Noir lay a hand on Joker's face as she studied his new mask, "Is this real? Is this nightmare finally over?"

"Almost." Joker placed one hand on either of their shoulders, "We need you both to come with us."

Panther wiped her eyes, "Where?"

"Back to the world Joker and I were in." Mona stated as Panther snuggled him closer, "Everyone... everyone is there."

“Everyone ?” Noir shakily exhaled.

Joker’s smile grew, “Everyone. Oracle and Skull. Fox and Queen. They’re all waiting to see you again.”

Panther collapsed to her knees.

“Panther!” Joker crouched in front of her, “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes! I’m just...” Another river of tears flowed down her cheeks, but her smile was bright and relieved, “I’m just so happy that everyone is alright! We were so worried!”

“Let’s go!” Noir faced the gate as Joker helped Panther to her feet.

“Wait, wait, WAIT!” Mephisto floated down, using an umbrella that sprouted bat wings to glide effortlessly and land in front of them. It was like a scene straight out of Alice in Wonderland as he tucked the umbrella under his arm, “You can’t leave without me!”

“What!?” Mona screeched, “We don’t even know who you are! You attacked us right when we got here!”

“I meant no harm, I was simply protecting what is mine.” The man smirked before he did a showman’s bow. Joker could see him staring sharply between he and Mona under the shadow of his white top hat, “I am Mephisto Pheles, principal of True Cross Academy!”

“Another school principal?” Mona whispered.

“Another’?” Mephisto asked.

Joker looked at Noir and Panther, “Do you trust him?”

Mephisto sputtered, “I’m right here!”

“Well, he *did* save us when we were first stranded here.” Panther said with a frown. “... Technically.”

“And he took care of us after.” Noir added. Mephisto flinched as she smiled sweetly at him, “As long as he behaves, then yes, we can trust him.”

Joker nodded, then turned to face Mephisto, “We’ve gathered allies across three worlds. Are you able to act as this world’s representative?”

Mephisto smirked, “I would be honored. Panther and Noir informed me about their... unique situation a while ago, but to see it in person at last is exciting!” He clapped his hands together, and something within the glimmer of his eyes seemed familiar to Joker for some reason, “Especially since there’s an alternate version of my brother standing right over there! And the *Messiah*, of all things! I wish the other Exorcists could see him, if only so I could watch them wet themselves!”

Messiah Picaro tilted his head.

Beelzebub scoffed.

Panther stared between Joker’s new costume and the extra Personas with wide eyes, “I have so many questions.”

“We can answer them when we reunite with everyone.” Mona said, “It’ll be easier if we’re all together.”

“I doubt we’ll be able to stop for candy along the way.” Noir glared at Mephisto, “So behave.”

“Well, actually,” Mona interrupted, “One of the people who came over from Oracle and Skull’s world *is* candy store owner, so who knows if he brought any sweets along with him.”

“Why didn’t you just say so!? What are we waiting for!?” Mephisto turned on his heel and, with a brilliant flare of his cape, jumped and dove headfirst into the bubbling gate.

“Wha-” Mona’s jaw dropped, “Is he crazy or something!?”

“Believe it or not, he’s way more eccentric than Fox.” Noir said.
“Especially when it comes to things like sweets and manga.”

“Seriously?” Joker asked. “He wasn’t shocked to find out that there are other worlds out there, or ask us any hard questions before he agreed. Is he really okay?”

Panther face palmed, “It’s a long story.”

“I know what you mean.” Joker stepped up to the ornate gate.

“Is it really okay to just... leave it like this?” Mona asked, “I mean, this is supposed to be a school, right?”

“Oh, Mephisto sealed off this part of the school grounds after the sky turned red.” Noir said, looking to the ground.

“You mean these weird lines everywhere in the dirt?” Joker asked.

“Yeah.” Panther said as she played with one of her pigtails, “And we were allowed to let our Personas guard it in case anything happens.”

“‘Allowed to’?” Mona’s eyes widened, “What do you mean by that?”

Panther opened and closed her mouth, but her expression fractured, barely kept together at the seams.

Noir reached over and grasped Panther’s fist with a shaking hand, “We weren’t... allowed any freedoms when we first came here. It was... difficult. Mephisto rescued us after a time, but we were still heavily restricted until the sky rained red.”

“I’m sorry.” Joker gently placed their entwined hands in both of his own, tightening his grip when he felt them shaking, “You don’t have to relive it if you don’t want to. Let’s not keep the others waiting.”

Panther gave him a thankful smile.

Noir firmly nodded, "Right!"

Hecate and Astarte returned to their respective Persona Users in a flash of blue fire.

"Please watch your step." Margaret stated with a polite bow, "Be sure not to stray off the golden path once we get inside."

"Oh! Who are you?" Noir asked.

"I am Lavenza's eldest sister, and a fellow Attendant to the Velvet Room." Margaret smiled at them, "It's a pleasure to make your acquiescence."

Panther beamed, previous horrors already buried, "Nice to meet you, too!"

Joker chuckled before he stepped into the Door. Unlike last time, he was sent straight through, though it was a little dizzying to *step down* and then be thrown upright a second later. He shook his head to clear it as the others joined him.

"Where are we?" Panther whispered as Joker's Personas circled protectively around them.

"A place where time escapes even my grasp. No wonder I had such trouble." Mephisto stood a few paces ahead, hands on his hips as he studied the void, "I never thought to see something like this in all my years."

"We cannot dawdle." Margaret said, "Staying here too long could prove detrimental to our health, even for one who isn't human."

Mephisto smirked at Margaret, but said nothing as Joker led them through the endless void. Thankfully, this winding path had been the shortest, so it didn't take long to delve back into the world of superheroes.

Darkness painted the USJ's ceiling again, but the facility was busy in spite of it. More boxes of food and other supplies littered the central plaza, with tables and bed rolls around the fountain. Urahara, Yoruichi, La Brava, and Nezu worked around the growing number of computers and tangle of cables that thrummed in tandem to Prometheus's markings. Edward and Alphonse sat at one table with a mountain of books surrounding them, the older brother absorbed in a thick physics textbook.

Teachers and vigilantes guarded various points and turned to them at their entrance, but kept a respectful distance as the newcomers gawked at their surroundings.

All in all, the USJ was looking less like a training facility for students and more like a budding war camp.

"Panther! Noir!" Queen sprinted to them, and the other Phantom Thieves weren't far behind.

"Everyone!" Noir's eyes shone with tears as she and Panther collided in a group hug.

Oracle banished Prometheus to land on them from above. Joker couldn't help but smile as they all traded words of encouragement doused in the shaky voices of friends who had finally found each other again after so long.

Nezu approached bearing a warm smile, "I am glad you were successful, Joker." His eyes turned to their otherworldly guest, "And who might you be?"

Mephisto did another showman's bow as he stared at Nezu, "I am Mephisto Pheles, principal of True Cross Academy for exorcists! I offered to be the liaison for the world were Panther and Noir were entrapped. And you might be?"

"Oh! You may call me Nezu, I am the principal of the top heroics school in all of Japan!"

Mephitso's eyes widened, "Heroics?" He cast a sweeping glance over the costumes of the heroes across the facility, "As in... superheroes?"

"Indeed!"

"A world of *superheroes* !? Fantastic!" An excited sparkle entered Mephisto's eyes as he clapped his hands together, "And I heard one of the people from the other worlds is a candy shop owner?"

"Yes," Nezu waved towards Urahara, "That would be him over there."

"Excuse me while I go make his acquaintance!!"

Joker and Mona stared as Mephisto rushed over so fast he generated his own gust of wind. They couldn't hear what was being said, but Urahara regarded Mephisto with wide eyes at his sudden appearance. The eccentric man spoke quickly and made wild hand gestures before Urahara grinned and produced a comically large lollipop from the sleeve of his haori and offered it to Mephisto.

"My, my." Nezu chuckled as Mephisto accepted it and began chowing down with gusto. Yoruichi rolled her eyes good-naturedly as Urahara pulled out another and ate it in much the same manner, "He is quite the character."

"That's one way to put it." Mona stated, "He didn't even ask us questions, he dove straight back into the portal we came through."

"I think we'll get along like a house on fire!" Nezu cackled, bearing his own terrifying grin.

Joker cleared his throat as he tried not to imagine how many worlds would burn to cinders if Urahara, Mephisto, and Nezu were left alone for too long. "How long were we gone this time?"

"Four hours." Nezu's grin fell, "Edward and Alphonse have settled, for the most part. I believe accepting the truth, coming from a world

like theirs, took some time.”

“So what happens now?” Mona looked to their other friends still wrapped in a group hug, “We have everyone.”

Nezu steepled his paws together, “Ideally, I’d round everyone up and we’ll all pool our knowledge together to formulate a plan! However…”

Joker raised a brow, “What?”

Nezu turned to the other Phantom Thieves holding one another, “I believe you all deserve a few quiet hours together, away from all of this. Let me handle the nitty gritty details of this meeting. Joker, Mona, go and spend some alone time with your friends at the teacher’s dorm.”

“Nezu…” Mona whispered with wide eyes.

“What about Kaito and Eri?”

“They’ve been spending these past few nights at the Shinsou dorm, along with Marshmallow. Everyone else is already here.” Nezu smiled softly at Joker, “You’ll have the dorm all to yourselves. Although, for the time being, it would be wise not to bring anyone out to the grounds. We’ve isolated everything in this facility as to not spread panic and confusion among the student body, and I would like to keep it the same with your friends until we have a solid plan in place for the endgame.”

“... Thank you.” Joker murmured.

“No need to thank me. Take as long as you need!”

Nezu turned on his heel and rushed towards Urahara and the rest of the otherworldly visitors.

Joker closed the rift, the golden stairs dissipating to nothing, as the dark wound stitched itself together. He shoved his phone in his pocket and approached his teammates.

“Everyone, I need you to come with me.”

“Of course, Joker.” Fox bowed his head, “Where to?”

“You’ll see.”

Joker walked towards the massive USJ staircase. He gestured for Lavenza to follow from the waiting Attendants, and banished his Personas back into the mindscape. The heroes and vigilantes respectfully stepped out of their way as Joker held his head high. Joker paused at the top of the stairs and looked out across the facility.

“What is this place?” Panther asked as she looked across the destruction.

“This is a world full of superheroes.” Mona started, “We’re currently at a high school that trains students to be full time heroes. We... this is the place where Joker and I landed after Yaldabaoth banished us.”

“Yeah,” Joker gestured to the dome that would’ve held the Typhoon scenario, tattered and mutilated, “We woke up in there.”

“Really?” Noir’s eyes widened.

“From here, it looks like an amusement park.” Queen frowned, “A destroyed amusement park.”

“It wasn’t always like this.” Mona looked between all of their teammates, “We heard some of you talk about the sky changing. Did you guys get the Red Rain, too?”

“Red Rain?” Skull blinked, “You mean like when the sky turned all red and it rained blood like it did back home? Yep.”

“Us too.” Panther’s gloved hands balled into fists, “We thought it was the end of the world.”

“We were so scared, too.” Oracle whispered as she looked to the ground, “We thought Yaldabaoth was going to attack then and there.”

“We got it too, but it passed without another incident.” Fox stated coolly, his eyes had a hard glint as he looked across the ruin, “But if this place received it as well... why is it so destroyed?”

“From the attack of a single Shadow.”

“What!?” Panther whirled around to Joker, “Shadows attacked here!?”

“They did because Joker regained access to the Metaverse app and we drew them here from our home world.” Mona shivered and crossed his arms, “The leader Shadow said that this was the first world they were trying to subdue before Yaldabaoth could come and finish the job. These Shadows... they were like nothing we ever encountered in the Metaverse before. If the Shadows got this strong, then there’s no doubt in my mind Yaldabaoth must be gaining significant strength, too.”

“Then the situation is worse than we realized.” Noir placed a hand over her heart, “Do we even stand a chance if Yaldabaoth is stronger than he was before?”

“We barely survived the last encounter.” Queen rapidly shook her head, “What if he does something like this a second time?”

“If he separates us again...” Oracle was on the verge of tears as her voice trembled, “I don’t know if I could make it.”

“Of course we’ll win.” Joker stepped into the center of his uncertain comrades, expression set in stony determination, “Do you know why? Look down there.”

Their eyes followed to where Joker pointed in the central plaza. Nezu stood on the rim of the fountain as every other person in the facility gathered around. Heroes and vigilantes from all backgrounds.

Spiritual individuals with centuries of experience. A pair of brothers bearing secret and forbidden knowledge. Another school principal that didn't look all the way human. Three other Attendants who supported Wild Cards of the past, and who support Joker now.

"Because Yaldabaoth is alone. Yaldabaoth thought he could break us, thought he would win by separating us across space and time, but he gravely miscalculated the strength of our hearts." Joker put his balled fist over the center of his chest, "He may have gotten stronger, but we have too. We've gained friends and allies from across these worlds, good people who won't stand by and let Yaldabaoth do as he pleases anymore! As long as we band together, as long as these multiple worlds stand side by side against his tyranny, then Yaldabaoth doesn't even stand a chance."

Fire ignited his soul, the same fire that flooded his eyes with vibrant gold and countless other iridescent colors. His friends were left speechless as the sparks of his Rebellion breathed new life with them. They looked between each other with growing smiles.

"You're right. Of course you are." Fox's grasped the hilt of his katana, "How foolish to be scared when we are all reunited once more!"

"That's our Leader!" Skull cried as he raised his fist. "We're totally going to kick ass!"

Queen cracked her knuckles, "The next time we see Yaldabaoth, he's dead meat."

"Yaldabaoth will feel all of the pain he put us through a hundred fold!" Noir traced the rim of her hat with a delicate finger, "I cannot wait to see him *squirm* in delicious agony."

"He has another thing coming if he thinks he can walk all over us again!" Panther waved her arm in a sharp arc.

"Muehehe..." Oracle grinned in mischief, "And with my support as the Navigator, these new Shadows won't know what hit 'em!"

Mona looked up at his partner in crime, and firmly nodded.

Lavenza smiled with the utmost pride.

“So, where are we going, then?” Skull asked.

“Don’t we need to be down there to help make a plan?” Queen said, looking down at the plaza.

“We’ll join them soon” Joker smiled. He turned to the Velvet Room door waiting by the USJ entrance, “We can use a shortcut to get to where Mona and I have been staying, we could have some coffee and curry and just... reminisce.”

A hand grasped his shoulder, and he looked to see Queen smiling at him, “I think... I would like that.”

“Coffee and curry!!” Oracle raise both arms, “We haven’t had any in so long!!”

“What are we waiting for!?” Skull bore an ear to ear grin.

“It feels... almost nostalgic to think of your coffee after so long.” Fox chuckled, “I cannot wait to savor it again.”

“We all deserve to enjoy Joker’s cooking once more.” Noir stated.

Mona cackled, “Joker’s only gotten better and better! He can make cakes, and brownies, and-”

“You can make sweets now, too!?” Panther grabbed Joker’s wrist and marched towards the Velvet Room door, “No more standing around! Let’s go, everyone!”

Joker bore a bright grin as they all poured into the Velvet Room.

No matter what plan they would concoct and what hard battles lay in the near future... before all of this finally ended for good... he could just be himself with his friends again.

Joker knew in his heart that Yaldabaoth's days were officially numbered.

Word limit? I have no idea what that means anymore.

Urahara, Nezu, and Mephisto walk into a bar. Truth is the bar tender. Edward and Alphonse have chosen Life and decided to run long before they arrived at said bar.

Anywho, now for the important info about the other Thieves stories! I know there is a decent mix of people who don't care much for the other thieves, while there are some that do. So! I'll satisfy both sides by writing the other Thieves journeys in Part 4 of the Thieves Den series to fill in a lot of what they insinuate happened to them in this chapter(Part 1 being this main story, Part 2 being extra bits and one-off side stories, Persona Builds, Arcana list, ect, Part 3 being the Nier Automata AU, and part 4 will be the other Thieves' adventures through the other worlds, once part 1 is done and after a significant break.) Each chapter will be a one and done deal of everything that's happened. I might split them into two chapters depending on how long they get, but seeing that Chapter B of the Automata AU may or may not breech 50k words... I'm not exactly averse to writing such long chapters anymore.

Personally, I think I'm most excited to write out what happens to Oracle and Skull in the Bleach world. Aizen will have Regrets and I'm going to shamelessly have as much Parental/Protective Urahara as much as possible, and nobody can stop me. I didn't realize how much I've missed writing a character like Urahara. Aside from the book or three worth of original content on a flashdrive, I've written a couple of Bleach cross over fics quite some time ago(they've never seen the light of day), and since writing this chapter an ancient Bleach/Okami crossover idea has been ghosting the back of my brain and refuses to leave. (It's quite literally almost 17 years old at this point, and will need to be burned to the ground and rebuilt from the ground up, but something to consider writing after all my currents works on here are done... among many other fic ideas yet)

Last thing, the reason why Mephisto felt somewhat familiar for Joker in that one line is just a reference to how they almost used Mephistopheles as Joker's starter Persona instead of Arsene. The more you know!

Well, enough rambling. I have the Uber Mega Sick Brain and am going to lay down now before this fever gets the best of me.

Next Update: October 28th

Prison Labor

Chapter 96: Prison Labor

“We had to adapt to our new environments or suffer gravely for it.” Morgana swiveled his head around, eyes glistening, “Yaldabaoth might’ve tried to tear us apart, but I think, after everything we’ve all been through, it did the opposite.”

“We’re together again.” Ren stated as an honest smile broke through, “And stronger than we’ve ever been.”

The Phantom Thieves looked between each other with new depths of appreciation and familial love they’ve never had before, not even when they were facing Yaldabaoth together the first time.

We'll get a small taste and hints as to what the other original PT's went through, but like I said with the previous chapter's end note, what the other thieves' imply here will be covered in their full stories... once i get around to them.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The Phantom Thieves piled into Ren’s dorm, having dispelled their costumes the moment the Velvet Room Door closed behind them.

Ryuji, Futaba, Ann, and Haru wore clothes that looked normal for modern day Japanese teenagers. Makoto and Yusuke, however, donned old styled clothes with a surprising amount of comfort and familiarity.

“What the-!?” Ann looked around in astonishment, “Since when could the Velvet Room do that?”

Ren stuck his hands in his pockets. “It’s new.”

Morgana snickered, “Neat trick, huh?”

“Too bad we couldn’t use it in Tokyo.” Yusuke sighed forlornly, “Oh, the train fare it would save.”

“Dude... enough about trains.” Ryuji looked between Makoto and Yusuke, “What’s with those get ups?”

“They certainly are antique.” Haru said with a smile. “You both wear them with such effortless allure!”

“Thank you.” Makoto pulled at the sleeve of her blue military jacket, “They took some getting used to.”

“The world we were in was set in some alternate version of the early 1900’s.” Yusuke looked down on himself, frowning, “We faced a lot of limitations and had to adapt quickly, one example being that we couldn’t charge our phones due of the lack of modern electrical outlets.”

“Huh.” Futaba perched at the end of Ren’s bed like a gargoyle, “The world Ryuji and I were in was set in 2001-ish. Most technology was a bit outdated, but we were able to jury rig stuff to charge ours with Urahara’s help. He’s pretty much a genius, so it was easy.”

“Urahara wasn’t the only genius, you know.” Ryuji ruffled Futaba’s hair, “There were times where you two went off on a science tangent that even Yoruichi and Tessai couldn’t keep up with!”

Futaba pushed up her glasses and smiled.

“Oh,” Haru looked down at the floor, her hands twisting together, “Our phones were confiscated for quite some time, but the world we were in was modern.”

“But we got them back!” Ann said with a tight smile, “... Eventually.”

“Does everyone have their phones on them?” Ren asked.

“Of course.” Yusuke reached into his breast pocket and pulled his out, “Makoto and I were never without them, just in case.”

“We can let our phones charge in here while we talk.” Ren dug around in his desk, giving the others a moment to really look around his room.

“So this is where you two stayed?” Haru’s eyes twinkled at the Phantom Thief banner hanging over Ren’s desk, “It’s smaller than the attic in Leblanc, but it’s quite charming!”

“This is our most recent place, out of three.” Morgana said as Futaba scooped him up and cradled him to her chest, “We started at an internet cafe and then we had to move to a bar’s attic.”

“Hey!” Ryuji grinned as he rushed over to Ren’s side, grabbing the Seth figurine, “Dude, that’s so cool!”

“Why are there figurines of your Personas?” Makoto asked, eyes wide. “... Or a banner with our logo on it?”

“Some of my Personas managed to get into the spotlight with the public.” Ren smiled at the Arsene figurine, “I bought this one because Arsene was embarrassed about it.”

“How did that happen?” Makoto asked with a hint of resignation.

“W-well,” Morgana sputtered, “The owner of the internet cafe was being harassed by a really bad hero! To save him, and the other people under his thumbs, well... it was public. Our original idea was to get our names out there so you guys would be able to find us if you ever found a way here, and our reputation just took off from there.”

“People needed help, and who were we to ignore them?” Ren kept his eyes down in the desk drawers.

Where were those darn chargers?

Yusuke chuckled fondly, “It wouldn’t be our Leader without his iconic heart of gold.”

“Right?” Ann’s smile was warm as she approached the board where dozens of photos hung, “Oh, most of those people in these pictures were at that other facility! And...” Ann gasped at a particular photo, “Who’s this cutie?”

The others leaned in to get a good look.

“She’s adorable!” Futaba cried.

“That’s Eri!” Morgana beamed.

“Eri.” Futaba grinned, “Do we have a little sister, Ren!?”

“We do.” Ren paused in his digging to smile at the photo, “She’s the reason why my costume is different, the reason why I can summon so many Personas at once. She’s why the Velvet Room came back to me.”

The others exchanged glances.

“There was a time where Ren lost his powers. Eri...” Morgana stared at Eri’s photo with a sad smile.

“Needed help, and saving her reawakened my powers.”

“Like... like the full on rip-off-your-mask-in-a-spray-of-blood Awakening?” Ryuji uttered in horror, which was shared by everyone except Morgana.

Ren nodded.

“So that’s how your costume is different.” Yusuke said with a slight tilt of his head, “It all makes sense now.”

“I was there to see it.” Morgana sighed, “And so was Eri, naturally.”

Futaba adjusted her glasses, “You really went through a lot here, huh...”

Ren shrugged, “Didn’t we all?”

“I guess, but Futaba and I didn’t lose our powers!” Ryuji set the Seth figurine down and bumped shoulders with Ren. “I can’t even imagine what it would’ve been like, going through that other world without Prometheus and Seiten Taisei!”

“We weren’t really allowed to use ours for a long time,” Haru said gently, “But our Personas’ voices were always there to encourage us in times of hardship.”

Ann huffed, “They couldn’t take our Personas away no matter how hard they tried.”

“We never lost ours either,” Makoto placed a hand over her chest, “I’m sorry you went through that, Ren.”

“It’s fine, really.” Ren cleared his throat before he spoke next, “I would introduce you to Eri and the students here, but the principal thinks it’s a good idea to keep this all quiet for the time being.”

“Oh, I don’t mind.” Futaba stated as she played with Morgana’s paws.

“Agreed.” Yusuke crossed his arms as he looked between his teammates with something indiscernible in his eyes, “I hope this doesn’t make me sound selfish, but I would prefer it to be just us for a while.”

Haru nodded, “Everything else can wait.”

Makoto's face softened, "We've more than earned the right to be a little selfish, after everything."

"Damn straight." Ryuji muttered.

"Language, Ryuji." Makoto chastised with *that* gleam to her eye.

"S-sorry..."

Futaba and the others chuckled.

Ren finally found the extra phone chargers at the bottom of the drawer.

... He meant to organize it better, but he hadn't had the time lately.

"Let's plug in our phones, then I can at least show you guys to the kitchen."

"Curry!!" Futaba shot up from the bed, Morgana crying out as she lifted both arms with him still in her grasp.

Their gathered phones were left on his desk, the cords entwining one another in a messy tangle, but they rushed out of Ren's room at the promise of curry made by their Leader. He led them through the common room, their eyes scanning for exits and entrances, some landing on the names of this world's Phantom Thieves tacked onto other dorm rooms.

Ren went behind the counter when they reached the kitchen, opening cupboards for ingredients and cookware.

"Take a seat," He said with a smirk, "It shouldn't take long."

Ryuji crashed into the chair of the table closest to the counter, grinning wide, "Sweet!"

"Sooo, about these sweets you promised..." Ann said as she sank into the chair next to Ryuji.

Ren thought for a moment, “I suppose I can make a strawberry shortcake.”

“Yay!” Ann cheered.

“Coffee, curry, and cake.” Haru sat primly across from Ann, “It’ll be quite the meal!”

“Just don’t push yourself too hard.” Makoto took the chair across from Ryuji, Futaba and Yusuke sat beside Haru.

“Oh, this is nothing.” Ren cracked his knuckles and began his work, starting with a round of coffee. “Trust me.”

“If you’re sure...” Yusuke said.

Morgana flicked his tail, “Ren took a job at a small cafe that got crazy popular.” He stated with a smirk, “So when he says it’s nothing...”

“I really mean it.” Ren took the goose-neck kettle off the heat once it was at the right temperature, “At its peak, we would get hundreds of people coming and going during the lunch and morning rush, and naturally, all with different orders at once. So making a little extra food when it’s just us isn’t a big deal.”

Futaba’s eyes bugged out, “Wow! Just wait until Sojiro hears about this!”

Ren smiled, worn and proud at once, “... Yeah.”

He poured the steaming hot coffee into mugs and handed them out. Everyone held the warm mugs in their hands and took a sip. Everyone. Ren, after all of this time and excitement, nearly forgot that Ryuji never really liked coffee, but...

He watched his best friend take a drink without a single protest.

“Ah, the depth of flavor is most impressive.” Haru said with a serene smile, “You’ve improved from the last time we had it.”

"It's delicious. As always." Yusuke took another drink.

"Um..." Ann blinked rapidly at Ryuji as he took his next drink, "Ryuji?"

"Hmm?" Ryuji looked around the table, "What? Why's everyone starin' at me?"

"I thought you wouldn't want coffee." Makoto said.

"Sorry." Ren opened a cupboard with Shuichi's endless stash of soda. Ren was sure he wouldn't mind, "I can get you something else."

"Nah, it's fine."

Ren paused, and wasn't the only one to gawk at Ryuji.

"Are you sure you're feeling well?" Ann placed a hand over Ryuji's forehead, "You don't have a fever."

"Wha- I'm fine!" Ryuji groaned, "It's just..."

"What is it?" Haru whispered.

Ryuji stared into his half-empty mug, lips forming a tight frown, "You all know how my mom and I never really had much money after my dad left, but we still had a home to return to. Food to eat. Warm beds at night. When Oracle and I were kicked to that other world..."

Futaba brought her knees to her chest and hugged them tight, her hands grasping her pants with white knuckles.

"We were homeless. Living off scraps we could find in the trash, hiding out in a drafty warehouse that was too cold at night to be healthy. I tried to look for a job, but with my looks... people didn't take kindly to me." Ryuji shook his head with a scowl, "I felt so useless because Futaba was suffering so much. Urahara saved our asses by taking us in when he did."

“Ryuji...” Makoto placed a hand over his.

His scowl melted into a weak smile, “It’s okay. I learned not to be so picky about everything, to really appreciate the little things, you know?” He took another sip of coffee and his sunny grin returned in full, “Like being able to drink our Leader’s coffee!”

“Makoto and I were in much the same situation, at first.” Yusuke sighed, “We really do take advantage of what we have, and don’t appreciate its true value until it’s gone for good.”

“Yeah.” Ann grimaced at Haru, who lowered her head, “We weren’t in the best situation, either.”

Ren firmly nodded.

“Could it be that we’ve all grown in such a way?” Haru asked solemnly.

“I think we’ve all changed.” Futaba pet Morgana, who had taken to sitting on the table. “But that’s a given.”

“We had to adapt to our new environments or suffer gravely for it.” Morgana swiveled his head around, eyes glistening, “Yaldabaoth might’ve tried to tear us apart, but I think, after everything we’ve all been through, it did the opposite.”

“We’re together again.” Ren stated as an honest smile broke through, “And stronger than we’ve ever been.”

The Phantom Thieves looked between each other with new depths of appreciation and familial love they’ve never had before, not even when they were facing Yaldabaoth together the first time.

Lighter banter bounced around the kitchen as Ren prepared the batter for the cake, and in smaller layers so it would cook and cool faster. He slid the three layers into the oven to begin work on the

curry, all the while they shared the highlights of their journeys over a few rounds of coffee.

Both the good...

“-They were almost on to us, but then Yusuke distracted Edward and Alphonse by a long winded speech about the true majesty of lobsters-”

“-That really old dorm had a cute demon for a chef! He made so many cakes and cookies and other things! I think he really liked me because he’d leave extra sweets for me after dinner-”

“-Oh man, Ichigo could never live it down! From then on, he treated Futaba like one of his own sisters! And then one time me an’ Rukia pulled a prank on Jinta because he was bein’ mean to Ururu again-”

“-And then WHAM! All the heroes and police officers were covered head to toe in glitter while Joker and I were safe miles away! Aizawa and Tsukauchi are still cagey around glitter, and Nezu has that stuffed fish in his office-”

And the bad...

“-They tried everything to ‘rid us of our demonic possession’ in the days we were locked down in that dungeon. Cold buckets of holy water, reading the same scriptures over and over, crosses and prayer beads. The branding never worked since Ann was immune to the heat and she secretly healed me every time. But oh the frustration on their faces from failure after failure was *delicious* -”

“-There was so much blood in that phone booth. I’ve never seen such a horrid sight. If it wasn’t for Makoto’s quick thinking, then I don’t know what would’ve happened-”

“-After we saw that poor little girl’s soul getting eaten by that Hollow, I... I just shut down for a while. If it wasn’t for Ryuji taking care of me, I don’t think I would’ve made it-”

“-Before I could do anything to stop Sraosha, All For One was killed and the fractures in my soul caused enough damage to where I... I didn't survive my wounds. If it wasn't for Morgana and Mr. Compress, I wouldn't be standing here-”

Tears. Laughter. Unconditional support and dauntless camaraderie. Not one of the Phantom Thieves judged the others for what they had to do to survive, what unfair trials and tribulations had been carved into their very beings for the sake of scraping through one more day in hopes of reuniting with their friends. What bonds and tiny shreds of happiness were sprinkled in between. How their experiences in these other worlds would shape them forever more.

And at the end of it all lay a family of teenagers who cherished one another. A sacred bond so powerful, no flames or steel or otherworldly powers could ever hope to sever them. Stronger than any Arcana Ren had ever forged, he felt his power flow into them as easy as theirs flowed back to him.

They had settled by the time Ren scooped the curry over heaping mounds of rice, the cake frosted and cut into even slices. Everyone stood to collect their plates, but Ryuji passed by his to give Ren a big bear hug.

“What was that for?” Ren asked as the others paused to watch.

Ryuji's eyes were wet, and he cleared his throat while blinking rapidly, “You know, just ‘cause.”

“I think what he's trying to say is... we're glad you're still with us.” Makoto asked gently. “Are you alright, Ren?”

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“You actually died.” Yusuke whispered in horror. “Not a falsified death like we staged that day in November.”

“You saw Akechi, too.” Haru grimaced, “That must’ve been quite a shock.”

“We all saw the aftermath of the interrogation, e-even if... if you tried to hide your injuries.” Futaba fidgeted with her fingers, “Like when we were planning on infiltrating Shido’s Palace in Leblanc, you always had your back to the wall and kept watching the door.”

“How you rubbed your head occasionally,” Anger heated Yusuke soft voice, “In the spot where that vile interrogator ground his heel on your temple.”

“The fact that we couldn’t touch you for a while or come up from behind without you jumping.” Ann stated, worry knotting her brow.

Ren’s stomach sank, “Oh...”

“We’re not putting you down or anything!” Makoto stated, waving her hands, “It’s just... we’ve seen what it did to you, even if you didn’t have to say it. And if this instance was *worse*...”

“It wasn’t easy.” Morgana stated.

“But I did get better, and I’m fine now. Really. Better than before, actually, so you guys don’t need to worry about me.” Ren looked down at the plates of food and then smiled at his friends, “So let’s eat and enjoy each other’s company, okay?”

Maybe it was the surety in his voice, or the strength within his posture which revealed the truth of his words that eased the other Phantom Thieves’ worries. They all exchanged glances before they stared at him again.

“Alright then.” Futaba, the little gremlin herself, threw him a lifeline, “Enough talk! I demand curry!!”

Ren sent her a thankful look as the rest snatched up their plates.

Futaba smirked as she dragged another chair for Ren at the head of the table, all sitting so close together that their elbows and plates of cake and curry touched.

Ryuji didn't wait to shove an entire spoonful of curry into his mouth, "Fbubfbjmph!"

"Care to repeat that?" Haru said, blinking several times.

"Ryuji, don't talk with your mouth full." Makoto said with a shake of her head.

Ryuji swallowed loudly, "Sorry! It's just so damn good! Way better than I remember it!"

"Yeah!" Ann beamed as she put her curry spoon down and ate a forkful of cake, "Ren!! You could totally be a professional chef at this rate! Could I hire you to be my personal cook after we graduate?"

"You sure that's a good idea?" Ryuji asked, "If you ate too much good food-"

Ann glared at him and expertly twirled her fork around her fingers, "Don't you dare finish that sentence, mister!"

Ryuji held up his hands in surrender.

Futaba sniffled.

"Futaba, are you okay?" Ann whispered. "Were we being too loud?"

"N-no, you're fine." Futaba wiped her eyes with a napkin, "I just thought I'd never get to taste Ren's curry ever again. This curry tastes like home."

Yusuke put down his spoon on his empty plate. *How* Yusuke inhaled so much food in so little time, without making a mess of himself, left Ren impressed.

“It’s strange...” Yusuke thoughtfully frowned at the stray bits of sauce on his plate, “Looking back now, it feels like everything went so fast, but I remember each day going so agonizingly slow that it was almost maddening.”

“Funny how reminiscing makes it seem like that.” Haru elegantly stabbed the glistening strawberry on her slice of cake with her fork, looking at it as if imagining it were Yaldabaoth’s head on a pike instead, “At least we know who is to blame, and can plan our vengeance accordingly. The more painful and drawn out Yaldabaoth’s demise is, the sweeter the final battle will be.”

She popped the strawberry in her mouth and chewed with the finesse of a noblewoman.

Ryuji gaped, “Yeah. Haru still scares the shit outta me.”

Haru giggled sweetly.

Makoto stacked her empty plates together and folded her hands on the table, “We *still* need to plan out the last battle of our journey.”

“... Yeah.” Morgana looked around the table, his brow knitted and head held high, “We should return to the USJ when we’re done here. We have our work cut out for us.”

Ren looked at the clock and sighed. Somehow, three hours had passed within the span of five minutes.

The next stretch of time was spent cleaning. Everyone was quiet aside from the sound of clinking plates and silverware, but it was a comfortable sort of silence where everyone basked in the presence of the others. No conversation was needed when they could finally smile or even make eye contact with each other again. A brush of shoulder against shoulder. A touch of the arm. Hell, just hearing Yusuke breathe normally as he and Ren finished up the dishes could be counted as something sacred.

They returned to Ren's room once the kitchen was spotless.

"It looks like everyone's phones are done charging." Ren said as he went to his desk.

Yusuke unplugged his and turned it on, uncertainty in his eyes, "Ah, it's been so long since this screen lit up."

Makoto chuckled at hers, "I forgot my wallpaper was set to a buchimaru picture."

"How cute!" Ann said.

"Hey..." Everyone looked to Futaba as the light from her phone lit up her glasses, "Could I try something? I'll need your phone, Ren."

Ren handed it over, "What do you want to do?"

Futaba donned her Metaverse Outfit in a flash of blue flame. Several holographic screens appeared around her and she got to work typing, a grin slowly working its way on her face. Symbols and hieroglyphics danced around Ren's phone.

"Did anyone else have server errors when we tried to text each other? And you know, remember how our phones didn't have the Metaverse app anymore?"

Haru looked at her phone, then to Oracle, "... Yes?"

"Muehehehe..." Oracle hit a certain key with finality, "Should be fixed now! I mean, as long as we are in the same world for the texting to work, at least."

Ren caught his phone as Oracle tossed it to him, the others gasping as their phones went crazy.

Not only did Ren's previous messages finally reach his comrades without the server connection error, Ren's phone flooded with old messages that his friends sent, too.

[Yusuke]

Makoto and I are unharmed for the most part, but we are weakened and in a strange place. Can anyone reach us?

...

It's been nearly three days since Makoto and I arrived, and we've not received a single word from anyone yet... Please be alright, everyone. I don't know what I would do if we could never see each other again...

[Makoto]

Please, can anyone respond? If you need help, let us know!

Hello?

...

Our phones are almost dead, so if anyone makes it here and we don't respond... that's why. Please, look for us. We'll do our best to stay here in Amestris for as long as possible.

[Ann]

Hello? Is anyone there?

I don't feel right, and I can barely hear Hecate's voice! Noir says she feels the same.

...

We finally got our phones back after so long, but no new messages?

Please be okay. We'll wait forever to be back with everyone, if we don't find a way to you all first!

[Haru]

Panther and I are alright, for the moment, but we're disoriented and weak.

Can anyone answer, just to let us know you're okay?

Just to let us know you're there...?

...

It took much time to see our phones again. When we first came here, we ventured from the forest and onto a school, but we were surrounded in an instant. They attacked when we tried to explain our situation, and our Personas were too weak to be summoned for long. The blue flames scared them and they... well, there are no proper words in high society to describe what they did.

The fact that we've received no new messages from anyone is no doubt concerning, but we'll persevere the best as we are able. My hope is that the day we see each other again is the day Yaldabaoth shivers in fear.

[Ryuji]

Hey, is everyone okay!? I woke up and found Futaba passed out by me, but nobody else is around

Anyone??

Hello?

...

Yo, Futaba has tried and tried again, but even with Prometheus our message app isn't sending to the rest of you. We'll find a way back, even if I have to go out and kick somebody's ass!

...

Nobody's responding

Just hang in there, 'kay?

[Futaba]

I can't take the silence.

All comms are too quiet...

I'm terrified. Ryuji's scared too, but he tries to hide it.

But I... I'll try my best to be strong like him and Ren!

...

No matter what Urahara or I do, nothing works.

But you know what? We'll keep trying if that means we get to see everyone again! If it means getting home and putting Yaldabaoth in his place, then I'll keep moving forward no matter what!

That's what our Leader would say, right?

Hang in there, everyone!

“You guys...” Haru placed her hand over her mouth.

Ann’s hands trembled as she scrolled through all the messages.

Yusuke closed his eyes and held his phone to his chest, “To think we were all trying to reach out to each other. It’s... as comforting as it is heartbreaking.”

“Yaldabaoth will pay for this.” Makoto spat with genuine venom as she stared at the messages.

“Damn straight!”

“Ryuji, language.”

Ryuji’s smirk was like the tip of Ren’s knife, “Not sorry this time, Queen.” He exited the messaging app and raised a brow at the glitched Metaverse App, “Why’s it all funky lookin’?”

“We don’t know.” Morgana clung to Ren’s shoulder to read all the messages, too, “It probably has to do with all these different worlds getting messed up.”

Oracle cast away her screens, her eyes unreadable behind her goggles, “Most likely.”

“Is everyone ready to go back?” Ren asked as he tucked his phone away.

“... Yeah.” Ann’s expression hardened like steel.

“I am too.” Haru said with a serene nod.

“Let us go.” Yusuke’s eyes were sharp, “The plan for Yaldabaoth’s punishment awaits!”

Makoto firmly nodded.

Ren donned his Metaverse Outfit, the others joining in a swathe of vibrant blue flames. Joker turned to his closet, which had been left open, and ventured into the Velvet Room.

Lavenza curtsied at their entrance, and touched the exit when they were all inside. They stepped into the USJ. Lavenza followed them as they descended the staircase to the central plaza.

Books, notes, roughly drawn maps, and whiteboards with equations took over the meeting.

The heroes cleared space for them, and Nezu and the people of the other worlds perked up.

“How’s it going?” Joker asked as he stood at the table, with the Thieves and Lavenza behind him.

“Well, for the most part.” Nezu stated. “We’ve exchanged a plethora of useful information!”

“But we’ve come across a bit of a snag.” Urahara said as he fanned himself, playfully smiling even as his serious eyes glinted from the shadow of his hat.

“What’s wrong?” Mona looked across the tense table.

“We’ve shared all manner of strengths and weaknesses across our worlds,” Mephisto theatrically waved his hands to the gathered collection spread everywhere, “But we always come back to *one* thing.”

“*Where* to hold the final battle itself.” Nezu threaded his paws together.

“We are *not* dragging it to Amestris.” Edward snapped, “Too many innocent people would get hurt.”

“I agree with my brother.” Alphonse said with a lowered head, “I’m sorry we can’t be of help in this instance.”

“Urahara’s shop is in the middle of a busy town too, you know.” Yoruichi stated as her tail curled around her legs. “And our training basement is too small for such a large scale battle.”

“I wouldn’t want anything like this to be around my normal students.” Mephisto’s eyes were narrowed, “Bringing the fight to a *school* wouldn’t be ideal.”

“I agree.” Nezu deeply sighed, “I could, theoretically, send all the students home and have this final battle on the school grounds of U.A. However, if the destruction got out of hand and leeched into the city, then there would be no end of trouble.”

“Couldn’t we just go to our world and fight there?” Panther asked, “I thought that’s what we’d do anyway!”

Urahara covered his face with his fan, his eyes sharpened in deep thought. Yoruichi stared at the man, her ear flicking.

“We debated on it.” Edward muttered.

“But that wouldn’t be a wise move, either.” Nezu peered into Joker’s eyes, “Not only would we have the disadvantage of fighting Yaldabaoth on home territory, but the possibility of him taking your world’s inhabitants hostage would be high as well.”

“Especially if he’s backed in a corner.” Joker clutched his chin. “It’s possible that Yaldabaoth reconnected himself to the cognition of the masses again, where he could heal himself endlessly. With his new army of Shadows, it may be way more difficult to cut him off.”

“And it’s not like we *know* where the portal home would lead us.” Mona whispered, “It could drop us right in front of him while he’s surrounded by Shadows! We’d really lose the upper hand, then.”

“Especially if Yaldabaoth still thinks that Joker is out of the game.” Nezu added.

“So, what?” Skull scowled, “You’re sayin’ none of you want to fight with us?”

“No, it’s not that!” Alphonse waved his hands.

“It’s just a matter of choosing the right battle field!” Mephisto stated, “None of us want to risk the overall well-being of our worlds or the people that live there, but if we do *nothing*, then all of our worlds will be lost. It’s really a conundrum!”

Urahara’s fan snapping shut drew everyone’s attention. “I have an idea.”

“Oh?” Nezu’s eyes sparkled.

Urahara stood, looking between Joker and all of the other worlds’ inhabitants as he tapped his fan on his chin. “We have a world where people can create anything they desire, so long as the exchange of materials is equivalent. I have a demon king who rules over time right in front of me, sitting in a world of untold superpowers. I myself have experience with traversing the realms between the living and the dead.”

Urahara slowly circled the table, his steps loud in the rapt silence.

“I’ve gathered heaps of data on everything we’ve accomplished here so far.” He looked over to the collection of Oracle’s computers by the rift, “Say I use it to create a temporary world with all of these combined ingredients. A world suspended in space and time, one that will dissipate when the final battle is over and everyone is returned to their home worlds, leaving no trace whatsoever.”

“You can *do* that!?” Panther cried.

Urahara turned to Joker, grinning, “I believe it’s possible to accomplish. I just need a few more bits of data before I can get to work.”

“What else do you need?” Joker asked, eyes wide.

“Data on *your soul*, as the World Arcana and commander of this little world hopping group. Data on the shiny new Metaverse app, and of the place between Dreams and Reality, Mind and Matter.” He cast his gaze on the Attendants as they stiffened, “With all of this data combined, and with Oracle’s help through Prometheus, there’s nothing we can’t do. When it’s complete, we can drag Yaldabaoth there and end him for good.”

“He’d be caught off guard *and* isolated from the masses in our world.” Joker murmured. “It’d give us many advantages we wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Nezu’s beady eyes stared at the table in contemplation, “We wouldn’t have to worry about collateral damage, both to our own worlds and to the space between worlds.”

“And it would give the element of surprise!” Mephisto grinned wide, his fangs glinting deviously, “Oh, I do like surprises!”

“Okay, and what are the rest of us supposed to do?” Edward raised a brow at Urahara, “I don’t like waiting around, doing nothing.”

Joker pursed his lips as he glanced at his original teammates, then the liaisons from the other worlds. He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around his family and never let go again, but if he did that, then they could all suffer greatly.

“Remember our talk with Fusions.” Kohryu whispered, *“This is just another necessary step.”*

“To win this war, no matter what.” Joker replied.

Kurosaki’s willingness to aid them immediately crossed his mind. If they could get others, people from every world to help fight...

“I know that look.” Queen put a hand on Joker’s arm, “What are you thinking?”

“This might be the largest threat that any of our worlds have faced.” Joker stated as he squared his shoulders as he pointedly looked to the destruction around the facility, “The attack here was just a small *fraction* of the Shadows Yaldabaoth has under his control, plus Yaldabaoth himself.”

Joker turned to fully face his original teammates, his expression stern to hide his nerves.

“We need more allies than just those gathered here. We’ll stand the greatest chance at ending this once and for all if we gather more people from all of these worlds.”

Noir inhaled sharply, her face paling under her mask, “Wait, are you saying we have to go back to the worlds where we were trapped?”

“Huh!? But we just got back together!” Skull shouted.

“I know.” Joker put a sturdy hand on Noir’s shoulder, “But it won’t be forever. We *need* the help.”

“If we’re separating willingly, just for a little while to gather much needed aid...” Queen hardened her resolve as she looked her teammates in the eye, “There’s no other choice.”

“I doubt many would believe the stories if we weren’t there to corroborate with them.” Fox nodded dutifully.

Panther took a breath to steady herself, “Okay. The next question is how will they have any chance against Shadows?”

“I’ll make gear from my Personas. Weapons, armor, accessories to give everyone a Persona’s spells or physical abilities, but we’ll need a lot of it.” Joker said.

“You and Mona told us about these items Joker, but will they really be enough?” Queen asked, eyes wide.

“Oh, you’re in for a treat!” Mr. Compress stepped up and offered his ice lily to Panther like a gentleman offering a present to a lady, “Have you ever dreamed of casting ice magic, my dear?”

Panther looked at Joker, who nodded. She took a breath and took the sparkling lily, twisting the stem between her fingers. “I feel... something. Like... like the first time I cast dia or agi, only it’s freezing!”

Mona snickered, “Focus your magic through the lily and see what happens!”

Panther stepped away and, under everyone’s watchful gazes, threw her hand out towards the flooded zone. A bite of ice nipped the air as Panther cast her spell, and the artificial lake became covered in a frigid blast that turned normal water into a thick sheet of ice.

Fox made a strangled noise, eyes nearly popping out of his skull, “What!? How can- Could any of us cast any type of magic with these items?”

Hawks smirked as he took off his ring and held it out, “See for yourself.”

Fox frowned as he gently took the charred ring, but slipped it on with another encouraging nod from Joker. He stepped next to Panther and closed his eyes in concentration, and with a flourish of his arm like the stroke of a brush, fire danced between his fingers. A licking wall of fire erased the creeping frost on the shoreline, and the deep *crack* of a frozen lake resounded across the USJ. When the heat cleared, Fox and Panther gaped at the line of melting ice. They stared at one another before turning back to Joker in shock.

Joker smirked, “I told you.”

“This opens up so many possibilities for all of us.” Queen whispered.
“So I could cast psy magic?”

“And I could use nuclear abilities?” Noir mused.

“I could *heal* without using items!?” Skull cried.

“All of that, and more.” Joker stated, “Many of these accessories have physical attacks, debuffs, status ailments, and passive abilities, too.”

“Is this really necessary?” Edward leaned forward and peered into Joker with blazing golden eyes, “Are the individual powers of these worlds really not good enough against Shadows?”

“It’s not that we doubt anyone’s capabilities or the powers each world has.” Mona sighed, “From our experience, nothing has been able to hurt Shadows aside from our Personas, or in the case of Shadows attacking the USJ, gear *made* from Personas. We simply can’t risk anyone being helpless here, no matter what world they come from or what their powers are.”

Edward grimaced, but hesitantly nodded.

Joker looked at Nezu.

“I predicted this might be one of the many outcomes of this meeting,” He waved a paw towards the base of the fountain, where bags of Black Items awaited, “I had miss Yaoyorozu make them for you over the past few days, while you were off collecting your teammates.”

“Everyone,” Countless stares landed on Joker as looked between the other worlds’ liaisons and the original Phantom Thieves, “Talk amongst yourselves. Write down who would be trustworthy enough to bring to the final battle, and what weapons, armor, or magical accessories would best suit them, and I’ll do my best to create the right gear before we split up.”

“And while you’re off making gear for everyone, we can teach them how to use these new powers, so that they won’t be so blind when they bring them to other worlds.” Mr. Compress stated.

Joker nodded, and everyone at the table separated.

Queen and Fox whispered with Edward and Alphonse by the tree line, Queen writing furiously with pen and paper. Spinner and Mr. Compress waited a small distance away to teach them whenever they were ready.

Panther and Noir spoke with Mephisto by the stairs as the demon stuck his tongue from the corner of his mouth and scribbled wildly on a page. Ryukyu and Hawks exchanged glances, but kept a respectful distance.

Yoruichi hopped on Skull’s shoulder as he leaned against the fountain, the two of them chatting as Skull nodded and jotted down ideas. Gentle Criminal, La Brava, and Aizawa leaned against the opposite side of the fountain to wait.

Mona stayed with Nezu and the rest of the heroes, but they were ready to step in in case someone needed help.

Urahara gestured for Joker and Oracle to follow him.

“This won’t hurt, right?” Joker asked.

“Nope!” Urahara grinned and batted his fan towards Joker, “At least, it shouldn’t. I just need a quick scan of your soul, that’s all! A few tiny little lights from my hands and it’ll be all over.”

“Right...”

“Don’t worry.” Oracle smirked, “I’ll make sure it’s quick and painless! Or *else* .”

“Oracle can be scary when she wants to be. I swear she learned that from Yoruichi.”

Joker raised an amused brow, "I never had any doubts." He looked over his shoulder to Panther, Noir, and Queen, "Any of the lady Thieves can be terrifying."

"Especially Noir!" Oracle chirped, "You *really* don't want to get one her bad side, Hat an' Clogs! She'll eviscerate you with a peaceful smile on her face."

Urahara huffed, "Women are terrifying..."

Yoruichi swiveled her head towards Urahara, "What was that, Kisuke?"

"Nothing!"

Yoruichi narrowed her golden eyes, "Futaba-chan, you know what to do if he misbehaves."

"Muehehe..."

Urahara's fan disappeared into his sleeve, "Let's get started *before* Yoruichi does anything mean!"

"I heard that!" Yoruichi said with a sharp smirk. "Don't make me come over there!"

Skull had a wide grin and watched, seemingly used to it.

Joker stood between the computer screens as Urahara flinched, his cheerful smile a bit too wide. Oracle's computers hummed with Prometheus and Urahara held out both palms towards Joker, glowing with a soft light. Joker felt a deep *hum* sink into his body.

Urahara's playful nature dropped like a stone and settled on thinly veiled concern, his fingers twitching as he took half a step closer.

"What's wrong?" Joker asked as his chest tightened.

“Your soul...” Urahara slowly circled Joker, glowing hands moving to scan different parts of Joker’s body, “It’s taken a lot of damage, and there’s so much scarring that I’m surprised you’re even still alive. How did you survive your soul fracturing like this?”

“I... technically didn’t.” Joker stuck his hands in his pockets as he looked towards Mona, “Mona had to bring me back when my body was in a morgue, if that’s any clue.”

Prometheus’ glowing markings darkened as the black flames around him curled in shame.

“I see.” Urahara gave him a thin smile that didn’t feel all that reassuring, “In my experience, a normal plus soul can’t return to its original physical body once they die. It’s only by luck that you weren’t completely and irreversibly destroyed. I don’t think even I could do anything to bring you back if such a thing happened.”

“That’s our Leader.” Oracle’s voice was subdued, “Always beating the odds no matter how slim the chances are.”

Urahara gave Joker a sharp, calculating look.

“And... how is it now?” Joker asked. “My soul?”

Urahara completed his first circle around Joker, “Mostly stable, for the moment, but there is still some lingering damage. If anything, your will to survive significantly strengthened your soul, almost like a broken bone being stronger after it repairs itself.”

Joker nodded.

“But I wonder...”

“What?”

Urahara looked up at Prometheus, to the computers, then to the heroes and their various Persona Gear, “The different magics and powers that define our worlds each have their strengths and

weaknesses, but when we combine such strengths and cover for each other's weaknesses, then we can accomplish something neither world has seen before." Urahara slowly turned his gaze back to Joker, the corners of his lips tugged in a thoughtful frown, "I might not be as good at healing kido as my friend Tessai, but I'm by no means unskilled. With your permission, I'd like to try and fully heal your soul."

Joker gaped at him, then looked up at Prometheus.

"You can trust him." Oracle's voice was firm, "I wouldn't let him come along otherwise!"

Joker swallowed, but he nodded at Urahara. "The least we can do is try."

The glow on Urahara's hands intensified and gained a deeper green color, and Joker stiffened as trickles of warmth seeped bone deep, almost like settling into a hot bath after a long, hard day. It filled the tiny cracks and infinitesimal fissures left over from reforging his contract with Satanael, and Joker found himself slumping in *relief*. It whisked away ancient pains buried so deep that he didn't even know they *existed* until Joker could suddenly breathe better.

Felt... freer.

Like some unknowable weight strangling him since the beginning being lifted from his shoulders at last.

"*This is...*" Satanael struggled for words when the mindscape softened, "*I never even realized...*"

"*How could we, when we never knew better in the first place?*" Kohryu offered.

Urahara circled him a second time, studying Joker intently from the shadow of his hat, "How is that?"

“Better.” Joker flexed his hands and rolled his shoulder, “Much better. Thank you.”

Urahara smiled, a *genuine* one this time, and continued his work.

Mona and the others did their best to support him in the disastrous aftermath of Kamino, but having an expert on the nature of souls like Urahara would’ve made things easier.

But he brushed it aside, as it was useless to think on it now.

Kohryu pressed himself through the mindscape to give his support.

Urahara’s eyes widened when cascades of data took over the screens. “Can you keep doing whatever it is you’re doing? The more data I have, the better.”

Joker smirked as all the Personas in the fully healed mindscape acted. The screens rapidly filled with strings of data and numbers, and it was any wonder that it could hold so much when it moved so fast. Urahara was satisfied after a few more turns around Joker.

Next, he and Oracle handed over their phones, the data Urahara needed from the Metaverse app barely took a few minutes to extract. By then, the others started to approach and handed him the list of what gear they’d need.

Urahara gained an excited gleam to his eyes when they grabbed the bags of Black Items needed for Itemization, and several engorged wads of bills from Nezu. Elizabeth and the other Attendants dogged Urahara as they entered the Velvet Room, the man gawking at his surroundings, his eyes drinking in every detail with a hungry gaze. He hid most of it by whipping out his fan and covering his face.

“Take all the time you need,” Joker said as he shifted the heavy bags in his hands, “I’ll be with Igor and Lavenza for a while. Oh, there’s a Shadow in the cell at the end of that hall over there, if you wanted

real data on Shadows themselves. Just... don't upset him too much? He's in the delicate process of switching sides."

"Understood." Urahara waved his fan at Joker, "This is so exciting! What I wouldn't give to spend a little extra time here, to study an entirely new realm-"

"Urahara!" Oracle glared at him as she knelt down and opened her laptop, "Remember we're on the clock here!"

The man sagged in a pout, "Right..."

Joker snorted and left Urahara under the watchful gazes of Oracle and three Attendants.

Igor grinned knowingly at Joker the moment he entered the central area. "The time of the final battle draws near..."

"Yeah, it does." Joker took a deep breath, "But it's not here yet."

Igor chuckled, "Indeed."

He studied the lists and planned out the executions with Lavenza.

The only world who required a little bit of everything was Mephisto's. Guns, swords and other weapons, armor, and mostly accessories that dealt with Bless or Healing magic, with a triple underlined request to have **no** accessories that used blue fire.

Yoruichi only requested accessories for elemental magic and psychical abilities, but no armor or weapons at all.

Edward and Alphonse required firearms the most out of all the other worlds combined, plus an inherent interest in any accessories that provided Nuclear magic. Makoto made a note on the bottom to include accessories from all ranges of magic as well, along with armor.

With a nod between he and Lavenza, they got to work.

Joker didn't know how long he spent in the Velvet Room as he checked items off one by one, only that most of the money was used up and the flash of the Electric Chair had been burned into his retinas. The assorted bags had been refilled with otherworldly gear that granted god-like strength and defence.

Even looking at the sheer quantity of everything... Joker hoped it would be enough against potential armies of Shadows.

With the help of the Attendants, they managed to carry them. Urahara gained heaps of data with Oracle's aid, grinning like a spoiled child at a candy store. Joker made a quick pit stop to his dorm to gather charged power banks from Power Loader's stash, and a few good phone chargers to boot. He tossed them in Fox and Queen's bag before they returned to the USJ proper.

The mood plummeted when he set down the bags of gear in the central plaza.

Everyone gave the original Phantom Thieves some space as Joker stood in the center of his friends. With a confident grin, he held out his hand.

"This time won't be as long. Focus on gathering allies for the final battle, and before you know it we'll all be back together again and rearing to kick Yaldabaoth's ass. I wrote all of the keywords to the other worlds on the back of your lists, just in case."

"Best to use it only for an emergency, though." Mona stated as he latched both paws onto Joker's hand, "We don't want Yaldabaoth to catch wind of our plans!"

"Hell yeah!" Skull slapped his hand on top, "We ain't letting Yaldabaoth control us any more!"

"Well said, Skull." Fox placed his hand over theirs, "No longer will we be weak and helpless against him!"

“The next time we meet, it will be for the final battle.” Queen was next. “Our very last one.”

“We’ll make him *writhe* in pain.” Noir set her hand softly on top, “I promise that will all of my soul.”

“I can’t wait!” Panther beamed, “We’re reclaiming our home, no matter what!”

“I’ll do my best, too!” Oracle grinned as her hand was the last on the pile, “Yaldabaoth will be sorry he ever messed with us!”

The Phantom Thieves cheered in unison.

Then, one by one, Joker escorted each pair back to the other worlds with their respective liaison, the bags of gear secure over their shoulders.

Queen and Fox crossed over Amestris’ rooftops with Edward and Alphonse at their side...

Panther and Noir disappeared into the forest with Mephisto...

Oracle and Skull were the last as they gathered up all the vital data, and Urahara gave Joker a look when they reached the absurd basement, stopping Joker in his tracks.

“I estimated how much time would pass for you before Oracle and I are done with the creation of this temporary world.”

“... How long?” Joker asked, almost hesitant.

“December 25th.” Urahara lost his playful nature, his fan nowhere to be seen as he looked Joker in the eye with a dead seriousness, “Make of it what you will.”

With that, Joker and Mona returned to the world of superheroes.

Uncertainty laced the faces of the heroes and vigilantes, looking up to the rift after Joker used the app to close it.

“December 25th.” Nezu interlaced his paws once Joker told him their time limit, “We began this operation to reunite with your friends on December 3rd, and it just changed to December 7th not an hour ago.”

A little less than three weeks to say goodbye, to train and prepare for the final battle against Yaldabaoth.

It felt like far too long and not long enough.

December 7th - Early Morning?

Joker stood in darkness.

An odd force pressed on him as if he stood several meters within the depths of the sea. But it wasn't cold or lifeless. It felt... warm, like a roaring fireplace chasing away the cold. Then, a flash of blue flickered. A single blink was all it took for figures to appear in a line before him. He didn't recognize most of these people, but the glow of the Chariot card spinning between them highlighted their array of clothes and costumes.

The most stunning was a woman with hair as black as Joker's, with a dark sleeveless body suit, yellow gloves, and a billowing white cape. A wispy golden figure stood beside her, in a vague shape of Yagi.

And then, a smaller figure wreathed in black shadows, the only thing visible was a startled green eye that was just as surprised to see him as Joker was to see this... figment of Midoriya.

Joker tried to speak or move, but he found that he couldn't.

Without looking back, he felt all of his Personas rising up behind him in this strange space, innumerable as they were powerful. Blue

cinders sprinkled over his side like snow, slowly drifting over the Chariot card and into the strangers' personal spaces.

The woman simply smiled.

Aside from Midoriya, the strangers bowed in unison and spoke in one voice.

Thank you.

Ren's eyes snapped open and he sat up. He was in his bed, in his dorm room at U.A. His heart pounded as he reached inward.

"What was that?"

"I know not, Trickster." Satanael frowned, "But the Chariot may."

Careful not to wake Morgana, who was currently muttering about Lady Ann in his sleep, he slipped out of his covers and walked over to his desk. He squinted at the phone screen as it lit up, revealing that it was almost 3:30 in the morning.

Right...

They finally returned to the dorms two hours ago and Nezu ordered everyone to get some sleep. Ren shook his head and went straight to his contacts, but before he could get to Midoriya's number, his phone rang.

He rushed to the bathroom and answered it, "Midoriya?"

"Ren! Are you... what was...?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah! I'm fine... I think."

"Do you know what that was?"

"I... You remember what I said about One For All, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Those were the Vestiges. I don't know what happened. I went to sleep, and then they were there in my dreams. They showed me how All For One came to be, and then how the First passed on the quirk and then you were there. I think... they feel guilty."

"About what?"

"You know, about All For One." Midoriya sighed, "It's true what I said, that it should've been my responsibility to deal with him. Maybe they wanted to thank you in person?"

Ren chuckled, "In person' meaning summoning me and my Personas in my sleep, using the power of the Chariot Arcana?"

"S-something like that." Midoriya sputtered. A moment of silence passed before Midoriya spoke again, "Hey, are sure you're okay?"

"Why are you asking?"

"It's just... we haven't seen you in the past few days, and Dark Shadow kept saying he felt something weird every once in a while, and so did I... like a twinge in my chest? Now this with One For All. I was getting worried."

"Oh. Everything is okay, now." Ren leaned against the bathroom counter, "We were able to open the rift, and I reunited with all of my teammates trapped in other worlds."

Midoriya inhaled sharply, *"You did? That's great! Are they here? Will we get to to meet them!?"*

"Not yet. They had to return to the other worlds to gather allies."

"Is that why you sound so sad?"

“Part of it, but...” Ren sighed, “Midoriya, we know when the final battle is going to take place. It’s December 25th. After Yaldabaoth is defeated, that’s it. It’ll be time to say goodbye.”

“... Christmas, huh?” Midoriya’s voice was watery, but he remained strong despite it, *“When that day comes, I’ll stand beside you to fight! I think... that’s why the Vestiges came to you tonight. You defeated our nemesis, so in return we’ll help you defeat yours with everything we have!”*

“Midoriya...”

“A-And I won’t be alone! There are others in the class that’ll fight with you too! Kacchan, Uraraka, Iida, Kirishima, Yaoyorozu, Todoroki... A few still need to be convinced, but it shouldn’t be a problem to get them on our side!”

“Thank you.” Ren found himself smiling, “All of your support means the world to me.”

“It’s the least we could do!”

Ren took his phone away from his ear and winced at the time, “Do you think you can get back to sleep? It’s late, and you have classes today.”

“Y-yeah, I should be able to. Oh, and Ren?”

“What?”

“I... just wanted to say that I really appreciate you, and.. despite how you came to be here, I’m really glad I got to meet you. Er... good night!”

Midoriya hung up.

Ren smiled as he left the bathroom, placed his phone on his desk, and curled back into the covers. Morgana was none the wiser as he

lay on his back, paws splayed in the air, now sleep eating tuna in his dreams.

Ren pet Morgana's belly and closed his eyes.

December 7th - Afternoon

Ren awoke with a start.

His mind felt foggy from the throes of sleep, but with one look at his phone for the time, it was cast away with panic. It was almost 1 in the afternoon. Morgana was nowhere to be seen.

"Why did nobody wake me up?" He threw open his closet and retrieved his tailored U.A. uniform, one ear snuggled to his shoulder as he held his phone there. The tone rang once before someone picked up, and Ren interrupted before they took the first breath to speak, "Sorry I'm so late, Nezu, I-"

"Oh, there's no need for an apology!" Nezu chirped, making Ren pause with one leg properly through his pants, *"We let you sleep in."*

"But why?"

Nezu hummed, *"You spent nearly four days gathering your friends without rest. I figured you would take a day or two off."*

"It wasn't four days for me."

Besides, just sitting around, waiting for the clock to tick down, *agonizing* over whether or not Urahara and Oracle were having trouble or if his other friends faced continued hardships in the other worlds...

It would be torture.

"No." Ren shook his head as he shifted his phone onto the other shoulder, finally pulling his pants all the way up and reaching for his

shirt, "Nezu, we only have so much time left, and I want to make every day count. Besides, today is the first day where I help out with the hero classes! I couldn't miss that after we already planned everything out."

"... Are you sure?"

"Absoulutely."

Nezu sighed, *"Very well. Lunch is already over and they have a short homeroom to do a headcount, but you might just be able to make it before they leave! I'll let them know you're coming after all!"*

"Thanks." He hung up and finished dressing himself in a rush.

He dove into the Velvet Room for a quick fusion or two and to use the rest of the cash to shuffle his current stock around, then bolted from his room the moment everything was set.

"Woah, hey!" Shuichi sputtered from the couch, "Where's the fire?"

Ren smirked, "The first year hero courses."

"Are you sure that's wise after everything that's happened recently?" Atsuhiro glanced at him in concern.

"Shouldn't you eat something first?" Tobita asked in concern, "You haven't had breakfast or lunch..."

"Actually, he hasn't eaten in *days* since we ate breakfast the first morning we went to the USJ." Manami added.

"I ate curry with my friends, and the combined time was less than a day for me. It's fine." Ren waved them off, "I already talked with Nezu, and I'm going to be late if I don't leave now."

"Wait!" Morgana leapt from the couch and landed on his shoulder, "I'm going with you!"

Ren nodded his thanks, and they left before anyone else could distract them.

“I don’t suppose we kept that Velvet Room door in the main building?” Morgana asked as they looked at the distance between them and the school.

“Nope.” Ren frowned, but it reformed into a smirk as Fafnir crept to the forefront of his mind with a *fantastic* idea, “But we have a ride anyway.”

“Oh! You mean me in by bus form?”

Ren grinned as he donned his costume, and within the flash of blue cinders rose Fafnir. Joker hopped onto Fafnir’s back and the dragon broke out in a burst of speed, Morgana screeching.

“REALLY!?” Morgana yapped at him as Joker held him to his chest, “First Seth, then Kohryu, now Fafnir!?”

“Come on, Morgana!” Joker laughed as Fafnir’s bumpy gait left gouges in the concrete at his feet, “This is more fun!”

Morgana batted him on the face.

They came to the school entrance in record time, with Joker preparing himself to dismount and walk into the school like normal... however, Fafnir had different plans.

“Fafnir!” Joker wrapped an arm around the metallic drake’s neck as claws pierced glass and concrete, Fafnir ascending the wall of the school like a nimble gecko, “Let’s hope the Devil won’t be too mad...”

Steam escaped Fafnir’s jaw as he cackled, “The Devil would understand the Trickster’s need for a proper entrance to his first class!”

Morgana groaned into Joker's chest, but offered no coherent comments.

Fafnir stopped at one particular window, the glass cracking as he plunged his claws into the seam and ripped it open, ignoring the cries of shock from the poor students. Joker kept his inward sigh a secret, instead sporting a grin as he jumped from Fafnir's back and flipped into the classroom with extra exuberance.

He took a wide stance as he landed in front of the teacher's desk and waved his arm towards the students, the other holding Morgana, "We're here!"

Silence.

Somewhat familiar faces stared at him, eyes and mouths wide open in shock. Joker could *feel* the growing headache in Vlad King's sigh right behind him.

"Fafnir!" Joker whirled to the dragon, "You got the wrong classroom!"

Fafnir jutted his head in, his razor-bladed horns scratching the wall as he looked to and fro. "Whoops."

Vlad ran a hard hand down his face, "It's fine. We're doing a joint training session with class 1-A anyway, so you reporting to either classroom is no problem." Vlad narrowed his eyes at Fafnir, "... Mostly."

"Perhaps it's a sign that we're going to trump class 1-A!" Monoma grinned, "After all, Joker came to *our* classroom instead of going to theirs!"

"Monoma..." Kendo pinched the bridge of her nose.

The door opened, and they looked to see Aizawa scanning the room. His eyes landed on Fafnir's head sticking in the window, to the

general damage the dragon caused, and finally landing his deadpan expression on Joker and Morgana.

“Really?” Aizawa crossed his arms and looked at Vlad, “I was wondering why there was so much ruckus all of a sudden, but you stealing Joker wasn’t what I expected.”

Vlad rolled his eyes before he turned to his students, “Go change into your hero costumes and meet us on Ground Gamma. All Might should already be waiting for you there.”

“Yes, sensei!”

One by one, the students snatched their costumes as the briefcases emerged from some mechanism in the wall, giving Joker prideful or excited looks as they went out the door. Ibara met his eyes, but then returned to the floor as if embarrassed.

“Come on.” Aizawa sighed as he turned on his heel, “I’ll let Power Loader and Cementoss know what Fafnir did on the way there, so they can make repairs.”

“Might want to tell them to fix the sidewalk from the dorms to the school, too.” Joker grinned as he walked side by side with Aizawa, Vlad taking his other side, “Fafnir might’ve been a bit too excited in his sprint here.”

Fafnir cackled again as he returned to Joker in a flash of cerulean.

Vlad deadpanned at Joker, but sighed as if he accepted that scolding him wouldn’t make much of a difference. “You remember what we planned, right Joker?” He asked instead.

“Yep. I made sure to look over the student files and everything with Nezu.” Joker’s grin widened as his chest warmed in excitement, “I can’t wait.”

“Just don’t scare them too badly. I’m still terrified at how you taught us teachers with the Persona gear.”

“Me? I would never!”

Aizawa buried his lower face in his capture weapon to hide his amusement, the cold autumn air gracing them as they stepped outside, “Whatever happens, it’ll be good for the students to learn from him. It’ll be interesting to watch.”

“Says the man who scared the crap out of his own students the very first day.” Vlad grumbled.

They passed a line of trees, their branches bare, as they turned towards the direction of Ground Gamma. One moment, Joker was smiling, about to make a playful retort, and the next he stopped stone cold as a familiar, *harrowing* sound of chains echoed from within the darkness of the treeline. He startled, blade ripped from it’s sheath, as Fafnir, Amaterasu, and Satanael pounced into reality. Their magic made the air crackle as they glared through the trees.

“Joker, what’s wrong!?” Morgana asked, tense claws digging into his shoulder.

Vlad King and Aizawa gaped at them. Aizawa steadily reached for his capture weapon as he studied the trees with narrowed eyes.

“You didn’t feel that?” Joker asked as he scanned the treeline, his heart pounding. “I just heard the sound of *chains*, Mona. You know, the sound we all dreaded hearing when we were in Mementos.”

“What!? But I didn’t...” Morgana blinked as his fur bristled, then followed his eyes. A chilled breeze pressed through the trees, the bare branches scraping together, “Joker, there’s nothing there.”

“... Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Morgana’s eyes softened in worry, “Are you sure you heard them?”

“Yes .”

“W-well, if you did then... it’s already gone...”

Joker scanned their surroundings with Third Eye, but Morgana was right in saying there was nothing to show for his panic. He dropped his battle stance, his Personas returning to him with sour and twisted well of emotions.

“Did you guys get any Metaverse readings when Joker and I were in the other worlds?” Morgana asked, Joker kept his tense posture towards the treeline.

“None.” Vlad King frowned and looked at his phone, “Even now, there’s nothing strange.”

Aizawa held up a hand, “Are you sure you’re up for a class today, Joker? If you’re still tired-”

“I’m fine.” Joker turned away as he sheathed his blade and shoved his hands into his pockets, “Come on, we don’t want to keep the students waiting.”

He didn’t see the concerned looks Aizawa and Vlad traded as Joker walked ahead, but he didn’t bother when his senses were blown to high alert at the merest hint of one of the most terrifying enemies they’d ever faced.

Joker hoped it was just his ears playing tricks on him.

Hitoshi fidgeted with his gloves for the tenth time since changing in the locker room.

He knew he didn't need to be so worried, but this would be the first time since he saw his best friend after *days* of eerie silence. That, and Joker would see his hero costume, and he didn't want to disappoint.

Layers of shadowy armor, both in silk and other threads, plus carbon fiber and other metals woven in for protection, made up the base of his costume. He remembered Mei's snarky comments about this layer looking like an armored ninja as she rubbed the special oils on his boots which would help mask his footsteps. Strong, yet it was still flexible and breathable to where he could move easily.

A knee-length hooded black cloak hung from his shoulders, stamped with a non-reflective gold image of a fan of cards in front of a crescent moon on his back, the entire design contained in another circle of gold. The innumerable pockets on the inside of the cloak kept all of his items and gear safe and within reach; lockpicks, smoke-bombs, small first-aid kits, any number of components to craft the items learned from both Ren and Mei.

He tugged the edge of his hood over his hair, the dark metal of his fox-like mask hidden by the black capture scarf around his neck. He idly wondered what his best friend would say when he named his mask, and its abilities, as the *Persona Cords* .

Still, it wasn't the *piece de la resistance*, the favorite part of his costume.

No, he could only smile as his hand naturally wrapped around the hilt of the dagger he kept horizontally on his lower back. The dagger Joker gave him. Something he knew would give him comfort when his best friend was no longer around. There were empty slots on his belt for guns too, but he was still training with Snipe to get his certification for those, so they would remain empty for a time.

"Woah, Shinsou!"

Hitoshi snapped out of his thoughts and turned to Uraraka, who beamed at him. "Yeah?"

"Your costume looks so cool!"

"... Thanks."

"It's true, then?" Kirishima grinned at him, "Aizawa-sensei told us you'd be joining one of the hero classes next year?"

Hitoshi nodded as he shuffled in his cloak, he felt protected from all of their stares when the front of the cloak closed, "This is just the first test of how far I've come from training, and to see how well my costume works."

Tokoyami's eyes glinted as he shrugged his own long cloak around him, "I cannot wait to see what abilities you're able to show off on this day. It'll be a mad banquet of darkness, indeed."

"Uh... sure."

He looked around the industrial zone where all the other students waited, twisting and turning corridors and innumerable nooks and crannies interwoven in a vast network of pipes. A part of him was reminded of Hatsume Ichinose's junkyard.

"Trying to steal our future classmate, huh?" Monoma said with a smirk.

"Monoma, don't start." Kendo glared at him with crossed arms. "It's not even confirmed what class he'll be in!"

"I'm just saying!" Monoma grinned as he put a proud hand to his chest, "Why, Joker even stopped by *our* classroom before we came here. Clearly, he favors our class over 1-A, so his protege totally belongs with us!"

Hitoshi barely bit down his squawk of surprise, "Protege? Really?"

“He what!?” Bakugo snapped at Monoma, “You’ve seen Joker!?”

“Yeah. He kinda... broke the window of our classroom and jumped right in?” Awase cleared his throat, “He rode on one of his dragons, the silvery metal one.”

Iida sputtered, his conversation with Yaoyorozu screeching to a halt.

“He scolded his beast into going to the wrong classroom,” Ibara clasped her hands together in prayer, “So he was looking for Class 1-A, not ours.”

“Ibara!” Monoma cried, “You weren’t supposed to tell them!”

A cleared throat snapped them out of their musings.

Hitoshi’s heart sank when he only saw Eraserhead and Vlad King approach with the smaller form of All Might, but some tiny little instinct told him to *look up*. He followed his instinct and gaped at what floated high in the sky over them, but no other student bothered following his gaze.

Relief shot through him as he and Joker met eyes, and his best friend smirked and put a finger to his lips. Things must’ve went well enough with reuniting with his other teammates, Hitoshi thought, he was just happy Joker could be here for their lesson. He’d *definitely* get answers later.

Hitoshi schooled his reaction and turned his attention to his teachers as to not give Joker away.

Eraserhead’s eyes glimmered with approval at Hitoshi before he swept his gaze across the other students, “Alright, listen up. As we’ve explained after lunch, we’ll be doing a joint training session between both first year hero courses.”

“You’ve said as such!” Iida chopped his hand, “But never specified what we’ll be doing?”

“A contest, of sorts.” Vlad crossed his arms and kept his stance wide, “Three rounds total, the first two rounds will be split between ten students from either class while the final round will be an all out free-for-all.”

“The first two rounds will be ten minutes each,” All Might supplemented, “And the final round will go until one of the classes win... or both classes lose.”

Whispers broke out between the students, and Hitoshi watched as Class A and Class B gave each other side eyed stares.

Someone from Class B raised his hand, “What are the rules and goals of this supposed contest?”

“Glad you asked, Shishida.” Vlad King huffed, “Joker will explain everything.”

“Eh? But Joker’s not here!” Mineta shouted.

“Are you sure?”

Hitoshi smirked as Joker projected his voice across Ground Gamma. Most of the students startled and looked up, faces paling at *what the hell* Joker was currently using to stay afloat in the air, sitting on it like a king on his throne - legs crossed and chin delicately resting in the palm on his hand. Morgana was curled around Joker’s shoulders like a comfortable scarf, eyeing them in amusement.

To put it lightly, it was a floating human skull larger than an entire person, with a snake threaded throughout it. The serpent’s tail curled around the bottom part of the jaw, slithering up into the left eye socket, out the back and around the top of the skull, with its hissing head somehow poking out of the other eye socket. The skull lowered itself to the ground where Joker slid off and landed on his feet, rippling colors spreading out around him.

“We’ll be playing a mixed game of tag and hide and seek. Whichever team finds me and pins me down first will win the round. If the ten minutes run out, then the win will go to me.”

Bakugo scowled and crossed his arms, “How the hell are we going to get to you if you have your *friends* blocking the way?”

“I won’t be summoning them for the first two rounds.” Joker smiled as he patted the skull, the snake flicking out its tongue playfully at him, “Loa here just wanted to show off, and who was I to disagree?”

The teeth of Loa’s skull chattered together in a macabre laughter before it vanished in a flash of blue.

“Oh. Th-that sounds simple!” The mushroom girl from 1-B stated. “If Joker’s going to be all alone... it’ll be easier right?”

“Especially since it’ll technically be *twenty-one people* against one per round?” Kaminari had a lopsided smile, as if unsure of himself.

“And fourty for the last round, kero.” Asui’s eyes glanced over Hitoshi, “Or fourty-one.”

“Don’t be so quick to discount little ol’ me. My partners may be powerful, but you shouldn’t overlook the one who *commands* them.” Joker’s grin gained a wicked sharpness as several students blanched, “It may seem like an unfair game of tag on the surface, but I have any number of moves, tricks, and helpful items up my sleeve! Here are the rules.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a large ink pad, opened it up, and pressed his hand into it. He then walked over to Eraserhead and firmly planted his hand on the hero’s capture scarf, leaving a bright blood-red mark on the hero, who gave him a deadpanned glare, “If I touch you, you’re disqualified from the round.”

“That’s it?” Uraraka asked. “We just have to dodge around you while trying to capture you at the same time?”

Joker nodded as he snapped the ink pad closed, "That's it."

"What's the catch?" Midoriya asked, eyes narrowed in thought.
"Surely you're going to have *some* advantage, right? It doesn't seem fair otherwise!"

Joker smiled warmly at Midoriya, "While my Personas are sitting out the first two rounds, I'll be switching between their defences under the surface, limited to one different Persona per minute. Physical attacks, gun damage, fire, ice, lightning, wind, psychokinesis, light, dark, and the possibility of any status ailments." Joker stared between the hardest hitters like Ojima and Shishida, "Will your physical attacks get through, or will Fafnir's power redirect the blows back at you?"

They all paled while Joker continued, peering at Todoroki.

"Will any fire or ice attacks stop me in my tracks enough to where one team will be able to catch me, or will it all blow up in your faces to where the other team has a chance to get ahead?"

Joker then smirked at Tokoyami and Kuroiro, who flinched under his gaze.

"Darkness," He glanced at Aoyama, who was sweating heavily,
"Light. There are any number of possibilities open to you, but it'll be up to you and your teammates to plan accordingly. Any questions?"

Hitoshi knew Joker left out one of the types of magic available to him, but his eyes were cast over to Yaoyorozu and he figured it was probably smart to leave out anything to do with *nuclear* abilities.

Hitoshi raised his hand, "Which team will I be on?"

Eraserhead nodded, "You'll be on 1-A's team the first round, and 1-B's team the second. You'll get to decide which one you want to be on during the third round."

“How will the teams be split!?” Iida asked.

Vlad smirked, “Aside from Shinsou’s participation in the first two rounds, that will be up to you.”

The students’ eyes widened.

“You’ll have ten minutes to strategize and split yourselves into teams,” Eraserhead stated, “Joker will be using that time to situate himself somewhere within Ground Gamma, so don’t waste it by screwing around.”

When it looked like no more questions would be asked, Morgana hopped down from Joker’s shoulders and stood between he and them, “You are the future heroes that Joker and I believe in, so show him what you’re made of!”

Cheers, battle cries, and grins full of excitement sprouted around the students.

Joker huffed at Morgana, “Thanks, Mona.”

Morgana stuck his nose up in the air, and pranced over to sit between Eraserhead and All Might, curling his tail around his legs.

Joker went off into Ground Gamma after a nod to the teachers.

“Oi, you’re with us the first round!” Bakugo snatched Hitoshi’s wrist and dragged him over to class 1-A, “So get the hell over here!”

Hitoshi grinned as the challenge to show Joker how far he’s come burned in his veins.

Joker balanced on one of the higher pipes winding around Ground Gamma, smirking as the wind blew through his coattails.

“The first group of students are setting out,” Aizawa informed him from the communicator in Joker’s ear, *“I hope you’re ready.”*

“Copy that, Eraser.”

He couldn't help the sprig of excitement curling around his chest. He knew 1-A the most out of both classes, had a good number of precious Arcanas forged with them, enough to predict what teams they could make. What strategies, what Quirks would work well together to try and nail him down.

But he didn't know 1-B.

Sure, he'd read their student files and the base description of their Quirks. Saw some of what they were capable of in the blurred chaos that was the Summer Camp, but he didn't know *them* beyond the surface level. He barely counted that encounter with Ibara as anything significant. Their personalities, their likes and dislikes. How they could work together. What new strategies they brewed or how much they've grown as individuals in the months since the Summer Camp.

And honestly, the challenge of the unknown class excited him.

He smirked as he scanned over Ground Gamma from this high vantage point with Third Eye, watching as the two classes entered the training ground from various different points. Already, 1-A split up into two teams to cover more ground, while 1-B moved as a single unit.

Third Eye faded as he turned and hopped down the network of pipes. He stuck to the shadows and plethora of hiding spaces this industrial zone offered. His Personas lay silent in the mindscape as he kept his hearing sharp and his eyes peeled, the first and only Persona serving as his mask was Loa.

If the students could figure out Loa's weakness to Psychokinesis and Bless within the first minute of their encounter, then they would have the immediate advantage. Of course he'd cover Loa's dire weakness to light once this class was over, but for now it would have to work.

Personas with too many defences like Odin or Satanael would wait until Round 3 to have their turn against all the students at once. And he'd shuffled his stock around this morning to include Personas with weaknesses.

After all, he wanted them to have a real chance here.

If he pushed them too hard to where he steamrolled them, then they'd be too frustrated to learn anything useful.

On the other side of the coin, if he made it too easy to the point where the students felt like Joker wasn't taking them seriously, dismissing any and all potential progress they'd made, then they'd feel discouraged or insulted. And again, they wouldn't *learn* anything.

The first group of 1-A students emerged and snapped Joker from his thoughts. Joker held his breath as he crouched down on the pipe over their heads, his footsteps quiet as he followed them.

"Where do you think he's hiding?" Mineta asked from the back next to Aoyama.

"Dunno," Kaminari fidgeted with his headgear, "Nobody else has found him yet."

"Obviously!" Ashido's smile was forced as she marched at the head of the group next to Bakugo, "It's too quiet."

"The second a fight starts, that's where we'll go." Bakugo cracked his knuckles, "We gotta kick his smug ass to the curb!"

"Still sounds like you're jealous, dude." Kirishima said with a smirk.

"I'm not *jealous*, Shitty Hair!" Bakugo snapped, "We gotta show him we can take care of our own shit without his help. I won't be satisfied with anything else!"

Ashido hesitated, but nodded, "You're right. Let's give him everything we've got!"

Joker blinked at the flutter of feathers landing on the pipe next to him. A pigeon stared at him and gave off a soft *coo*, a few others darting around him with rapid flaps of their wings.

The group below froze and looked upwards at the commotion cause by the birds.

Joker didn't wait to be spotted, he *dropped*.

Mineta cried out as he found himself face planted into the ground, a blood red mark painting his back.

"Mineta Minoru has been disqualified!" A robotic voice announced across the speakers. *"Please report to the Observation Deck!"*

"ALREADY!?" The boy cried as Joker leapt to his next target.

Bakugo snatched Aoyama's cape and wrenched him away with one hand, the other flashing an explosion in Joker's face. Joker pulled himself into a backflip to avoid the worst of it, but Kirishima was already charging through the smoke cloud with hardened fists.

Joker laughed as he danced around Kirishima's punches, a splash of acid skirted behind them as Ashido skated over the cement. Joker was caught off guard as she threw some thin glass vials at him, which shattered over his back and left arm. His eyes widened as acid poured harmlessly off his back, but his arm crinkled as ice spread over it.

"Acid and ice don't work!" Ashido reported in her earpiece.

"Is this... *liquid nitrogen* ?" Joker asked in wonder as he continued his bout with Kirishima.

Ashido snickered, "You can thank Yaomomo for that!"

"Kirishima!" Kaminari shouted as Ashido zipped way.

Kirishima took a powerful stance as his entire body turned into jagged rock, “Go for it!!”

Bakugo grabbed Aoyama and used an explosion to blast them farther away.

Yellow lightning crackled over the ground and up the tangle of pipes all around Joker, but he simply smirked as it passed harmlessly over Loa’s natural defences.

Kaminari paled as his hand went to his ear, “Lightning is out!”

“Cover me, Sparkles!” Bakugo snapped as he dashed forward.

“S-sparkles!?” Aoyama sputtered, but he shot bolts of light towards Joker.

Joker cursed under his breath as he threw himself to the side, one of the bolts grazing his arm. The light *burned*, but it wasn’t a direct enough hit to leave him open, though his costume smoked ominously where it hit.

Bakugo’s eyes widened, “It’s light! We have 30 seconds with *light* !”

“Good!” Joker beamed as he wove around Bakugo and Kirishima’s united strikes, bursts of Aoyama’s light dancing through them in timed openings, “You’ve learned to keep track of your enemy’s weakness and the amount of time left. Well done!”

“SHUT UP! I don’t need your damn compliments!”

Twenty seconds...

More footsteps joined the fray as a majority of the 1-B team descended without mercy.

“Hey, Joker’s ours!!” Called a girl in a purple suit, parts of her body splitting off in all directions.

“As if!” Bakugo screamed.

A giant pipe landed in front of Joker, cutting off Bakugo and Kirishima’s assault, striking the ground twice to cause an explosion of cracks in all directions. It cut off Aoyama’s view of him while 1-B attacked.

Tsunatori Pony shot at Joker with her horn projectiles, backed up by a rapid fire deluge of scales shot from Hiryu Rin’s hands. Nirengeki Shoda and Yui Kodai stood upon the top of a tall pillar nearby, with Nirengeki speaking rapidly into his ear piece as Yui threw more large debris at him, each hit striking twice.

“GET OUT OF OUR WAY, 1-B SCUM!”

Ten seconds...

Bakugo’s next super heated explosion obliterated the pipe blocking their path.

“YOU’RE THE ONES IN OUR WAY!!” Tetsutestu Tetsutsu called as shining iron fists were dodged by Joker.

Kaminari and Aoyama screeched as parts of Setsuna Tokage’s body swarmed them, covering the wild strikes from Sen Kaibara’s twisting limbs.

“H-how is this fair!?” Kaminari cried as he tried to escape the dastardly teamwork.

Joker’s laugh bounced around the utter chaos. The 1-A and 1-B students were both in a frantic chase to get at him, while simultaneously trying to get in *each other’s* way. It worked fantastically in Joker’s favor.

Suddenly, several beeps and other noises went off. The students froze. It seems, given a set time limit, that nearly every student had some sort of watch or timer set to one minute.

“Well, well,” Joker pulled at his glove with a smirk, “Minute’s up, time for a new strategy.”

Loa slipped from his mask and was replaced by Cu Chulainn, who grinned at not being in the midst of battle in quite some time.

Before any of the students could react to his words, his hands darted into his pockets and tossed two small bombs into the air. The first, which Joker put up his arm to block, was a bright flash of light. Screams and cries of shock echoed as the second bomb hissed and filled the area with a thick cloud of smoke.

Third Eye cast the students’ bodies in blue auras as he burst through the cloud, handprints marking most of them. He might’ve felt sorry for Setsuna when he caught her disembodied head and threw it at Ashido when the girl was stunned out of her acid skating.

Bakugo loudly swore as Joker was upon him after marking Ashido, using a blast of heat and light to escape into the sky.

Joker stood in the center of the downed students as the smoke cleared, the robotic voice from before gleefully checking off several names.

“Disqualified students: Aoyama Yuga, Ashido Mina, Kirishima Eijiro, Kaminari Denki, Tsunatori Pony, TetsuTetsu Tetsutetsu, Setsuna Tokage, Hiryu Rin, Sen Kaibara. Please report to the Observation Deck!”

Joker smirked up at Nirengeki and Yui as Bakugo’s form faded in the distance, both of them shivering in fear.

“Nirengeki Shoda and Yui Kodai have been disqualified, please report to the Observation Deck!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” Jiro muttered in disbelief as she crouched beside one of the pipes, her ear-jack firmly planted in it.

“Did you really expect anything else from *Joker* ?” Hitoshi stated dryly despite the pride he held for his best friend’s victory over so many.

“I-I guess not.” Jiro whispered, “I don’t think it was smart to send Sato to back up the others.”

Koda wrung his hands together, “H-he wanted to go help, s-so...”

“Sato Rikido has been disqualified! Please report to the Observation Deck!”

“... Damnit.” Jiro muttered.

“It’s not completely lost!” Uraraka balled her hands into fists, “1-B lost most of their team, too!”

Koda looked at Shinsou, “Y-You know Joker the best. A-any ideas?”

Hitoshi clutched his chin, unable to feel the cold metal of his mask through his glove, “Maybe...”

A body landed by them, and they jumped as Bakugo stood fully, wiping the grime that clung to his sweaty skin.

“Great job losing the others.” Jiro deadpanned. “I thought you said you’d ‘give Joker your all.’”

“Shut up!” Bakugo snapped, “Joker was a goddamn whirlwind even without his friends.”

“Stop fighting!” Uraraka waved her arms, “Koda, Jiro, do you know where Joker is?”

The pair concentrated. Koda knelt down as a pidgeon landed on his shoulder, a small rat climbed into his extended hand.

“U-Um... th-they’re saying he’s going after the last three students on the B team.”

“Confirmed.” Jiro pulled her jack from the pipe and pointed to their west, “They’re going in that direction.”

“It’s been a few minutes.” Hitoshi stated, “So Joker probably switched Personas again.”

Bakugo glared at Hitoshi, “Any ideas, Einstein?”

“You’re actually asking me?”

“Wow, Bakugo and teamwork?” Jiro narrowed her eyes, “Who are you and what did you do to our Bakugo?”

“Shut up!!”

Uraraka facepalmed, “You guys…”

Hitoshi sighed, “I have a few other ideas. But we’ll have to work together to pull it off.”

Uraraka grinned, “Let’s do it, then!”

Hitoshi matched her ferocious expression as they ducked their heads together for Hitoshi’s plan.

The three surviving 1-B students made Joker smile.

Bondo Kojiro used his strange jar shaped head to spew glue onto the pipes and other buildings, heavily limiting Joker’s options if he didn’t want to get stuck like a fly in a trap. Ibara Shiozaki’s thorny vines covered any other exits and reduced their chase to a corridor of sticky glue and sharp thorns. On top of that, Manga Fukidashi, the student with a *literal manga speech bubble* as a head, used his Quirk to shoot elemental blasts in hopes of striking Joker’s weakness.

‘FWOOSH!’

Manga sent a sharp gust of wind as the trio ran ahead of their little tunnel of doom, Joker was blown back by several feet, but he skid to a stop, mostly unharmed, if not a bit breathless. Fortunately, Cerberus' familiar presence wasn't weak to wind.

"I'm impressed." Joker stated as the three stopped and faced him, all of them panting, "You have something precious that 1-A seems to lack. Sure, they have some extremely powerful Quirks on their side and they damn well know how to use them, but they don't have the level of teamwork your class has."

"We had to work hard to surpass them," Ibara whispered as her hair wriggled, "And we'll win because of it!"

Joker's vision was swamped with a wave of thrashing vines.

"JOKER. IS. OURS!!!"

They looked up as Bakugo soared over them. Joker could barely see through the small openings through the vines, but it looked as if he was pulling the pin on his grenade gauntlet. Joker felt the Tower's sharp smirk and the overwhelming pride in his voice.

"Dragon Cannon!!"

Dozens of screaming comets exploded out of his gauntlet and spread out like the petals of a flower. Joker covered his face as the vines and glue disintegrated under the flash of heat, the force cracking and breaking pipes and cement around Joker.

The last of 1-B startled and were brought to their knees as Jiro forced her enhanced heartbeat in the broken ground, while a group of frantic pigeons blocked the way to Joker.

Finally, Joker heard Uraraka's voice, "Release!"

A familiar feeling of a scarf snaked around Joker's arms and held them tight against his body, only this time it was black instead of

Eraser's white. Uraraka and Hitoshi landed in front of Joker and Uraraka slapped her hand on his shoulder.

Joker grinned as he was trapped in a floating cocoon.

"Time's up!"

"Huh?" Uraraka's eyes flashed in panic, "But-"

"It seems 1-A won this round by the skin of their teeth!" All Might announced.

"Just barely." Eraserhead hummed, *"Three seconds more and Joker would've won the round."*

Uraraka put a hand on her chest, "I'm glad we won!"

"Congratulations." Joker said, still smiling, "You think you can let me down?"

"Oh, right!" Uraraka placed her finger tips together and Joker's feet planted firmly on the ground, Hitoshi recalled his black capture weapon around his neck.

The trio of 1-B students looked demoralized as Koda and Jiro helped them to their feet.

Joker looked at Bakugo as they collected themselves, "Was that the attack inspired by Seth?"

"It was." Bakugo gave him a wary look, "What do you think?"

"It was totally badass. Seth would be really proud of you."

Bakugo smirked, "Damn straight!"

"All students please return to the Observation Deck so we can go over the round." Vlad King muttered, obviously sullen by the loss, *"Joker, are you coming back, or...?"*

Joker put a hand to his ear, “I’ll stay in Ground Gamma and prepare for the next round. Don’t wait up!”

Hitoshi’s eyes crinkled in a hidden smile, “I’ll be right back to kick your ass again.”

“I’d expect nothing less from the Jack Of All Trades Hero.” Joker chuckled, “See you soon, *Wild Card* .”

He shot out his grapple and left them behind, soaring over the smoldering vines and charred puddles of glue in his wake. Joker took a few minutes to wander around and cool down from the riveting first round, frowning as the training grounds grew too silent without the ruckus the students caused. It made his skin crawl.

Joker returned to the highest pillar in Ground Gamma and scanned the area with Third Eye. Aizawa, the other teachers, and all of the students were barely pinpoints far in the distance on the Observation Deck platform close to the edge of the training ground. He listened for the sound of chains, but only received the dull roar of the wind instead.

“Did I just imagine it?”

“We know what we felt.” Zaou-Gongen growled, *“If it was the Reaper, then you have my Strength to take it down!”*

“And my swords.” Futsunushi said.

“But how would it be here?” Amaterasu asked, *“Without a Red Rain or the Metaverse no less?”*

“Like the Reaper follows the conventional rules of the Metaverse.” Cybele added with a snarl, *“It’s **the** Unique Shadow of all unique Shadows, after all. Who knows what it can do now that Yaldabaoth is so strong.”*

Joker pursed his lips. *"Do you think visiting the other worlds attracted it?"*

"It's possible." Satanael curled his wings about himself, *"If it, too, was lost in that void like Metatron, our meddling may have caught its attention. We can do nothing but keep our eyes sharp and hope we misheard what was in those trees."*

The communicator hissed in his ear, *"Joker, the second round of students are about ready to go."*

"Good." Joker stated with a smirk, "Bring them on, Eraser."

With a final scan of Ground Gamma, he descended into the maze.

"Any idea where he is yet, Shoji?" Midoriya asked as his eyes roamed over the pipes above their heads.

"None." One of Shoji's arms formed a mouth, while the rest formed ears which swiveled and swayed in all directions, "So far, he's kept quiet. I can at least hear where 1-B is going, so we can keep track if they find him first."

"I suppose that's a solid plan on his part." Yaoyorozu clutched her chin, "Joker's ability to remain undetected is quite admirable."

Ojiro scoffed.

"What troubles you, Ojiro?" Tokoyami asked as he leaned against a pipe.

"Nothing."

"Clearly it's something!" Hagakure's visible glove gently punched Ojiro on the shoulder, "Come oooooon, tell us what's bugging you!"

"Is it Joker himself, kero?" Tsuyu asked with a tilt of her head.

Ojiro bristled, "Why would you say that?"

"It's just..." Tsuyu bore an underlying glimmer within her pupils, "You always make a face whenever Joker is brought up, and since this class started you've looked angry or annoyed. You're the only one in our class that does that anymore."

"She has a point." Todoroki frowned at Ojiro, "You've been that way towards Joker for as long as I remember."

"He's a *thief* and an ex-vigilante, and he got away with his crimes with barely a slap on the wrist." Ojiro flicked his tail, "Someone like that can't be wholly trustworthy. That goes for him and all of his friends."

Iida stiffened, "You know, I used to think the same way before I really got to know him. My old self's narrow minded opinions... really did more harm than good."

"I did too, at the start of the USJ." Todoroki looked to the sky, "But things changed."

"Do you want my advice?" Tsuyu asked as Ojiro scowled.

"What?"

"Fight Joker by yourself." Expressions of alarm surrounded Tsuyu, but she remained stoic, "Maybe sparring with him, getting a feel for how he really is face to face, will settle your differences."

"But shouldn't we stay together?" Tokoyami asked, eyes wide.

"I don't like this idea..." Sero whispered.

"We saw what happened to our classmates who split up."
Yaoyorozu's shoulders tensed, "It wouldn't be wise for *any* of us to go our own way!"

“No, she’s right.” Ojiro turned his back on the rest of them, “I’ll scout around to see if I can find him myself. Shoji?”

Their classmate sighed, “Class 1-B’s entire team is heading towards the northeast, so I would avoid that direction. Anywhere else seems safe enough for the moment.”

Ojiro nodded and he used his tail to launch himself towards the pipes before they could so much as protest.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Tsuyu.” Tokoyami whispered. “If it comes down to class versus class against Joker, team B has 11 people to our 9.”

“What’s more important: Winning one round of a single class, or making sure our classmate grows out of his enmity?” Tsuyu tilted her head as her classmates frowned in thought, “The answer is obvious to me.”

“Especially...” Midoirya’s hands balled into fists, “Especially since Joker won’t be here for much longer.”

Tsuyu nodded, “We’ve all grown as people since knowing Joker. Maybe Ojiro will finally grow out of his own prejudice with a one-on-one encounter before that mindset cripples him.”

“We could only hope.” Yaoyorozu sighed, then brought herself to stand tall, “Let’s move to the next area and do a sweep there.”

Class 1-A’s team remained oblivious to the ghosts following Ojiro.

Joker heard everything.

Ojiro was nimble and used his tail quite well in an environment like this, swinging and jumping from the pipes. Joker trailed Ojiro a good ways away from everyone else before he decided to reveal himself, using the boy’s predictable path to go around and get ahead.

“Looking for me?” Joker stood tall on a long horizontal pipe, looking down on Ojiro.

The boy stiffened, his eyes hardening with his scowl, “Were you following me?”

“Guilty as charged!” Joker stepped off the pipe, used his grapple to slow his descent, and rolled into his landing across from Ojiro, “How could I not, when I saw you go off all on your lonesome?”

Ojiro took a stance and scoffed, “I’m not surprised you used such underhanded methods!”

“Underhanded methods?” Joker grinned as Ojiro charged, and Joker ducked under the massive tail swipe that tried to take off his head, “I would call it ‘using my enemy’s foolishness to my advantage!’”

They entered a dance with both partners moving rapidly, a step here, another dodge there. Concrete shattered under Ojiro’s tail, pipes were dented beyond repair. Joker didn’t bother countering, turning the boy’s own anger against him to wear him out.

“Why can’t I hit you!?” Ojiro snapped when Joker continued to dodge with ease.

“Hastur has a handy little skill called Ali Dance.” Joker stated as more concrete shards peppered him, “It makes an enemy’s accuracy quite dreadful!”

“So I just have to wait you out until you switch friends. Figures you’d have something scummy like this instead of doing a fair fight!”

“A fair fight?” Joker’s wide, ear to ear grin made Ojiro flinch, “I see you have a strict set of morals on what you assume is ‘fair.’ That’s admirable, but at the same time that sort of blind rigidity could be the end of you... or anyone you try to save.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Joker flipped away from Ojiro's last punch, and tilted his head when there was enough space between them, "How about we talk about a theoretical situation. To pass the time, if you will, for me to switch Personas so we can continue our little spar."

Ojiro scowled, watching Joker for any sort of lie, but tersely nodded. His eyes locked on Joker as the vigilante took on a relaxed pose despite his opponent's battle stance.

Joker looked up to the sky, "Say there was a teacher at school. To the open public, he's admirable and charismatic, and his athletic skills are renown across Japan enough to where the school he teaches receives immense funding for their athletic programs. Say he won the equivalent of a shiny gold medal from U.A.'s Sports Festival, he's a hero and shining beacon for those who don't know any better."

Ojiro flicked his eyes around before they landed on Joker again, "... Okay?"

"*However*," Ojiro stiffened as Joker's gaze turned predatory, "You find out that he not only severely abuses the boy's team, bruises and broken bones galore in the name of 'training', but he also preys on the girls. Takes them into his office on the off hours of school and does what he pleases with their bodies. What would you do?"

Disgust colored Ojiro's face bone-white, "I would tell the other teachers! Or the principal, at the least."

"And what if the teachers avert their eyes? What if the principal already knew about the abuse, but he always swept it under the rug to preserve the school's precious reputation?"

"The... the heroes and police would surely do something, then!"

"Are you sure?" Joker shook his head, "Police and heroes are paid off. Honest investigators are pulled away because the principal has a

lot of fingers in a lot of pies, which includes dealings with the higher government. Parents are included in this, too.”

“Then... I... As a student, I wouldn’t have the authority to do anything?”

Joker took a step closer, and Ojiro took a step back at the cold and dark look on Joker’s face, “You’re friends with Hagakure, right? You, Tokoyami, Hagakure, and Shoji have formed quite the tight knit group.”

“How did you know that?”

Joker waved his hand, “Just answer my question.”

“Yes.” Ojiro swallowed thickly, “Hagakure is my best friend.”

“How would you react if you found out that Hagakure was called into this teacher’s office... after hours? Not a single soul was around to hear her screams for help.”

A shiver wracked Ojiro’s body, “Wh-what-”

“She drags herself to school the next day, a broken husk of a girl that had something very precious stolen from her against her will. She goes to the rooftop during class with the intent to throw herself off because she can’t deal with the pain this teacher so callously inflicted.”

“That’s... you can’t...”

Joker slowly stalked forward, and Ojiro met it with equal steps back, “*You* can do something about it when everyone else chooses to bury their heads in the sand. *You*, Tokoyami, and Shoji are the only hope she has to ever get justice against a monster that wears human skin.” Joker stopped less than a foot away when Ojiro’s back hit a wall, “What. Do. You. Do?”

Ojiro found his tongue heavy, throat closing at the horror Joker presented to him. Several seconds of tense silence pass.

“You’d continue to do *nothing* ?” Joker spat as a sudden anger flared in his chest, “You’d simply sit back and watch Shiho die!?”

“Shiho?” Ojiro snapped out of his fearful stupor. He looked at his opponent up and down, without the haze of anger and spite, really *seeing* Joker for the first time. “Wait. You... this wasn’t a theoretical situation at all, was it?”

Joker pursed his lips, “No. It wasn’t.” Joker forced a jagged smirk on his face, “Time’s up, by the way. I’ve switched Personas over 20 seconds ago.”

Ojiro didn’t move, but continued to stare at him in deep thought.

Joker sighed as he pressed a hand on Ojiro’s shoulder, a blood red mark sticking to his costume.

“Ojiro Mashirao has been disqualified! Please report to the Observation Deck!”

“Ojiro...”

A voice right behind Joker made him whirl around and shove his hand out to... nothing. Joker furrowed his brow as he felt the curve of a shoulder in his grasp, but there was nothing there.

“Hagakure?” Ojiro whispered, “How long have you been there?”

“Um... this whole time. I heard everything.”

Joker slowly peeled his hand away and stared at the handprint floating in the air.

“Hagakure Toru has been disqualified! Please report to the Observation Deck!”

“Please tell me you have a costume that’s not just a pair of gloves and boots.” Joker said.

“I-I do!” Hagakure’s gloved fists waved wildly in the air, “U-Um... th-they took my DNA to make a full body suit that’s just as invisible as me! Th-these gloves and boots are just to show people where I am!”

“Thank goodness.” Joker sighed, “Otherwise, after the conversation I just had with Ojiro, I’d be flying off on Kohryu right now for a *talk* with Nezu.”

She giggled before she walked over to Ojiro. The position of her gloves, boots, and ominous floating handprint revealed that she crouched next to Ojiro after he slowly slid down the wall.

“Hagakure, I... I’m sorry.”

“Eh? What for!?”

Ojiro looked at Joker with the remnants of horror.

“Remember this lesson, Ojiro.” Joker offered a softer look at the student, “It’s all well and good to have morals and set values, but the real world doesn’t give two shits about them. There are people out there who will take advantage of that and use them against you. But that’s why you’re here to learn and grow, so that there won’t be as many Shiho’s in the world. Right?”

Ojiro glanced at the place where Hagakure’s head probably was.
“Yeah. That’s right.”

Joker gave him an honest grin, “Good. You two get out of here. I have your other classmates to deal with.”

“Wait, Joker!” Ojiro gathered himself up as Joker raised a brow, “Shiho... what happened to her?”

“She fell into a coma from her injuries, but she eventually regained consciousness. With time, support from her friends and family, and

extensive physical therapy, she's on her way to a full recovery."

"And... this teacher?"

Joker locked eyes with Ojiro and smirked darkly, "He suddenly decided one morning to have a... *change of heart*, and revealed his crimes in front of the entire school. He'll be put away for a long, long time."

Ojiro understood the unspoken implication, but his shoulders fell as he glanced at Hagakure once more.

Joker walked away.

"Joker..." Aizawa's voice trilled through the comms, *"Are you sure you're alright to continue the lesson? That was... intense. The previous groups heard everything from the cameras around Ground Gamma."*

"I'm fine, Eraser. It's a good lesson for everyone to learn. At least it won't be through the hard way... like how I had to learn."

"If you're sure. The time limit is half over for this round, so keep that in mind when you go off to torture the other students."

Joker gave a bright grin and a two-finger salute to the nearest camera.

"What in the world is 1-A doing?" Monoma gaped, "They lost two of their members!"

Tsuburaba smirked, "That's fine! Makes it easier for us to get Joker!"

Kamakiri hissed with laughter and other exchanged confident looks.

"Don't be stupid." Hitoshi snapped, "They still have their strongest power houses like Midoriya and Todoroki."

Awase nodded, "And people like Yaoyorozu and Tokoyami for strategy..."

"And Iida for speed." Honenuki added.

"They're right." Kendo stood at the forefront of the group, her eyes sharp, "Not to mention we still have to face off against Joker himself. We watched how he dealt with the last groups, so don't let your guard down!"

They all froze when the ground rumbled, and a pillar of smoke rose nearby.

"Uh, what the-" Monoma couldn't get anymore words out before the entire world fell to chaos.

Joker dropped down in front of them, a cheeky grin on his face despite being covered in dust, and he didn't even look surprised as he turned to them. "Yo!"

"Get back here!"

Iida was nothing but a blur trailed by clouds of dust, and Joker barely managed to throw himself out of harms way before a fierce kick from Iida soared over his head and dispelled the dust. Tokoyami, wreathed in Dark Shadow's terrible form, descended with Midoriya crackling in green lightning.

"We won't let you get away!" Tokoyami howled.

"Oh really?" Joker laughed as his coattails weaved with his movements to dodge Dark Shadow's claws, "What does Class 1-B think about that?"

The 1-A students flinched and whirled around to their sister class.

"Everyone!" Kendo waved her arm towards the fray, "Like we planned! Go!!"

Honenuki stomped his foot, and the ground between them and Joker softened like quick sand.

“No you don’t!” Great shards and towers of ice bloomed within the span of a breath, with Todoroki sliding down one of the walls. His glare was as frosty as the plummeting temperatures as a glacier rose to block their way.

“Damnit!” Kendo’s fists grew large and she began working through the ice with a snarling Shishida.

“That dubious thief led 1-A right to us!” Monoma chuckled as he ran a hand through his hair, “That’s a kind of underhandedness I can respect.”

“Shinsou, Monoma, see if you can’t find a way to sneak around. Kuroiro and Yanagi, do the same in the other direction!” Kendo said over her shoulder, “The rest of us will work to get through this to distract 1-A and Joker!”

The designated pairs broke off. Shinsou went with Monoma to the left, Kuroiro and Yanagi to the right.

Hitoshi used his capture weapon to jump to a higher vantage point, Monoma took a few seconds to follow.

“There’s only a few minutes left for the round.” Monoma muttered as they crept around the glacier, “Do you think we can pull this off?”

“If we’re smart about it.” Hitoshi stated, “But Joker’s unpredictability plays to his favor, and he’s gathered everyone together in a smaller space... nobody can go all out without getting in their own team’s way.”

Monoma sighed, “As long as we win at least one of the rounds, I don’t really care.”

The massive glacier fell in a great swathe of misty ice. The sound of combat bounced off every pipe, and it wasn't another few seconds before there was a flash of light and heat from somewhere up ahead. Dark Shadow's screech of rage coiled around them.

"Tokoyami Fumikage, Kuroiro Shihai, Yanagi Reiko, and Kamakiri Togaru have been disqualified! Please report to the Observation Deck!"

Monoma looked distraught as they finally rounded onto the battle, safe for the moment from their higher vantage point.

Ice covered everything in a thick sheet on the ground.

Sero and Asui kept to the air, jumping or shooting tape to swing from. Whenever they tried a long ranged attack to get at Joker, it was blocked by one of Tsuburaba's air barriers. Honenuki, Todoroki, and Iida were locked in a wild clash of quirks.

Midoriya and Yaoyorozu worked together to flit around Joker's movements, but thanks to Shishida's beast form and Kendo's relentless punches, they could never get close enough. Shoji currently overpowered Awase and Komori into fleeing.

Hitoshi muttered under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What is it?"

"You know, our teachers never explicitly said it had to be 1-A vs 1-B vs Joker." Hitoshi muttered. "In both rounds, your classes have gotten in the way of each other."

"As if we'd ever work with them." Monoma winced and rubbed at a spot on his chest, "... Maybe."

Asui jumped off Tsuburaba's next air barrier, but ended up colliding with Sero. They fell in a mess of tangled limbs, and Joker didn't wait

to strike. Iida tried to stop lest he run them over, but the ice and a clever sneak attack from Honenuki's quirk made Iida trip into them anyway. The ruckus made Kendo and Shishida distracted enough to where Joker darted between them, red handprints decorating their costumes.

Hitoshi turned to Monoma and raised a brow as the robot's voice echoed over the speakers.

"Asui Tsuyu, Iida Tenya, Sero Hanta, Kendo Itsuka, and Shishida Jurota have been disqualified! Please report to the Observation Deck!"

"Joker's obviously taking advantage of the rivalry your classes have. And we're losing *bad* because of it. Eraserhead even said he barely counted the last round as 1-A's win because there was only 3 seconds left when Joker got captured."

Monoma grimaced, but said nothing.

Hitoshi checked his watch. Two minutes remained.

"Do you think you can get to Tsuburaba and copy his quirk?" Hitoshi asked as he began to fiddle with the dials on his Persona Cords.

Monoma narrowed his eyes as he scanned the battlefield. Tsuburaba did a good job at keeping people away from him, or preventing Midoriya and Todoroki getting to Joker. Honenuki and Awase were busy backing up his classmates against Shoji and Yaoyorozu. Mushrooms sprouted on Shoji and Yaoyorozu's bodies, but with Shoji's mask and the frigid temperatures from Todoroki's ice, Komori wasn't having much luck doing anything.

"I should be able to, why?"

"When I give the signal, I want you both to work together to form the strongest barrier you can around Joker and I. If my plan works, then we should get the win before time runs out."

Monoma dragged out a sigh, "Alright. I'll trust you."

Hitoshi waited in his hidden nook for Monoma to make his way to Tsuburaba, using the chaos to his advantage. The pair nodded to one another and Hitoshi waited for the perfect moment to strike after Monoma brushed his hand against Tsuburaba's shoulder.

Midoriya dove in for a kick that Joker danced around, ice shattering before he jumped back up into the pipes to plan his next strike.

Hitoshi sighed, "Forgive me, Joker." He spoke in a voice that wasn't his own, then took a deep breath and shouted, "AAAAAAH, JOKER!! I need help! Are you there!?"

Joker whirled around, all pretenses of the charming Phantom Thief shattering at the mimicry of Morgana's voice.

"Mona-"

Joker went still as Hitoshi's Quirk clamped down on him.

Hitoshi used his black capture weapon to swing down and, like he planned, Tsuburaba and Monoma's combined Quirks formed a thick barrier around them. Panic laced Midoriya's face, and he flicked a finger towards the barrier. The blast of air beat against it, but it held strong. Todoroki's fire was useless too, wrapping them in a veil of writhing flames.

Hitoshi grimaced as he felt the wills of *many* powerful beings wriggling against his control, but another presence, one who just felt like Joker, soothed them in the background. He stopped in front of his best friend, Joker's eyes scarily blank, and placed a hand on Joker's shoulder.

"Got you."

"Class 1-B wins the round! Everyone, report to the Observation Deck!"

Joker blinked out of Hitoshi's Quirk, but the smile on his face turned infectious. "Wow, good job! How did you do that?"

The barriers fell around them as all fighting ceased.

Hitoshi tugged on the rim of his hood, the other hand tapping on his metal fox mask, "Hatsume Mei made this for me. I call it the Persona Cords, and I can pretty much mimic any voice when the settings are right."

Joker smirked, "I believe you, considering you still sound like Mona."

"Right." Hitoshi turned the dial on his neck, his voice returning to normal, "Sorry."

"Don't be." Joker looked around as both remaining students gathered around, with the 1-A students slumping in defeat, "Come on, let's not keep your teachers waiting!"

They returned to the Observation Deck. Joker took his place beside the teachers as the students shuffled between their feet, trading looks and ominous silence.

Eraserhead sighed, "1-B won this round."

"Barely." Vlad King crossed his arms and frowned, "Like the first round, you all had less than a minute left, and only won because of *Shinsou's* quick thinking. Eraser and I barely count them as wins for the rest of you."

"But now begins the *real* challenge." Joker's smirk sparked dread in the students, "This third round will be a free for all with no time limit, and I won't be holding my Personas back. Do enough damage or figure out how to render them immobile, and we'll consider them disqualified. But capture *me* and the round will end no matter how many Personas are left. Prepare yourselves for the fight of your lives!"

Fafnir and so many other magnificent beings rose up behind him in a raging sapphire wave. Hitoshi recognized most of them; Amaterasu, Odin, Cybele, Mother Harlot, Lakshmi, Cerberus, Loa, Hastur, Futsunushi, and the deep and satisfactory bond he'd sensed only with Sandalphon.

One, though, he didn't recognize.

This Persona was covered head to toe in worn bandages, with all but one of his limbs severed from his body, yet floating in place as if still naturally attached. The man calmly twirled the curved dagger in his grasp, keen eyes flitting across the students in a cool and confident gaze, until those eyes finally landed on Todoroki.

Todoroki's eyes widened as he rubbed his chest, and Hitoshi wondered if this Persona had the same Arcana as Todoroki, like Hitoshi himself did with Sandalphon.

Joker leapt on Fafnir's back and the dragon descended into Ground Gamma, the echo of his chugging laughter making them shiver as the rest scattered in all directions.

"Joker and his Personas have five minutes to situate themselves in Ground Gamma." All Might's smaller form said, then he looked at Hitoshi. "Young Shinsou, what class do you choose to be with this round?"

Hitoshi looked between Class 1-A and 1-B.

"He'll obviously be with us." Monoma stated when Hitoshi didn't answer.

"As if!" Uraraka punched the air, "We made a great team the first round! We can do it again, right Shinsou?"

"Like hell." Kamikiri rasped, "He's ours."

“Shinsou can make the decision for himself!” Iida said, chopping his hand.

“Bullshit!” Bakugo snapped at Kamakiri and ignored Iida’s squawking protests, “He won *both* rounds for our classes! That means he deserves to be in the best class!”

“Oh yeah?” Kuroiro smirked, “So you admit you would’ve lost if he didn’t carry you those last three seconds.”

“Take that back you son of a-”

“*Enough !*”

Hitoshi winced when his shout garnered the attention of all 40 students. His grimace was hidden by his grinning fox mask, so he tried to project the confidence Joker showed off so easily. He stepped into the gap between classes, looking back and forth with hardened eyes.

“If you continue to fight between yourselves, then Joker will tear you to pieces and make fools out of all of you... *again* . And this time, I won’t be pulling your asses out of the fire! Joker said he’s leaving this world’s future to *both* classes, right? Well right now, you’ve proved him wrong by being a bunch of bickering brats!”

Many turned pale at his proclamation, others tore their gazes away to stare at the ground in shame.

Hitoshi squared his shoulders as he turned to his teachers, “If I have to choose, I won’t be choosing 1-A or 1-B. I’ll just choose... Class 1. Either we work together to defeat Joker and claim a tie, or I’m sitting out this third round to watch them all lose.”

Eraserhead sported a wide and terrifying cheshire grin.

Vlad King and All Might took a few steps away from the man for their own safety.

Morgana, who sat on the console below the screens, smiled at Hitoshi.

“You heard him.” Eraserhead chuckled darkly, “What will it be?”

“I suppose... if we can put our differences aside...” Yaoyorozu spoke first and stepped into the gap.

“... Yeah.” Kendo sighed and joined her, “We can’t afford to fight each other.”

“Being equal, huh?” Monoma smiled, “I guess I can live with that.”

Most of his classmates openly gaped at Monoma.

“Really?” Kamakiri asked, “Even you, Monoma?”

Monoma shrugged and looked away, “I haven’t really had the heart to hate 1-A recently. Anything I said today was just to keep up appearances.”

“Why?” Midoriya asked. “Usually you’re so... harsh. No offence!”

Monoma rubbed the same spot on his chest, “I dunno. Ever since Joker’s performance in the Cultural Festival, all that jealousy and *hate* I had just... vanished.”

Ojiro glanced at Hagakure, “... Yeah.”

“So Joker did rid you of your demons today.” Tokoyami nodded at Ojiro, “Good.”

Ojiro scratched the back of his head as his face turned red, Hagakure nudging him with her invisible elbow.

Hitoshi smiled as, one by one, both classes came together to close the gap.

A calm breeze blew through Ground Gamma, masking the faint sound of rattling chains in the distance.

Y'ALL.

We are so close to the end. One more chapter. One chapter left for the hero kiddos to get just a taste of what is to come, to see what powers they'll really have to deal with before they fully agree to help Joker in the final battle. One more chapter to wrap up some of the last interactions Joker will ever have with some of the characters. I knew for quite a long time now that once we reached the joint training arc, that this story would be **very** close to the end. And here we are at last, and thankfully the stars aligned once again to create the **perfect** update schedule.

Next chapter: Our Beginning - November 25th

Our Beginning

Chapter 97: Our Beginning

Hey, remember way back when Arsene promised to punt Mineta during the Summer Camp?

ALSO here's a playlist of Persona builds and Palace runs! The Palace videos will show some of the OG Personas(the ones who originally came with Joker to this world) while the shorter videos in the Challenge Room show the builds of our newer friends.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlhgzsrNwArRNB12y01IMm5YcZiplmxFC>

I will learn how to hyperlink someday, but today is not that day.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Fafnir is immune to physical attacks and I’m unsure of his elemental strengths,” Hitoshi spoke rapidly into his communicator, “Anima, try using the sleep bombs. Honenuki, if he gets weakened, use your quirk to subdue him!”

“Roger!”

Fafnir’s laughter echoed as students dodged his claw and tail swipes, “Is this all you have!?”

“N-Now!” Anima said.

Dozens of birds descended over Fafnir, dropping the small vials in their grasp. Fafnir looked up in time to receive shattering vials of

sleep powder to the face, and Hitoshi smirked as the dragon stretched like a cat and nodded off, as if this were a relaxing afternoon and *not* a hairy training exercise.

He didn't stir as Honenuki sunk the dragon in a pit of softened earth, leaving only his head and the tips of his front claws exposed.

"Fafnir is disqualified!" The robotic voice announced, to which many cheered as the dragon faded away with blue ash.

"Anima, return your birds to me so I can resupply them," Yaoyorozu said, *"Well done."*

"O-on it!" Anima replied as the birds flew off in a feathery cloud.

A wounded cry of a lion came from behind him, and Hitoshi winced at the next announcement.

"Cerberus is disqualified!"

"Sorry." Todoroki's somber voice trickled through the comms, *"Would... you like some fire to heal that?"*

They didn't hear the Persona's reply, but the thought made Hitoshi's heart warm.

"We should keep moving." Tokoyami whispered to Hitoshi, *"Joker could be anywhere."*

"Yeah." Hitoshi looked between Tokoyami at his left, and Kuroiro on his right, his hand reaching up to his comm, *"Yaoyorozu, Niregeki, we'll keep looking for Joker. Can you take over?"*

"Leave it to us!" Yaoyorozu stated. *"We'll use your information to the best of our abilities."*

"Remember Cybele uses wind attacks!" Niregeki stated, *"Midoriya, use your team's agility to your advantage to counter her!"*

"Got it!"

"Oi! This skull thing is weak to light!" Bakugo snapped, *"Sparkles, get your goddamn team over here! AUGH! WHAT THE-"*

"Did it just....?" Ashigo gasped, *"Did it just taste part of your soul or something!?"*

Unlike Cerberus, Loa's voice trickled in, undulating in high and low tones, *"Tower, youR spiRit is Quite deleCtable... We finD it TastEs liKe Caramel..."*

"What the fu-"

"Um... backup is on their way!"

Hitoshi smirked as he led his two teammates into the shadows, the sounds of battle taking over Ground Gamma. They travelled over the long network of pipes like practiced thieves and masters of shadow, the darkness only disturbed when Aoyama and Hagakure combined their quirks in a powerful flash of light.

Loa screeched with clouds of smoke charring its skull, the snake hiding away in the eye sockets as it tumbled to the ground.

"Loa is disqualified!" The announcer robot stated, and screams of victory rang out from the students.

"We're dropping them like flies!" Kamakiri hissed, *"We'll win this thing in no time!"*

"E-easy for you to say!!" Uraraka yelled, *"T-try avoiding Futsunushi's swords while flying through the air! I don't know if we can keep up with him!"*

"Well, I believe Kamakiri's team just offered to back you up." Nirengaki stated ruthlessly, *"Since they're free for the moment."*

Kamakiri sputtered, but Awase sighed, *"Fine. Let's go!"*

Tokoyami shivered and pulled his cloak tighter over himself.

Kuroiro raised a lazy brow at him, "Problem?"

"Dark Shadow is concerned for Joker." Tokoyami sighed when they stopped to crouch under a criss-cross of networking pipes, "I feel every bit of pain inflicted on my partner, so I wonder what damage is being done to Joker."

Kuroiro looked alarmed.

"He'll be fine." Hitoshi said.

"How can you be sure?" Kuroiro whispered, "If hurting his friends is hurting him..."

Hitoshi sighed, "Hey, Yaomomo, Amaterasu is still in, right?"

"Yes! Todoroki's team is closing in on her since she nearly overwhelmed Bondo's team."

Hitoshi hummed, "Then he's definitely fine. Joker told me once that Amaterasu has outstanding regenerative powers, so as long as he has her..."

Tokoyami's shoulders dropped with a sigh of relief, "Good. This is just a training exercise, so I would hate to inflict undue harm on him."

"Let's focus on *finding* him." Hitoshi muttered. "Jiro, any updates?"

"N-none..." She whispered back, *"I'm not hearing him anywhere, neither is Shoji. So either he's not moving or the fights are masking him."*

"He must be staying in one spot if nobody has been disqualified yet. We'll keep scouting."

Hitoshi stepped forward, but they startled when a violent tornado ripped into the sky nearby, and another blast of wind and a huge

dust cloud eradicated it. They listened, eyes wide, as specs of concrete and metal rained over them in smoldering chunks.

“Cybele is disqualified!”

Kuroiro snorted as he glowered at Tokoyami, “One of your classmates?”

“Probably Midoriya.” Tokoyami stated, “He’s been learning long ranged wind attacks with a specialized pair of gloves.”

Hitoshi snorted, and they continued onwards, if in vain. Kuroiro checked the surrounding shadows with his quirk, while Dark Shadow could stretch out and search through any nooks and crannies they could find. Hitoshi kept his eyes sharp as he found places his best friend would hide, but Joker wasn’t anywhere.

Mother Harlot was disqualified next when Ibara and her team trapped the multi-headed dragon in a thicket of thorny vines, the Persona herself throwing in the white flag with a lazy wave of her hand and greedy gulps from her chalice.

A towering skyscraper of ice trapped Hastur when it intercepted Todoroki’s team, and he was thus disqualified.

But with each Persona defeated, the more powerful ones like Amaterasu, Odin, Sandalphon, and Futsunushi inched closer together, not letting any of the uniting teams through their ranks. Hitoshi frowned when Jiro and Shoji kept reporting their shifting locations.

“Wait, aren’t we missing two?” Hitoshi asked when they circled the battles, searching high and low but finding nothing. “Lakshmi and that other one covered in bandages. Yaomomo?”

“No,” Yaoyorozu said in dawning realization, *“We’ve had no reports about those two...”*

“Then they must be with Joker.” Hitoshi said as he took out a small map of Ground Gamma from one of his cloak pouches and spread it on the ground between his teammates. He took out a red pencil and marked it, “Odin is here. Amaterasu here. Futsunushi here, and Sandalphon there...”

Tokoyami’s eyes widened when Hitoshi marked the circle the X’s formed, “He must be within the center, waiting for us.”

“Waiting there, when so many of his friends are getting disqualified?” Kuroiro narrowed his eyes at the map, “It doesn’t make sense unless he’s planning an ambush, but he’s going to be ridiculously outnumbered at this rate.”

Hitoshi clutched his chin, “I’m not really familiar with Lakshmi’s abilities, and I have no idea what that one covered in bandages can do. Knowing Joker, he has some sort of plan.” He looked up at his teammates, brows furrowed, “This round can still go either way.”

Kuroiro swallowed.

Tokoyami’s feathers puffed up, and his hand reached to the communicator, “Nirengeki, Yaoyorozu, how are all the teams holding up? Is anyone injured?”

“Um... many teams are starting to get tired, and switching out more and more as the final four battles are proving to be the most difficult. They’ve even gotten wise to Anima’s birds, so inflicting status ailments are impossible now.” Nirengeki explained as tremors shook Ground Gamma. *“There are a few injuries, but even minor injuries will wear anyone down after a while...”*

“Over forty minutes have passed so far. Hang in there, everyone!” Yaoyorozu declared.

Tokoyami gave a mirthless chuckle and bowed his head, as if already in defeat, “In other words, Joker will be well-rested. If the circle of four Personas continues to close enough to reach Joker,

then it will be six powerful Personas and a fully rested Joker versus...”

“Forty-one extremely tired and/or injured students.” Kuroiro looked to the sky, “That clever bastard.”

Hitoshi grimaced, “Yaoyorozu, Nirengeki, did you hear that?”

“Yes, *we did*.” Nirengeki whispered in dejection.

“*What should we-*”

Yaoyorozu was cut off as an immense glacier rose and their hearts lurched at the small form hovering before its deadly onslaught. A bright flash of light burned their eyes, an explosion and ensuing shock wave ripped through the training ground in waves of sweltering heat and frigid ice.

Hitoshi swore when the fallout encroached, “Hang on!”

Dark Shadow burst out of Tokoyami and wrapped itself around the three of them, grunting when harsh carpets of dust blew over them. Their ears popped at the intensity of the howling gales. It drew back when the dust finally settled, and they looked in horrified awe.

The glacier took on an odd shape as a small ball of fire, *a radiant sun brought forth by the Ultimate Shinto deity*, melted most of it into a backwards sculpture resembling a deranged lotus flower. The mini-sun winked out of existence with a flick of Amaterasu’s hand, and she slowly lowered herself to the meteoric crater in the ground.

Many of the buildings and networks of pipes in the area were flattened in a single moment.

Kuroiro laid himself out on the broken ground, limbs spread as sprinkles of ice fell across Ground Gamma like snow, “Is it too late to surrender?”

“We’re *not* surrendering!” Hitoshi snapped.

Tokoyami put one shaky hand on Dark Shadow's muzzle, the other reaching up to his comm, "Yaoyorozu, is everyone alright?"

"Y-yes, there are additional few injuries, but- wait!"

"They... they're falling back?" Nirengeki said.

"Yes!" Uraraka added, *"Futsunushi stopped attacking and is running away?"*

"Same with Odin ." Iida stated, breathless and wheezing, *"What are they doing?"*

Hitoshi pursed his lips, "Going to Joker. This is our chance to rest and patch up any injuries before pushing forward."

"True." Yaoyorozu said, *"The teachers haven't called a stop, and we don't have a time limit. Everyone, gather at point Zeta. We'll take a rest and form another plan there!"*

"Wait a moment... I hear something in the direction the Personas are going!" Jiro shouted, *"Tapping... like morse code? It spells-"* She took a sharp breath, *"It's saying 'I'm waiting.'"*

"Okay. I'm terrified." Kaminari said, his voice higher pitched.

"Can this class be over already!?" Mineta yelled.

Kendo sighed, *"There's still a chance for us to win, but it doesn't look good."*

"M-maybe we should just give Monsieur Joker our surrender-"

"NOBODY'S STOPPING UNTIL SOMEBODY WINS, SPARKLES!!" Bakugo shouted.

Hitoshi groaned as he helped Tokoyami and Kuroiro into standing, "Let's go. We won't get anywhere by standing around."

“Do you really think we stand a chance against Joker?” Tokoyami asked bitterly.

Hitoshi shared a steep look with Kuroiro. “Yes.”

Kuroiro smirked, “It’s going to be up to us three, isn’t it?”

“If we combine our skills to catch Joker off guard for even one moment-” Hitoshi’s smirk shown within the glint in his eyes, “Then that’s all we need.”

Tokoyami snorted, “Very well. I’ll follow the both of you to victory.”

The sound of chains nearby startled them. They whirled around in the direction the sound came from as an... odd feeling settled over their bodies. The taste of metal on their tongue, terror singing in their souls. A cold shadow crawling over their graves. Ice creeping through their veins to freeze their hearts.

“Okay, we heard chains but there’s nothing there.” Kuroiro scowled as his voice trembled against his will, “What’s going on?”

“It... could be one of Joker’s other Personas?” Hitoshi tried, but something in his gut writhed, instincts screaming to *get away*, “Let’s hurry to the rest of our classmates.”

Hitoshi took his two teammates and fled from the tempest of bloodlust slowly flooding Ground Gamma.

Joker sipped coffee from a thermos to hide his pleased smirk. He sat on the edge of a circular tower, legs dangling off the side. Attis hovered behind him on his left, Lakshmi standing on her feather-light toes to his right.

“Is that genuine pride you’re feeling, Trickster?” Satanael asked.

"It's the complete opposite of what they did in Rounds 1 and 2."
Joker packed away his thermos and leaned forward, *"They learned their lesson, and they learned it fast. How could I not be proud?"*

"It was the Moon." Sandalphon approached from the right, the wind between his metal feathers whistling softly, "I overheard it was *his* idea, or else he'd sit out and let everyone be annihilated."

"Quite admirable, getting these rambunctious children to cooperate." Amaterasu descended from above with a smile on her face. She looked at Attis with pride, then turned to the warped ice lotus taking up the northern horizon. "The Hanged Man erected another glacier in the nick of time."

"I would expect no less from him." Attis nodded.

"They did much better than expected," Futsunushi chuckled warmly as he floated towards them at their back, "Such spirited youngsters!"

"Now they gather around us." Odin stood at the bottom of the pillar. He turned away from Joker in a flare of his cape and jabbed his spear forward, "It is time for the main show, is it not?"

Joker stood and gave a sweep of his surroundings with Third Eye. They entered his normal field of vision one by one, some covered in light bandages, but their expressions determined all the same.

He let himself be spotted as the students surrounded him on the ground, some standing high up on pipes, those like Setsuna's dismembered body parts, several birds, and a floating Uraraka circling him in the air.

"Finally showing your face, huh Joker!?" Bakugo grinned as all students took on battle stances.

"I wouldn't miss out on such excitement!" Joker's smirk stretched from ear to ear as his head swiveled to study both classes, "I'm impressed you disqualified so many Personas so quickly."

“This is your one chance, Joker!” Iida chopped his arms from the group of front line fighters, “Surrender, or else we’ll give everything we have to win this!”

“So confident! But I refuse.” Most students’ bodies tensed, ready to leap at the slightest movement, when his smirk turned sinister, “After all, how do you know you haven’t played right into the palm of my hand?”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” Monoma shouted, though his face was pale with fear, “You haven’t disqualified *any* of us! Even with your friends being as strong as they are, how do you expect to face all of us at once!?”

“Yeah!” Kendo jabbed a finger at him, “You’re bluffing!”

“Am I?” Joker tilted his head

Ibara narrowed her eyes as her vines crawled towards him, “Don’t you dare underestimate us!”

“Well, Lakshmi?” Joker looked at his Persona, “What do you think about their confidence?”

Lakshmi chuckled as she twirled around in an elegant dance. Beautiful lights weaved around every student, many gasps broke out as they found their strength and vitality ripped away.

Uraraka and Setsuna faltered in the air, others stumbled or knelt down as their legs felt weak, or their breath stolen.

“You know...” Joker smiled as strained expressions glared up at him in sweet defiance, “I never thought I’d use these skills. After all, I never really find myself so... *thoroughly surrounded* . Attis?”

Attis sliced his dagger through the air. This time the multicolored lights of a Thermopylae surrounded Joker and his Personas - *brighter, sharper, colors more intense and pure* - and their increased

power *sang* through the air and pressed down on the students' weakened bodies.

Joker pulled out the ink pad and pressed his hand on it, flexing his fingers as his sinister grin intensified, "If you want to survive, then stand up and fight!"

"WE'LL *DESTROY* YOU, YOU BASTARD!!" Bakugo screamed before he charged forward with sputtering explosions.

Joker shot his grapple to a nearby pipe and swung through the air as the students charged under Bakugo's war cry. Attis descended with Joker as they landed beside Odin, Amaterasu and the others turned in the other directions to fight back the rest.

"Strength..."

Odin raised his spear as Bakugo shot at him, wrenching the boy away with a twist of his spear to toss him with no more effort swatting a fly.

"Speed..." Joker grinned when Bakugo's wild snarl cut off at his collision with another tower, and he sauntered forward as another rushed him.

"*Recipro Burst!!*"

Joker ducked under the exhaust and whipping winds of Iida's kick. Attis snapped into action with a swipe of his blade to get Iida to back off, and the earth boiled under their feet as Attis summoned a relentless pool of lava to separate them further, stopping Ibara's vines and Honenuki's quirk dead in their tracks. The warm light and intense heat waves warped Joker's wide smile into a terrifying leer.

"Defense..."

Kirishima, Tetsutetsu, and Shishida launched themselves at Sandalphon, but Sandalphon simply smiled as he held up his hand.

Pillars of light ripped apart the earth and seared them with holy light, Kirishima and Testsutestu's quirks covered their bodies as they shielded Shishida from the worst of it, but they were lined in cracks and painful breaks.

"All of these are needed for a battle, of course." Joker looked around to the chaos; Futsunushi's swords soaring through the air, Amaterasu's junihitoe glowing from the miniature sun cutting off many of the elemental quirks, to Lakshmi as she twirled around Tsuyu and Midoriya's attempts to capture her while she threw out more debuffs to them and the surrounding students. "But what really stands out in a successful battle is strategy, honing in on your opponent's weakness and taking every advantage for yourself."

Bakugo tore himself out of the wreckage, fury etched in his grime-covered face.

"Strategy, huh?"

Joker grinned as Hitoshi stepped out of the shadows of a nearby pillar beside Tokoyami, who had Dark Shadow wreathed over his body like living armor.

"I was wondering where you were, Wildcard." Joker said.

Hitoshi's hand fell to the hilt of a familiar black and white blade at his back, his other hand tapping something in his ear, "You might have weakened us and put us up against some pretty incredible gods, but you know what?" Hitoshi drew the blade as Tokoyami widened his stance, "It doesn't matter how many times we're weakened, or what unstoppable power houses you throw at us! You entrusted the fate of this world to us Joker, so no matter how many times we're knocked down, we're going to get right back up and win! We're going to *prove* that we're worthy enough to protect this world! Isn't that right, everyone!?"

All across the Ground Gamma, the students' voices rallied in agreement. Their willpower restored as they stood up to his

Personas with renewed efforts, and Joker couldn't help the warm smile on his face.

Bakugo grinned, "What do you need me to do, Einstein?"

Hitoshi narrowed his eyes at Attis.

Odin had fallen back a ways, fending off a group of front line fighters encouraged by Hitoshi's words.

"Separate Attis and Joker." Hitoshi took a step forward, and Bakugo's eyes snapped to something on Hitoshi's back before he looked back at Joker, "We need Joker alone for a bit."

Bakugo flexed his fingers, "Fine! Just don't take forever! I'd like to win *sometime* today!"

Bakugo shot off with much more power than before, and Attis rose to meet him, only to be startled when Bakugo suddenly changed directions mid-air, flipping between he and Joker to separate them with a powerful *boom* from each hand. Joker jumped away in one direction, Attis the other, but Bakugo chased Attis with a flurry of explosions.

Joker whirled at the sound of rapid footsteps and threw himself aside when Hitoshi swung Joker's own dagger at him. Hitoshi kept stern eye contact with Joker when they danced together, Hitoshi swinging and Joker dodging the silvery arcs in the air.

Joker laughed as he pulled himself into an elegant backflip, tailcoats billowing, "You've improved so much."

"Thanks. I had a great teacher to get me started." Hitoshi flipped the dagger around in his grasp, the glint in his eyes burning into Joker, "And several after that, actually."

Joker pulled on his glove with a smirk, "I told you all that training with Futsunushi would pay off!"

Hitoshi scoffed, though Joker would never know how Hitoshi's hood hid the redness of his ears at the praise.

Tokoyami lunged from behind, and Hitoshi eagerly joined in.

Dark claws and shadows, singing silvery arcs of a dagger, the fading noises of battle as the pair pushed Joker farther from his Personas. The sound of the other battles faded as the distance stretched.

Their teamwork was seamless enough that Joker couldn't find an opening to counter and disqualify them without taking a blow. It wasn't until Hitoshi traded a *look* with Tokoyami that the latter finally took the initiative, Dark Shadow's bulk growing larger over Tokoyami body.

Joker frowned as Hitoshi fell back, hidden by the writhing claws of darkness when Tokoyami made swipes at him. Tokoyami nearly hit too close as Joker's buffs ran out and they were back on even playing ground. Tokoyami sensed this and pressed forward with Dark Shadow's demonic cry.

They stepped into a patch of sunlight filtering through the thick tangle of pipes, Tokoyami stuttered as Dark Shadow shrank-

Joker bolted forward, hand outstretched with an ink covered glove...

Only to be wrenched back when a black capture scarf wrapped around his arm, mere inches from Tokoyami's body.

Joker looked at the inky scarf and followed it to Hitoshi while Tokoyami retreated. Joker's guard shot up when there was a hint of victory in Hitoshi's stance, and a strange chill came over Joker's body.

"You think this is all you need to win?" Joker asked as he twisted his arm to unravel the cloth.

Hitoshi called it back with a flick of his wrist, “No.” Hitoshi took on another stance that was far too similar to Aizawa’s, “But we’ve already won. You might as well give up now.”

Joker blinked before his costume suddenly came alive, binding his arms and legs to his body against his will. “What the-”

“Now!” Hitoshi cried as he shot his capture scarf back at Joker to further restrain him.

Dark Shadow howled as it separated itself from Tokoyami and lunged at Joker. The living darkness expanded around him and trapped him in a bubble of shifting shadows. Joker struggled, but ultimately, he was trapped.

“Don’t think you can get out of this one.” A voice said, and Joker had to squint to see Kuroiro’s pale hair and dark skin... coming out of the shoulder area of his costume.

“Joker, can you move?” Aizawa asked in their shared comm.

Joker tried to shift, but Kuroiro narrowed his eyes and tightened his hold over his quirk. Paired with Hitoshi’s capture weapon and Dark Shadow’s suffocating bubble...

He relaxed, “No, Eraser. The kids win.”

“Joker has been captured, Class 1 wins!!” The robot announced to Ground Gamma.

Dark Shadow crowed in joy as it let them go. Hitoshi called back his capture weapon and Kuroiro... Joker watched in slight fascination as the student sunk back into his costume only to emerge from the shadows at his feet.

Kuroiro shivered as he stood fully, “What in the world is your costume made out of? It gave me weird chills.”

“Oh.” Joker rolled his shoulder, “My costume *is* a part of my soul and the accumulation of my Will of Rebellion, so no wonder it felt strange to you.” He ignored Kuroiro’s startled stare and turned to Hitoshi, “How did that happen? I never sensed Kuroiro.”

“I hid in his costume at the start, and then the capture weapon.” Kuroiro smirked, “My quirk works with any sort of shadow or black material, so...”

“Aren’t we great!?” Dark Shadow clung to Tokoyami’s shoulders, “We beat Joker, Fumi!!”

Tokoyami chuckled, “I know. Should we return to our teachers?”

Joker cast his senses to his Personas as all combat ceased. Though some students bore injuries and exhaustion made them drag their feet, his remaining Personas returned to him.

“Hitoshi, can you tell everyone to gather at the pillar I was standing on before? Cybele can heal them when we get there.”

“On it.”

Joker turned and started walking in the direction they came from as Hitoshi made Joker’s request known across their comm. Tokoyami and Kuroiro trailed after Hitoshi like his right and left hands, and they all followed Joker.

“Huh, I didn’t think we went *this* far away from everyone.” Kuroiro stated.

“The thrill of battle can make one distracted over such things.” Tokoyami smiled at Joker, “Especially when it’s an exciting one.”

“You got that right.” Hitoshi grinned under his fox mask, “My heart was pounding the whole time, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt... so *focused* on a single task before.”

Joker took the next step forward, grinning as he was about to compliment Hitoshi again-

And in the next step-

- the rippling sound of chains-

-the air tainting with dread and the scent of old blood-

-Freezes him in place with a dawning look of horror.

Hitoshi stopped, "That sound..." Hitoshi paled at Joker's expression, "Joker, what's wrong?"

"What do you mean 'that sound'?" Joker snapped, and Hitoshi winced at the intensity in which Joker stared at him, "You've heard it before?"

"Y-yeah." Kuroiro took a step back, "We... we heard it near the start of the round. Before the class surrounded you."

The sound of chains grew louder, and Joker's blood chilled when screams rang out ahead of them.

A few moments before...

"I can't believe we won!!" Mineta cried as he flopped over. "It's a miracle!!"

"Just barely." Monoma looked to the sky, "We're all beat up and I doubt Joker has a single scratch on him."

"Would it be a true victory, then?" Yaoyorozu asked, frowning.

"Yeah." Midoriya nodded, "If they won by capturing Joker, and by following the rules set out beforehand... it would be a real victory for us!"

“Who cares?” Bakugo scoffed and planted himself on top of a piece of fallen wall, “We won. Does it really matter *how* when our teachers already called it?”

“Agreed!” Iida chopped his arm, “And I’m sure we’ll get to see it firsthand when we return to the Observation Deck!”

Monoma opened his mouth, but froze at the sudden chill in the air. Shivers travelled up their spines while hairs stood on end. Bakugo wasn’t the only one to rub at the goosebumps sprouting on his arms.

Todoroki blinked as many eyes turned to him, but he shook his head, “That’s not me.”

“Then...” Midoriya frowned, “What’s this feeling, all of a sudden?”

Bakugo scowled when the echo of chains rattled through their skulls, and a great puddle of bubbling blackness appeared behind Mineta, roiling and rising and *bursting* into a terrifying form. Black ichor rained on them as the *thing* slowly rose like a cursed phantom from an ancient grave.

A dark tattered coat dripping in crimson and black blood, body wrapped thrashing chains, and in its hands it held two large revolvers. Its *horrible wheezing* squeezed through the ragged bag tied over its head, with a single, soul piercing eye blazing through the lone hole.

“What is this?” Monoma laughed as he walked right up to it, “Come on, Joker! I thought the round was over!”

Click .

“... Huh?” Monoma stared at the barrel of the gun on his chest.

A *blast* of bright power fractured the earth at their feet, and Monoma was sent careening into the tower Joker stood on earlier. Cracks

broke the tower under the strain, and Monoma coughed and he collapsed to the ground.

“Monoma!” Kendo screamed as she ran to him and turned him over.

“Wh-what is...” Monoma coughed up red, and put his hand over his heavily bleeding chest.

“E-Everyone!” Shinsou’s voice came from the comms, flooded with panic and fear, *“J-Joker says that’s not one of his Personas! He’s ordering everyone to fall back!”*

Bakugo’s eyes went wide, “Wha -”

Shock and fear pranced through the group, their rabbiting hearts pounding loud in their ears as they slowly turned to look at this *thing*, a snarl of dust and bone creaking from its throat as it readied its revolvers.

Joker and his Personas went hard on them. Caused bruises and scrapes, some minor frostbite or burns. Small cuts that didn’t bleed much and could be taken care of within a minute of first aid. There were no broken bones or dislocated joints.

But this...

This was sheer brutality.

“YOU BASTARD!! WE’RE NOT RUNNING AWAY!” Bakugo shot off with an explosion, one palm held out while the other hand formed a small hole over it, “AP Shot!”

The *thing* turned as the focused blast hit it right in the face. Bakugo smirked as the demon had bent backwards over its spine, its entire head smoking and arms dangling.

Then, with a *horrible wheeze* and a flash of its eye, its arm moved in a dark blur. Unharmed was it by Bakugo’s attack as it aimed a gun at him and fired. A blast of wind punched him in the chest and knocked

the breath out of him, and his classmates screamed when a few close to him were hit too.

Bakugo landed hard on his back and pulled himself into standing, fire and pain lancing through his ribs. He coughed at the unexpected agony, his ribs shifting in a way they shouldn't as another wave of pain rooted him to the ground.

Ashido threw a glass bottle at it, shocking the others into attacking.

Todoroki shot a stream of fire, Ashido skid around it and threw any number of bottles, the others surrounding it with battle stances.

The demon reveled in the combat as it shrieked in ear-piercing joy, untouched as it shook off fire, ice, and lightning, acid and flash grenades, barely taking notice as Midoriya, wreathed in green lightning, kicked its chest with meteoric strength. Midoriya got a gun to the face and a blast of Psy magic for his efforts.

Bakugo staggered a step forward, his fractured ribs protesting in another wave of fire as more of his classmates were being brutalized.

"D-don't move!" Koji was at his side, hand on his shoulders as their classmates continued the combat in equal painful screams and battle cries. "Y-you're hurt!"

"Hands off me!" He panted, "I have to help against that thing!"

"B-but-!"

Iida came through next, a speeding bullet train donned in silver armor. The exhaust pipes on his legs blazed bright blue as his kick generated its own wind, the attack not landing on the demon's main body, but instead knocking one of the guns from its grasp.

"Everyone!" Iida shouted as the revolver went flying, "Those guns shoot magic! If we can just disarm it-"

The demon's free hand grasped the chains around its body, and Iida's eyes widened as the demon thrust its arm forward, the chain snapping around his lower body. The demon *pulled*, and Iida went with it.

Kirishima yelled as the demon used Iida as a flail, knocking him against his classmates in a savage path, and any who tried to help were knocked back by silver armor. With a final cry, it tossed Iida's limp body away to land in the rubble.

"Iida!" Tsuyu's hands hovered over their Class Rep, but he was still.

"How are..." Kaminari's legs trembled as the demon hovered over them, "How the hell are we supposed to win?"

The chains wrapped back around its body, and they all felt the same dread as its remaining gun *clicked*. The next thing they knew, everything was white. White hot agony through their bodies. The blue sky turning white with an explosion of unrelenting power. White noise drilling into their ears as each and every hero student was on the ground, groaning in pain as their skin *burned*.

Yaoyorozu and Kendo had thrown themselves over Monoma, Tsuyu over Iida, just like Koji tried to protect Bakugo from the blast.

Bakugo peeled his eyes open, vision blurred, but just clear enough to see the dark demon float over Mineta. Something was different as the demon pointed his remaining gun at Mineta's head, the taste of *death* filtering through the air like it hadn't before. Bakugo tried to move, tried to stand as the idiot grape just sat there, gaping into the barrel while shaking like a leaf, but his ribs *burned* and shot through his body with lances of pain.

"Look out!" Joker descended onto the scene as Satanael burst into reality with many others, blue flames writhing around them.

Satanael punted Mineta with the tip of his boot, the student flying into Yanagi and Rin with a strangled scream. Satanael curled his wings

around himself as the *click* of a readied gun was too loud in the sudden silence, casting death unto him.

But unlike the students, Satanael was unaffected by the spell, scowling in *fury* . It readied it's next attack with a bloody gurgle.

Fafnir howled in rage as he tackled the Reaper, jaws clamping down on its wrist and forcing its arm up as it pulled the trigger.

The students cried out as the unrelenting light of a Megidolaon exploded over the sky and turned the entirety of Ground Gamma into stark white and black shadows. The *thrum* of the explosion hit their bodies and send a wave of dust in all directions.

"Joker, what the hell!?" Bakugo spat through the pain. "What is that!?"

"We call it the Reaper." Joker wrenched Paradise Lost from the sheath on his hip, "I didn't think it'd actually show its face here."

Fafnir shook his head like a wild hound and dragged the Reaper further away from the students, Cybele dropped from the sky and slashed the Reaper's chest with her blades, her smirk bloodthirsty as oily black ichor splattered on the ground.

"*Joker, what's happening?*" Aizawa asked over all of their comms, "*The cameras went out-*"

"Tell Mona it's the Reaper! I'm engaging a powerful Shadow and ordering the students away!"

"*What!?*"

"WHAT!?" Bakugo shouted in tandem to Eraser's, "You can't be serious, Joker! We're not leaving you to deal with this... *thing!* "

Bakugo hissed in pain and clutched his ribs. Joker stared at him, and then slowly turned to see Monoma bleeding at the base of the tower, Tsuyu clutching Iida over her shoulder, of the many others who were

on the ground bearing injuries and burns. Kendo's eyes were laced in tears as she held Monoma while Yaoyorozu pressed freshly made bandages on his wounds. It only took moments for the bandages to be soaked in *red* .

"Fine, then. Just stay and watch." Joker said, his voice firm and unrelenting.

Something settled within Joker as more of his Personas appeared and engaged this Shadow, their movements almost tinged in mania. Joker's shoulders straightened, and Bakugo's stomach fell to his feet at the unhinged *rage* in Joker's eyes. Even Bakugo flinched back at its intensity, hackles raised.

"Cybele. Loa, Messiah Picaro, you stay back, too." The deities seamlessly switched places with Zaou-Gongen, Futsunushi, and Hastur to appear at Joker's side, "Heal them and make sure none of them do anything stupid. Loa, you stay away because of your weakness, but see if you can't drain him from afar."

"Got it, Trickster." Cybele stated.

She swung her sword in an arc, and familiar lights of woven green threads drifted around them. Bakugo breathed a sigh of relief as the light sunk into his skin and the pain ebbed away. He would deny the inkling of relief as Iida finally lifted his head. Monoma sat up, eyes wide, as he removed the bandages despite Kendo and Yaoyorozu's fussing, to see unmarred skin.

"This is an order, from a staff member to students. Stay behind my Personas." Joker faced the Reaper with a grin, his dagger glinting, "I'll take care of him."

His coattails billowed as he stepped forward, other Personas charging around him. Cu Chulainn and Odin jabbed their spears in powerful twin blows. Hastur's tentacles undulated as countless eyes from the abyss opened and singed the Reaper's cloak with their beams of light.

Joker's fear faded in his unmatched anger, even as the Reaper retaliated with powerful blasts of magic. Whenever a stray attack, be it shards of ice, crackling lightning, or death singing on cursed or blessed magic, it was either Messiah Picaro or Cybele that took the damage, or redirected it away from them.

Whatever this *thing* was, it was clear to all students that Joker would make it regret showing its face and... hurting them so much.

"I don't know how you managed to get here, or why you can appear at all without the Metaverse. Did you creep through the rift when I went to get my friends?" Joker said under the gunshots aimed at his Personas, who darted in and out with claws, teeth, swords, or magic - *black blood splattering in deep pools everywhere with each hit* - "Maybe you're a fail safe Yaldabaoth threw in here after Metatron never reported back, or maybe you just wandered in by yourself. I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. I'll make you pay for daring to hurt *my* students."

Joker snapped his fingers.

Attis smiled as his passives from being surrounded by the students were still in effect, the beautiful and startling lights of a Thermopylae drenching every Persona in unrestrained power.

Lakshmi sapped the Reaper's strength with her debuffs.

The horrible screeches and thrash of chains continued when the Reaper fired off its magic without restraint. Both red and black blood oozed down its body. Buildings crumbled and many pipes and other structures were destroyed, but still Joker did nothing but *move forward* as the Shadow began to recoil.

Shinsou, who now stood at Bakugo's side, watched in awe when Joker's mask... *disappeared* when all of his Personas were present, the final being Kohryu as his great golden body hovered over them.

Weaknesses were struck, but Joker never stopped as Amaterasu floated at his back, working with Attis to heal and soothe faster than the Reaper could damage.

Fafnir, Zaou-Gongen, Hastur, Satanael, Cu Chulainn, Odin, Cerberus, and Sandalphon wove their attacks and magic together in seamless harmony, needing barely a flicker of thought as instinct directed them.

The amount of power they forced into their attacks could shatter the sky, rend the earth, make the very air vibrate and contort to their will. And all the students could do was *watch* .

Bakugo's mouth went dry as Joker picked apart the foe they couldn't even touch.

Kohryu, Messiah Picaro, Loa, and Cybele hovered before the students as they were frozen in place by awe and terror both.

Zaou-Gongen used Charge, and the Personas surrounding the Reaper leapt away when Futsunushi's many blades *hummed* with power and honed in on the Shadow like missiles. Black blood spewed as the swords skewered the Reaper, pinning its long cloak to the pavement, another through its chest, the last nearly taking off its left arm as it tried to raise its last gun in futile retaliation.

Everything stopped when the Reaper sagged down into the swords, its head twitching to stare at Joker. With one last wheezing groan, it went completely still, and vanished in a splatter of black sludge already dissolving on the ground.

Silence.

And in that moment, Bakugo didn't know if it was a trick of the sunlight, Joker and his Personas' bodies seemed to glow for a moment. A flicker of unmatched *power* being absorbed into their soul as the last of the black ichor dissolved, as if the demon was never there at all.

Joker looked up into the sky as a lone wind threaded over them. Then, he breathed a long sigh of relief and turned towards the students, all staring at him with an overwhelming amount of emotion.

“Joker!”

He looked back over as Mona, Eraser, Vlad King, and Yagi raced to them.

“You’re a bit late to the party.” Joker smirked, “I don’t want to say ‘I told you so’, but...”

Mona flinched, “Y-yeah, I know. I’m sorry, I...” He blinked, eyes widening, “Hey, your mask is gone!”

“My mask?” Joker reached up and felt his maskless face, eyes scanning over the Personas, “All of them are out and stable... It’s just like what happened in Kamino.”

Vlad King raised his hands, “Explain. I thought Shadows wouldn’t ever appear without that app on your phone.”

“W-well, uh...” Mona jumped onto Joker’s shoulder, “I... I don’t know.”

“The Reaper isn’t a normal Shadow,” Joker frowned as he looked up into the blue sky, “But maybe... maybe the worlds are closer to merging than we thought.”

They shriveled back in horror.

“Excuse me!” Uraraka braved past the Personas and stood across from Joker, the others hesitantly gathering around, “What in the world just happened!? That wasn’t part of Round 3, was it? That thing... it’s like it was really trying to kill us!”

“Th-that would be a rough final test...” Monoma muttered as Kendo helped him into standing, the front of his costume completely destroyed.

Tsuyu helped Iida up in a similar fashion, and Bakugo scowled as Koji extended his own hand, but he took it anyway.

Joker grimaced, "I suppose we can't just forget this ever happened?"

"Hell no!" Bakugo scowled, "You said 'Shadow', so that *thing* was one of the monsters you fought at the Cultural Festival, isn't it?"

Iida, Kirishima, Yaoyorozu, and Todoroki exchanged wary glances.

Midoriya's brow furrowed as he studied Joker.

Most of Class 1-B gawked at Joker or his Personas.

"HE DID WHAT!?" Monoma gaped.

"Sensei!" Kendo stared at Vlad King, "Tell us what's happening!"

Joker looked at Eraserhead, who shrugged, "It's up to you."

"This isn't how I planned to tell them." Joker muttered. "And I didn't think Class 1-B would be involved, either. Or that it would happen right in the middle of a class!"

Vlad King pinched the bridge of his nose, "When do your plans ever go as planned, Joker?"

Yagi offered an encouraging smile, "We'll back you up, no matter what. That was my promise to you, remember?"

Shinsou walked over to Joker and grabbed Joker's shoulder, his eyes crinkling in a smirk, "Same here."

"Me too!" Midoriya walked tall and proud as he stopped on Joker's other side, "I'll stand by you if you tell them the whole truth."

Joker looked at the students again. 1-A were prepared to listen to his story, and while startled confusion took over the ranks of 1-B, they

watched Joker in rapt attention. His eyes slowly flicked over all of his Personas once more, and then he sighed.

“Alright, but listen up, because I’m only going to explain this once...”

December 8th - Night

Silence painted Nezu’s office in shades of apprehension and rigidity.

Ren stared down into his lukewarm teacup, his thumb tracing the delicate handle. Others were scattered in the space; Hawks, Ryukyu, and the others in Joker’s little group, Morgana, and of course Nezu himself as he continuously checked over everyone’s mostly untouched cups of tea. The most astonishing companion was Lavenza, who sat in the other chair in front of Nezu’s desk, holding Admiral Feesh.

Until finally, Nezu pressed the hidden button to open his office door for Aizawa and Vlad to walk in.

“Well?” Nezu asked, ears pricked forward as the rest stared at the pair.

“Class 1-A took it well enough.” Aizawa said as he crossed his arms, “Having Midoriya back it up was all they needed. And...” His eyes hardened, “Everyone in that class has agreed to help us during the final battle.”

Ren’s eyes widened while Nezu hummed happily.

“Then I suppose I’ll need to set aside from funds to get them equipped, yes?” Nezu said.

“Understood.” Ren chuckled, “I’m surprised you’re not bankrupt yet.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that! Believe me, this sort of funding is mere pocket change.” Nezu’s smile fell as his gaze landed on Vlad,

“How about 1-B? They have not been involved much in this whole affair.”

Vlad King pinched the bridge of his nose, “*Surprise* would be an understatement, but with what happened after the end of Round 3, and with those like Midoriya and Shinsou backing it up, they have no choice but to accept the truth. They want to join in on the final fight too, because I quote Monoma ‘We can’t let our sister class do it all by themselves.’”

Morgana smirked at Nezu, “Are you sure you have the budget for this?”

“Equipping 41 students definitely won’t be cheap.” Ren added.

“You let me worry about that.” Nezu said with a nod. “The school will be just fine.”

“Well, that settles it then.” They all stared as Hawks set down his teacup and stood, his red wings fluttering.

“Settles... what?” Ren asked.

Hawks exchanged a heavy look between Gang Orca and the others, then he stepped up to Nezu’s desk, pausing at Ren’s side.

“We’re staying here to help train the students, of course!”

“Eh?” Morgana blinked at him in bewilderment, “But what about all that stuff you said before about keeping the peace with the public?”

Hawks’ gaze fell to Ren, who was surprised at the *guilt* in the man’s expression. “Look,” A vibrant crimson wing wrapped around Ren and Morgana, the pair falling further in surprise as they were held with such care and strength, “We barely have two weeks. *Two weeks* . I don’t want to miss out on the little time we have left together.”

“We were late to the party when you opened the rift to get your friends *and* we didn’t even know what happened today until after the

fact.” Ryukyu leaned back on the couch with crossed arms, “Even if we have a set date for the final battle, we can’t allow something like the Reaper to happen again between now and then.”

Gang Orca nodded, “We’ll be here for you until the end.”

Ren smiled at that.

“Don’t worry about the public.” Tensei grinned as he looked between Best Jeanist and Hawks, “We’ve decided to coordinate our agencies with one another, so we have enough sidekicks to go around.”

Hawks snorted, “Kagome is certainly fired up about it.”

Nezu threaded his paws together and pinned his interest on Lavenza, who had yet to speak, “The aid to train all the students is appreciated. However, it is a question if the Reaper will be a returning danger or not. It did not, in fact, breach any of the sensors we had in place. And with the rift currently closed...”

“The Reaper is... unique.” Lavenza turned in her seat to stare at all of them in turn, hugging Admiral Feesh to her chest, “It has stalked Wild Cards of the past throughout their journeys. It is a Shadow compelled by madness and hatred, and knows no master. A living embodiment of death... though we know not if it is a means to challenge the Wild Cards themselves, or if it serves some other purpose.”

“So it wasn’t under Yaldabaoth’s orders?” Morgana asked incredulously, “It was just here by freak accident?”

“It would seem that way. It may have hid itself away while we had the rift open while the Trickster retrieved the others.” Lavenza dipped her head, “I apologize for not detecting it before it was so close to your students.”

Morgana’s ears drooped, “Even I didn’t sense it before it was *right there* .”

“Another reason for us all to be wary, then.” Nezu said, “I’ll gladly accept the assistance that Hawks and the others are offering until the final battle, if not to add to the number of eyes and ears we have on hand.”

Miruko smirked, “Damn straight! I’ll kick that thing’s ass if it thinks it can ever show it’s ugly face here again!”

“Well, someone’s excited.” Best Jeanist remarked with a hint of a smile showing in his eyes.

Nezu cleared his throat, “If that’s everything, I believe this meeting should be dismissed. It is late after all.”

The heroes exchanged glances, but with mutual nods they vacated the room. Hawks’ wing gave Ren and Morgana on least gentle squeeze before the blanket of feathers was pulled back.

Lavenza set Admiral Feesh on his chair and curtsied before she too, left to return to the dorms. More specifically, the Velvet Room in his dorm.

“Oh, and Ren?”

Ren hesitated after he stood, blinking at Nezu, “Yes?”

“I was thinking of bringing Endeavor into the fold of those who know the truth.” Nezu leaned forward, “He is one of your Arcanas, yes? His power would help even the odds against us.”

Ren exchanged a quick glance with Morgana, “I don’t see why not. We’ll think about what Persona gear would fit his skill set the best.”

“Very well! Leave it to me to inform him.” Nezu turned to his computer, grinning as he typed away, so they decided to flee while they still had the chance.

“Talk about a busy day, huh?” Morgana stretched over Ren’s shoulders before relaxing with a long sigh.

“Understatement.” Another voice deadpanned.

Ren stopped in the corner of the hallway, the both of them gaping at Aizawa leaning against the wall.

Ren looked further down the hallway where the sweep of Hawks' wings disappeared, then back to Aizawa, “You’re not walking with the others?”

“I asked them to go ahead when they saw you weren’t following immediately.” Aizawa frowned, “I... want to talk to you, Ren. Alone. If that’s alright.”

Morgana jumped off his shoulders when he nodded, tip of his tail dancing back and forth, “I’ll let the others know. But don’t stay out too long or it’ll affect your sleep!”

Ren huffed, then he turned to Aizawa with a raised brow, “Why did you want to speak with me?”

“Not here.” Aizawa pulled himself from the wall and began walking down the hall, “Come with me.”

Ren held his curiosity as he did so, following after Aizawa as they stepped out into the chilled night air. They turned their backs to the school, the dorms, the various forests and gardens around the campus. Ren’s eyes went wide when the gate leading to the outside came into view.

“We’re... leaving? Is that a good idea after what just happened?”

“Just for a little bit.” Aizawa tucked his face further into his capture weapon and refused to look Ren in the eye, “There’s one spot in particular where I want to have this talk.”

Ren frowned, but he nodded, “Lead the way, then.”

Aizawa walked on, and they only made it one street when Aizawa stopped him. “You might want to don your costume for this.”

“What-”

Aizawa threw his capture weapon somewhere into the rooftops, and leapt.

Ren looked around. They were alone, nobody would be around to see, but still...

He shook his head, donned his costume with a flaming blue flourish, and met Aizawa on the rooftop after the zip of his grappling hook.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Joker flexed his wrist as he tinkered with the grappling hook, “If we get caught-”

“We’re good enough that nobody would see us. Besides, it’s too cold for many people to be out, even villains.” He reached up to his capture weapon, “If we do encounter any trouble out here, just leave it to me.”

Joker waved a gloved hand, “If you wish.”

Aizawa shuffled on his feet, waiting as if expecting Joker to speak more, “You’re not going to ask where we’re going?”

“Nah.” Joker stepped up next to Aizawa, grinning, “I trust you.”

A look in Aizawa's eye came and went so fast that Joker couldn't decipher it before the man turned away, “Alright. Let's go.”

Aizawa jumped to the next rooftop with Joker not far behind. A certain... *peace* came over them as they traversed over the streets and sidewalks like flitting shadows, over the tiny handful of people huddling in jackets and coats as the temperature continued to fall. Joker couldn't see any stars, and the pervading chill made itself known by the white ghostly mist leaving his lips. Thankfully, Satanael and a few others had resistances to ice, so he wasn't too cold. Aizawa didn't seem bothered, either.

Joker hadn't patrolled Musutafu in several months, so exploring the city in the depths of biting frost was an entirely different ballgame to the warmth or humidity of spring and summer. Still, the exercise and freedom brought a smile to his face.

Aizawa, however, seemed focused on finding something. Too focused. He'd stop occasionally and look around before switching directions. At first, Joker paid it no mind, just enjoying the sensation of running across rooftops again, and with the unexpected company of a man who started off as an enemy and wormed his way into one of his most valued and trusted confidants.

It wasn't until Aizawa stopped a good distance away from the harbor that Joker understood. Joker frowned at the warehouses across the dark water from them, and comprehension dawned when Aizawa stared at these warehouses with bare hints of pain in his expression.

"It is rebuilt," Kohryu whispered softly, *"but this is where the raid happened."*

The other Personas in the mindscape, the ones who had yet to exist when the raid occurred, shifted at the memory of the great battle, of the hurricane Kohryu called down to cover Joker's escape. And of the pain thereafter. Though this wound had long since healed, the mental scar pulled with uncertainty.

Joker's chest tightened, but he said nothing as Aizawa turned and led them back into the city. A new weight settled in Joker as he watched Aizawa more carefully. The next time Aizawa stopped was when he hesitated at the lip of the rooftop and looked down, the cold wind whispering a memory of *'give them back!'* when Joker recognized this particular alley.

Joker nudged the man's shoulder when he was lost in thought, "Aizawa..."

"One more spot." Aizawa turned away.

Joker bit back his confusion and followed. They spent another ten minutes hopping between buildings in silence before a vaguely familiar building came into view, the perfect setting to sit and look across the city bathed in darkness and twinkling lights. The cold crafted a subdued mask to keep much of the noise at bay, draping them in an isolated veil of gold.

The place where Joker offered Aizawa a truce, and the long-earned forgiveness necessary for them to work together at the Summer Camp.

Aizawa finally stopped when they reached this rooftop, and turned to toss something at Joker.

Joker blinked at the small thermos in his hand, wrapped around it was a rolled up piece of paper tied in cord. "What's this?"

Aizawa huffed, "Coffee I made."

"It's not going to be burnt, is it?"

The man deadpanned at Joker's teasing grin, "Just try it."

"Alright." Joker popped off the cap, poured some of the still-steaming liquid in it, and brought it to his lips. It was pleasant and smooth, and not at all like the failure that was Aizawa's first attempt. Surprise made his eyes widen at the seamless balance of chocolate and nutty notes at the end. "Wow. This is actually pretty good."

Aizawa nodded at the paper tied to the thermos, "That paper on there is the blend I came up with. It took me ages to get it right."

"When did you even have time to practice?" Joker said as he replaced the cap and studied Aizawa's recipe.

"Please," Aizawa crossed his arms and looked out to the city lights, "I teach all day and mostly patrol at night. Most of the sleep I manage

is from snatching it here and there throughout the day, so believe me when I say I know how to make time when necessary.”

Joker smiled, “It’s really good.” He raised a brow. “But did we really need to come all the way out here, and... in *this* place in particular, just for me to try your coffee?”

Aizawa stilled. Then, he heaved a long sigh and sat at the edge of the rooftop. Joker went to sit next to him, the thermos sitting between them.

“I still remember your favorite coffee blend.” Aizawa’s cool gaze searched the city, “I figured it’d only be fair if you had a recipe I created, so that whenever we have these blends, no matter where we are or what we’re doing, however much time has passed since we had to say goodbye...” Aizawa turned to look at Joker with unprecedented amounts of softness, “We’ll always remember each other. Just... for everything you’ve done, Joker, thank you.”

Joker pushed past the volcanic warmth in his chest, the ball in his throat, and the way his eyes watered so quickly. He forced a grin as he unraveled the recipe and studied it again with a new intensity. “I’ll be sure to treasure it. Hell, I could ask Boss to put this up on the menu board in Leblanc.”

“Really?”

“Yup!” Joker gave Aizawa his cheekiest grin, “We could call it the ‘Grumpy Cat Blend!’”

Aizawa scoffed as he ruffled Joker’s hair, “Brat.”

Joker laughed at the warmth and fondness in Aizawa’s tone, completely the opposite of the frigid air around them. He made a point to reach into his breast pocket, pulling out Kaito’s family crest carefully tucked within Eri’s drawing. Joker smoothed out the recipe paper as best as he was able, and placed it with them before tucking all three items next to his heart.

Aizawa watched with a glimmer to his suspiciously wet eyes and a rare, honest smile on his face.

Maybe Joker should find a way to keep Bakugo's modified Seth figurine in his costume too, if to keep these items all as close together as possible. Or any number of precious gifts or mementos his other Confidants could bestow in the dwindling time they had left.

Joker blinked as something white flickered across his view.

"It's snowing." Aizawa said as they looked up into the dark heavens, "Really, now of all times."

Joker watched as large snowflakes slowly weaved through the air on calm breezes, absorbing the city lights en masse until Musutafu practically *glowed* with a white and gold aura. He held out his hand to let a snowflake land on it, absorbing the intricate and beautiful shape until it melted into a dot of water on his glove.

"We should get back before we're covered in this stuff." Aizawa stated as he stood up, specks of snow dotting his black costume.

"What, no waiting around for a snowball tournament?" Joker teased, "Afraid you're going to lose?"

"As if." Aizawa rolled his eyes, "We've been out long enough, and I don't want us getting sick."

"If you say so." Joker hid his smirk as he swept up the thermos, and they headed off towards U.A. in a mystical wonderland of glittering gold.

Ren savored the lingering taste of coffee long after they returned.

December 9 th - Morning

“-And then Joker swooped in and totally kicked its ass while the rest of us watched, too amazed at his badassery to even move.”

“Geez.” Ren ran a hand through his hair, “Hitoshi makes it sound like I wasn’t terrified of it at first. Or the injuries. Or if I got there even *seconds* later, Mineta would’ve-”

“Hey,” Hitoshi nudged him, “Everyone’s fine. So don’t stress too much about it.”

“I’m just glad everyone came out of it okay.” Risumi smiled as she refilled their cups of tea, one hand resting on her rounded belly. Ren was too out of it to pay attention the last time he saw her, but Risumi was practically radiant, “We noticed Ectoplasm clones and those little robots patrolling more often. And I *know* I’ve seen red feathers flying here and there. Is that why?”

Ren nodded. “I don’t think it’ll come back, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Ayumu hummed as he snatched one of the sugar cookies off the plate in the center of the table, “How did your previous visit to the USJ go? Hitoshi didn’t tell us anything, but we know you’ve been gone for days.”

“Ah, it went... relatively well. I reunited with my friends and everyone is working with the other worlds to get allies for the final battle.” Ren frowned, looking at Risumi’s belly before his eyes went to the floor.

“What is it?” Risumi leaned forward, “Don’t think I can’t handle a bit of bad news just because of my condition.”

Ren swallowed. “The date for the final battle is scheduled for December 25th. That’s... that’ll be the day we’ll have to say goodbye for good.”

Ayumu stilled, eyes sad but accepting.

Risumi teared up, but she held it back with her herculean inner strength, "I see. Then we just have to make every day count then, don't we?"

Ren snorted, "That's what I told Nezu."

"And he would do well to listen to you." Risumi firmly nodded. She glanced at Ayumu, "Think it's time?"

Ayumu smirked and set down his half-eaten cookie, "Yeah. It's time."

"What are you doing?" Hitoshi watched as his father rose and disappeared down the hall to his and Risumi's bedroom, returning moments later with a small folder tucked under his arm.

"I'll be entering my third trimester in January." Risumi absently rubbed her belly, "We've known the gender for quite some time now, and we've wanted to tell the both of you for a while."

"Sorry I've been so busy." Ren stated.

"Don't worry about it, sweetie." Risumi smiled warmly as Ayumu sat down and placed the folder in front of Ren and Hitoshi. "This folder here has ultrasounds and the gender. Recovery Girl has been looking after me pretty well."

Ren's mouth went dry at the folder, of the psuedo-sibling he'd never be able to meet.

Hitoshi nudged him, "You should open it."

"Me?" Ren blinked at him, "Why not you?"

"I have my whole life to get to know my baby brother or sister." Hitoshi kept his voice firm, but it did waver near the end, "It's only fair that you get the first look before... you know."

Ren pursed his lips, then looked down at the folder. Without further ado, he flipped it open before any hesitation could creep in. He

squinted at the ultrasound photos clipped to the paperwork, his heart warming at the vague image of a tiny person beginning to form. His Personas crept forward in the mindscape to see, making various noises of approval or, in Amaterasu's case, nearly weeping with joy.

"This child shall be strong!!" Zaou-Gongen roared in utmost pride, *"For the Strength, there's no other path!"*

His eyes caught the red circle at the bottom of the page, "It's... it's a girl?"

"I..." Hitoshi's voice became thick as he looked at his parents with wide eyes, "I'm going to have a baby sister?"

"You are." Ayumu smirked, and Risumi leaned forward with an odd, yet warm, expression.

The way the both of them looked at Ren and Hitoshi, their eyes glittering as if waiting for something else to happen, made Ren frown. He looked back down at the paperwork as Hitoshi's eyes filled with stars. He scanned the ultrasound photo and saw it labeled in the corner as 'Baby A.'

"Wait a minute..." Ren moved the paperwork aside to see another underneath, clipped with yet *another* photo labeled as 'Baby B.' Ren looked up, jaw dropping, "You're having *twins*?"

Zaou-Gongen's excited howling gained volume until it drowned the whole mindscape.

Hitoshi puffed out his chest, his eyes heavily watering, "I'm going to have *two* baby sisters!?"

"Yep." Ayumu's grin was incredibly warm as he looked at Risumi, "Identical twins."

Risumi nodded, "Ayumu."

Ayumu chuckled as he dug in his pockets and set two enamel key chains in front of Ren and Hitoshi in the shape of lotus flowers. The five closest petals to the center were various shades of deep blues or violets, the colors all complimenting each other, while the outer layer of petals was a lighter blue, closer to the cerulean of the flames when Ren's costume or Personas were summoned. The petals and outer edge of the charm was bordered in gold.

"This is...?" Ren picked one up to study it.

"It's the new logo for our cafe." Risumi reached into her pocket and held her charm up, and Ayumu did the same, "The five petals at the center represent me, Hitoshi, Ayumu, and the twins. The outer petals represent you, Ren."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." Ayumu smirked as he reached over and playfully poked Ren in the forehead, "The one who saved us from Silver Falcon and the Shie Hassaikai, the one who warmed our hearts and ultimately saved our business... our very lives." Ayumu traced over the cerulean petals with his index finger, "Our guardian and protector when nobody else even bothered to lend a hand. We're not lying when we say we count you as our son, too."

"Without you..." Risumi shook her head and rubbed her belly, "I doubt we would've survived."

Ren grasped the lotus charm tightly, his throat lodged with emotion.

"And not only that, we've decided- Oh!"

Ren, Hitoshi, and Ayumu were half out of their seats at Risumi's cry.

"What's wrong? Are you in any pain?" Ayumu hovered over her, hands out, "Do we need Recovery Girl? I'll run out and get her-"

“No, silly.” Risumi chuckled, “Come here, all of you. I can feel them moving!”

The three boys were fully out of their seats within the second, hands pressed against Risumi’s belly. A few seconds passed when Ren felt the tiniest of *thumps* against his palm. His Personas crept closer until they were all at the very edge of the mindscape, barely a toe away from manifesting in reality.

“I felt it!” He said, expression breaking out into a wide smile.

“Me too!” Hitoshi took a deep breath and beamed at his mother’s stomach, “Hey there, I’m your big brother, Hitoshi. I’m going to take great care of you two, you’ll see.” He gently nudged Ren’s shoulder with his own, “This is our oldest brother. He’s a real badass, you know. I’ll tell you all about him when you’re old enough.”

Ren chuckled, vision suddenly blurry.

“One of the children’s energy thrives, but...” Futsunushi’s presence darkened.

A stroke of worry flashed through Amaterasu and Cybele.

“What’s wrong?”

The barest trickle of Salvation’s energy flowed through Cybele, down Ren’s arm, and into Risumi, weak enough to generate not a single wisp of light.

Risumi’s eyes widened as she stared at Ren.

“Nothing to worry about now.” Cybele muttered.

Amaterasu sighed at Ren’s intense curiosity, *“We sensed that one of the children bore a... defect in their developing spine. Hidden enough to where it wouldn’t have been detected until it was too late, but there is no worry to be had, now.”*

“Thank you.” Zaou-Gongen’s thunderous voice faltered, *“If something happened to them and we weren’t around...”*

Attis studied Zaou-Gongen with cool eyes, *“I never pegged you as a doting father figure, Zaou.”*

Zaou-Gongen said nothing, but his fiery stance and intense, protective glare revealed all.

Ren gave Risumi a sheepish smile, one she returned with motherly warmth. She put her hand over Ren’s and squeezed, the lotus key chains still in their grasps clinking together. No words were needed, as Risumi seemed to *understand* .

Ren’s smile melted into a genuine one as he felt the next thump under his palm, stronger this time.

Yeah, this little family would be alright.

December 11 th - Afternoon

Ectoplasm gathered up books and papers from his desk, and gave Ren a glance when he didn’t move, “Are you coming along?”

“In a minute.” Ren leaned back in his chair and looked across the empty classroom, “I’ll catch up, so go ahead.”

Ectoplasm dipped his head in a nod and walked out, leaving Ren to stare down at his desk in contemplation. The Teacher’s Assistant desk, placed perpendicular to Ectoplasm’s desk, with enough space to stand and move to the writing board with ease. Windows behind him let in the cold sunlight, edges lined in snow and frost from the light blizzard he and Aizawa experienced a few nights ago.

In the silence, he heard the clock above the board ticking.

With each *tick tick*, a precious second counted down to the inevitable, and over the past few days the weight of it pressed down on *everyone* . He didn't mind it. Not in the slightest, from spending most lunch hours at the Shinsou dorm, reading stories to Eri at night, cooking and baking with Tobita and enjoying meals with this world's Phantom Thieves and the teachers. The rest of the time he was usually with students or tending to his duties as a TA.

The strain of having less and less time affected them all.

Heavier eyes and rough nights. Helping hands that held Ren's longer and longer. Hell, last night the teacher's dorm had a movie night. Eri and Morgana sat on his lap, with every one of his teammates pressing in from all sides. He didn't even question how Shuichi and Lady Stubbs laid over the top of the couch without getting tired and falling off halfway through the movie. Tobita and Manami leaned against either of his shoulders, with Atsuhiko shamelessly laying sideways over their feet, somehow looking refined and dignified as he propped his head up with a hand on his cheek. Kaito took one look at them all and smiled a small, wistful smile, as he etched the scene into his memory.

With a sigh, he collected his things and stood up lest any more cherished seconds slip through his fingers with ominous *ticks* .

He stopped before he could so much as walk around his desk, eyes widening as the classroom door opened and a student walked in, looking troubled.

Her dark hair was wrapped in a loose bun, with a subtle prism of colors reflecting from the light underneath, and her eyes were the brilliant shades of a summer sunset.

Those eyes latched onto him and widened, "Oh, Amamiya-sensei!" He didn't think he'd get used to *that* or Joker-sensei, "I... was looking for Ectoplasm-sensei."

"Do you need help with something, Fukui-san?"

She stilled, “You know my name?”

“Of course I do.” He said with a teasing smirk, “I’d be a sorry Teacher’s Assistant if I didn’t know any students’ names, especially with a second-year student who just left the classroom not ten minutes ago. Now, did you need something?”

She regained herself remarkably fast, holding the chemistry textbook and her notebook to her chest, “I was going to ask Ectoplasm-sensei for advice. I’m a bit lost over some of the formulas we went over earlier.”

Ren gave her a smile as he set his things down, “If you want, I can go over the material again and help you figure it out. I learned a certain trick on how to nail down the order of those formulas, if it’ll help?”

“You actually understand all of this? But you’re my age, right?”

“More or less,” Ren chuckled as he pulled on Kohryu’s wisdom, “But I find that my age hardly matters in this situation. If you’re not comfortable with me, then I can easily direct you to where Ectoplasm went so you can ask him. It’s up to whatever you decide, Fukui-san.”

She bit her lip and thought for a long moment, the *tick tick* of the clock pounding in Ren’s skull. With a sigh, she went over to her desk -second row, third away from the window- and sat down with a straightened spine and eyes forward.

“I trust you, Amamiya-sensei.” She opened her textbook and notebook, pen at the ready.

He had to keep his face straight when he realized it was a *red* pen, with the flaming hat and mask design stamped on the side.

Instead Ren grinned at her, then went around to the board and swept up a marker. By the end of the session, her pen rapidly flew across

the paper without his aid, and within the next day, she and more students came to him for help after class.

He found that helping students silenced the overwhelming *tick* of the clock.

December 13th - Evening

“Isn’t that enough candy?” Atsuhiro asked from beside Ren, plates clinking together as they washed them from dinner, “You’re going to give Eri cavities!”

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad!” Shuichi grinned as he popped another piece in his mouth and chewed.

“As long as she brushes her teeth right after,” Hawks grinned and handed Eri another piece of caramel, wings gently fluttering, “I’m sure it’ll be fine. Besides! These caramels are *homemade* and they taste way better than regular ones in the store!”

“Don’t blame us if she gets a sugar rush,” Tobita said with a soft smile.

Manami nodded, “We’ll be sure to let Ryukyu know who’s responsible.”

“Ganging up on me!” Hawks put a hand over his chest and fell back over his chair, wings sagging to the floor, “Aren’t they just evil, Eri-chan!?”

Eri giggled and leaned in to whisper, “I’ll bribe them with candy later.”

Hawks snickered.

“Spirited as always, huh?” A familiar detective said.

Ren looked to the door as Tsukauchi, Yagi, and Nezu walk in.

“You guys have been gone all day.” Manami pointed out as she smiled, “But... congratulations for being promoted.”

“Thanks.” Tsukauchi smiled, “The new Commissioner’s office is a lot bigger than my last one.”

“Congratulations, Tsukauchi.” Ren said as he dried his hands, “If anyone deserves this, it’s you.”

Tsukauchi beamed. Nezu and Yagi exchanged knowing glances as the former detective reached into his coat pocket, approaching the counter where Ren stood opposite.

“I came by to give this to you.” Tsukauchi said as he placed close to Ren, who gaped when Tsukauchi removed his hand.

“Your detective badge?” Ren raised a brow as he ran his fingers over the smooth, worn metal, “Is that even *legal* ?”

“I don’t need it anymore, and as long as you aren’t going to wave it around and do anything heinous with it, it should be fine.”

Ren snorted, “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I know. I trust you, and that’s why I’m giving it to you as... something to remember me by when you go home.” Tsukauchi sat down on the closest stool, glancing at Ren with indiscernible emotion.

Atsuhiro cleared his throat, “The rest of us will be in the living room.”

The others exchanged a strange look, and walked out with Hawks after he playfully swept Eri up in his arms.

Ren frowned when they were alone, “Tsukauchi...”

“You don’t need to say it.” Tsukauchi clasped his hands over the counter, “At the beginning, I unintentionally put you through hell. And then we went through hell with each other between Kamino and the

Shie Hassaikai. And now, all of us are fighting together to get you and your friends home. I'd say it's been quite the journey." Tsukauchi smiled, and Ren detected the melancholy that drenched it, "And I wouldn't be in my position if it wasn't for you. You can count on me when the day comes for the final battle."

Tsukauchi stood up and put a hand over his hat.

"Leaving so soon?" Ren said with a smirk, "Are you sure you don't want any coffee or curry?"

"Well..." Tsukauchi turned and motioned for Ren to follow into the living room, "I only stopped by for a short time to drop off my badge for you. I had... a previous engagement already set."

"A 'previous engagement', he says." Yagi grinned at Tsukauchi, "And totally not a date?"

"A *date* !?" Atsuhiro whirled around to Tsukauchi, "Why didn't you say so!? We could've done something to help you get ready!!"

Tsukauchi sputtered, an uncharacteristically red shade spotting his cheeks, "I-It's not a date!"

"No," Nezu grinned wide, "It's only a dinner with a lovely woman at a nice, fancy restaurant no less, to get to know one another. Not a date in the slightest!"

"Who is this not-date with, anyway?" Ren asked innocently.

Tsukauchi cleared his throat and tried to regain his composure, "It's with Zoey."

"The doctor who helped out Recovery Girl with... me before?"

He nodded.

Ren patted him on the back, and horror crept into Tsukauchi's expression at Ren's smirk, "Have fun on your date. She seems like a

wonderful person.”

“N-not you too!” Tsukauchi cried. “It’s just... we’re celebrating my promotion, and I’ve been meaning to ask her to get coffee anyway but neither of us had time until recently, a-and Recovery Girl mentioned this place-”

“Totally a date.” Ren deadpanned.

Tsukauchi hid his face in his hands.

“And you’re going in *that* ? In your boring old work attire?” Atushiro gasped, affronted, “No, no, *no*. A fine lady needs a fine gentleman to accompany her! Ren, if you would give me a hand, Tsukauchi needs to redo his attire!”

“Wh-what, you can’t-”

“Come on, Tsukauchi. Be honest, you want to impress her, right?” Ren stated.

Tsukauchi finally gave up with a long sigh, “Yeah, I guess.”

“Right! Now come along!” Atsuhiko grabbed Tsukauchi’s elbow, and both he and Ren dragged the man into Atsuhiko’s room for a change of clothes.

After Tsukauchi left, in a dashing suit and tie they chose for him, the worn detective badge found its home within Joker’s costume.

Next to his heart, stored carefully away with its treasured brethren.

December 15 th - Afternoon

Ground Beta’s buildings ricocheted with ferocious student cries and the song of magic dancing on an icy wind.

Joker perched on the corner of the building, watching the hero students in their winter costumes experiment with pieces of his soul. Sure, they could've done this in Cementoss' gym, shielded from the outside elements, but pitting 41 students with new magical accessories in close quarters could only spell disaster.

Several of his Personas, this world's Phantom Thieves, and the teachers were spread across the city in small student groups, showing them how to use these new magics.

Endeavor and Nigteye were somewhere around here too, going over the details of this 'upcoming mission' with Nezu.

Right now, Joker looked down as Todoroki had a blizzard ring on his right hand, and a blazing ring on his left.

He and Bakugo stood before Gang Orca, who wielded a new and terrifying weapon at his back. Yagi had asked for an additional weapon after dinner last night in addition to the gun he had at the USJ, and Gang Orca offered Mjolnir. In exchange, Joker gifted Gang Orca the wicked and demonic-looking bardiche born from Beezlebub. Gang Orca's size and the general design of the bardiche made for an absolutely terrifying figure.

"So," Todoroki frowned as he glanced between the rings, "It's just like using our Quirks, but slightly different?"

"Correct," Gang Orca nodded, "Just focus the way how you control your Quirk, but instead push that intent *through* the accessories Joker gifted you."

Todoroki's expression hardened as he turned to a pair of abandoned buildings, the familiar ice of a Diamond Dust coating one building, the blaze of Inferno consuming the other.

"About time you got it, IcyHot!" Bakugo snapped, "Now watch this!"

Joker sighed at the next building collapsing under a fiery Gigantomachia.

"The Shadows will fear these children who witnessed the Reaper's demise." Amaterasu whispered in approval as similar clouds of dust stained the horizon all across Ground Beta.

"But learning control is paramount." Satanael countered, *"I'll discuss it with the other children, and Bakugo especially, before the day ends."*

"Hey, at least this isn't a Charged Gigantomachia like what happened to that mountain during the Summer Camp." Sandalphon said.

Joker snorted as he sensed Satanael heading towards Bakugo's group, and went to check on the next a few blocks away. He spotted Endeavor and Nighteye then, standing in the middle of the street.

Nezu and Nighteye were speaking with Endeavor, the man's expression serious as he listened. Nighteye saw Joker's shadow, and looked up at him with a nod. Endeavor and Nezu followed suit. Joker waved at them before moving on.

"Again! WITH FEELING!!!" Miruko shouted at her group of Midoriya, Kirishima, Shishida, and Kendo.

Midoriya shouted a battle cry as the wind kicked up around him, using the strange and alien little statue from Hastur to create a devastating tornado.

Joker heard the flutter of familiar wings before Kirishima and the others could try theirs out, and looked over to see Hawks land beside him. Vibrant wings wrapped around Joker, as they had so many times these past few days that the action was second nature.

"Enjoying the show?" Hawks said with a playful smirk.

“They’re doing well.” Joker returned his gaze to Miruko, who had Midoriya trapped under her arm while shouting praise, ignoring how Midoriya’s face was beet red, “They hardly need me to step in personally.”

Hawks hummed, the wings draping over Joker tightening to provide an extra shield from the cold, “You taught us pretty well, you know. And I heard from the teachers that the students from other classes have really taken to you. Is it true you had to move your little after-school study group to the library?”

Joker felt his face heat up, “Yeah, there are too many students for one classroom now. But...” Joker grimaced and shook his head, “Our time here is almost up. It might be a good time to bring it up to Nezu for Kaito to start taking over. It would give Kaito a head start on becoming a teacher himself.”

“Yeah...” Hawks barely managed to hide the pain flashing across his expression, his hand reaching up to ruffle Joker’s hair.

They stayed silent for a few moments, just idly watching the students practice. A stray thought distracted Joker, and he couldn’t help but mention it to Hawks now that they were alone.

“Hey, about Ryoto...”

Hawks tilted his head, “What about him?”

Joker pursed his lips. What was he supposed to say? ‘By the way, the guy who raised you might just happen to be the reigning god of this world?’

Hawks waited a few seconds more before he sighed, “Funny you mention Ryoto, actually.”

“Why?”

"I haven't been able to get in touch with him for a while." Hawks dug out his phone and scrolled through dozens of messages, "Either he's just that busy now that Kunikazu's case has been blown sky high, or he's ignoring me. It's not like him, though."

"A god disappearing from his realm?" Amaterasu hummed, *"It may be a troubling sign..."*

"He could simply be off on some business, like Hawks implied." Attis supplemented, *"There's no need for us to jump to anything heinous."*

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'm sure he'll turn up soon." Hawks stated, then he grinned brightly at Joker, "After this class is over, meet me and the others at the entrance to Ground Beta."

Joker blinked at the change in subject, "Why?"

Hawks' expression bloomed into a genuine smirk, "Just meet us there. It's important!"

Joker snorted, "If you say so. By the way, shouldn't *you* be teaching your own group right now?"

"Oops." The warmth of Hawks' wing disappeared as the man stepped away, "I'll check on them, but Tokoyami and his teammates made great progress already!"

With that, he flew off with a hard beat of his wings, sparks from the fiery blade at his back leaving a burning trail through the air.

Joker passed the time by watching the remaining groups from above, thoughts of Ryoto falling to the back of his mind. The teachers called this session to a stop after another hour, and while Power Loader checked in the Persona Gear from the students, Joker made his way to where Hawks and the others agreed to wait.

Miruko flashed him a grin and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. Nobody commented on the hidden sadness veiled in her

smile, as it was in all of their stances, “Joker, we got something for you!”

“You did?”

“Yeah...” Ryukyu bore a softer smile, “We all came together to make it.”

“As a thank you for... well...” Gang Orca fondly ruffled Joker’s hair, but kept his hand there for several seconds, “For everything.”

“And so you don’t forget us.” Best Jeanist said smoothly.

“As if he’d every forget us anyway!” Miruko cried.

Hawks smirked as he glanced at Tensei, who chuckled and held his hand out to Joker.

Joker’s eyes widened at the bracelet sitting in Tensei’s palm, an elegant braid of familiar dark blue and startling white. Small metal rings around the bracelet attached a few familiar items protected in some sort of resin: A pink dragon scale, an orca’s tooth, and a tiny scarlet feather smaller than his pinky.

Tensei placed it in Joker’s palm, and he turned the bracelet around several times, studying it intently while speechless.

Tensei cleared his throat, “With Power Loader’s help, we used pieces of my engines to make the metal rings, and to reinforce the center of the bracelet so it’s as strong and sturdy as possible.”

“I wove the braid together with pieces of my costume,” Best Jeanist glanced at Miruko, “And with a few donations of Miruko’s hair.”

Miruko snickered as her free hand rubbed at the startlingly short fur around her rabbit ears, “Happy to give it up for this!”

“I shed scales all the time too, in my dragon form.” Ryukyu said.

“And I’ll just regrow that feather easily!” Hawks chirped.

Gang Orca chuckled, “Orca whales don’t regrow their teeth, but I was more than happy to make this small sacrifice if it means we could all make something to remember us by, Joker.”

“I...” Joker wrapped his fingers around the bracelet and held it to his chest, “I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!” Miruko cackled, but she still held onto Joker with an iron grip.

“Now, there’s just one more thing.” Ryukyu stated.

“You guys don’t have to-”

“Save it, Joker.” Hawks said with a smirk, “Let us do this for you, while we still have the chance.”

“... Okay?”

Best Jeanist checked his watch, “We made dinner reservations for one of the high end restaurants in Musutafu, and we have plenty of time to get ready yet.”

“We asked Nezu in advance,” Gang Orca said, “So it’s alright.”

“And of course Mona can come too!” Tensei beamed, “It’ll be a nice, private dinner with just our group.”

Joker realized, as he gripped the bracelet tighter, that this would be their version of a going away party. The final chance to be together before things got too busy and time ran out, and he couldn’t possibly say no when they gave him such fragile looks as they awaited his answer.

“A dinner sounds nice.” Joker said as he shoved that ever familiar ball of emotion down his throat, “I’m sure Mona will love it, too.”

“That’s the spirit!” Miruko wrapped her other arm around him and hugged him tight, and he politely pretended not to see the budding tears in her eyes as she buried her face in his hair.

She collected herself and finally let go, just long enough for the rest of the hero group to hide the sorrow soaking into them.

December 17 th - Morning

Nezu watched Ren work on the last problem with a smile of pride on his face.

The boy finished what Nezu had written out on the board, the strokes of his pen going silent as Ren looked up in expectation.

“Nezu?” Ren frowned as Nezu continued to stare at him, “Are you okay?”

“Ah, of course!” Nezu reached for his teacup and found it empty, and Ren gave him a strange look when he reached for the teapot to refill it.

“That’s your fifth cup of tea, you know.” Ren glanced at the heavy *tick tick* of the clock, “I *know* you never drink this much right before lunch. What’s wrong?”

“This is our last agreed-upon day for your lessons with me.” Nezu chuckled as he set the pot aside, “So I’ve been thinking. Reminiscing, really. Many others have been giving you presents, correct? A means to remember them by.”

“Yes.” Ren reached up to his chest, in the spot where Nezu knew he kept such items on his costume, “What about them?”

“Seeing how there are barely a handful of days left...” Nezu put his cup aside and opened one of his desk drawers.

Ren stared at the intricate fountain pen Nezu held up. It was a beautiful piece of art, one he paid top dollar for its creation. The smooth blue handle was flawless and the gold etching around it was a masterful work of intricate fluid lines. The nib could hold more ink than any other pen he'd had, and it could write like a *dream* .

Nezu leaned forward and placed it on the edge of his desk, motioning for Ren to take it.

"You're giving me a pen?" Ren asked as he stood from his desk and approached. He picked up the pen and studied it, "It looks expensive."

Nezu grinned, "It's not just any pen, but one carries quite a story."

Ren looked at Nezu with an indiscernible expression, "How so?"

"It's the very pen I used to sign the documents to become principal of U.A." Nezu swiveled around in his chair and looked up to the various frames on the wall, "That very same one I always kept on hand for such important documents and meaningful occasions over the years. The same writing utensil I used to start my Vigilante Program! Why, that pen you're holding in your hands is a very piece of U.A.'s history itself!"

"Are you sure you want to give it to me?" Ren asked, eyes wide, "If it's that important-"

Nezu held up a paw, "Of course. I would not give this to you if I wasn't absolutely certain." His tone softened, "It is a token of how important you are to me, Ren. How important you are to all of U.A. itself. Take this pen not only as a personal gift from me, but also as a sign of your own accomplishments as well!"

Ren's eyes turned sharp and contemplating, but he nodded, "I'll put it to good use."

“See that you do! It is a remarkable partner to have in the world the paperwork!”

The lunch bell rung, signaling an end to their morning routine for the last time.

“Nezu-”

“It’s quite alright.” Nezu grinned, but he knew Ren was smart enough to see past his forced cheer, “Do get some good lunch. Cementoss has a riveting lesson for his class today and you’ll need the energy!”

Ren smiled sadly. Then, he bowed at a full 90 degree angle, “Thank you for everything, Nezu. I... we wouldn't have made it this far without your help.” He stood fully and collected all of the notebooks he’d used for their classes. “And here.”

“Oh?”

Ren huffed, warmth spreading on his face, “Something to remember me by. All of my notes and assignments are in these.”

Nezu took them with both paws and watched as Ren packed up his remaining things and headed towards the door. A small handful of heartbeats went by before Nezu opened the cover of the first notebook. He read a whole two lines before vision turned blurry.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you Admiral Feesh?” Nezu’s chuckles came out wet and shaky as he reached for the tissues.

After all, nobody needed to know that the Devil of U.A. *could* actually cry.

December 19 th - Night

“What are we doing here?” Joker raised a brow as he looked across the Challenge room. Lavenza was at his side, having led him here, while the rest of the Attendants stood in a line before him, expressions firm. This world’s Phantom Thieves and Hitoshi were seated around the entrance. “Normally I wouldn’t mind some training, but-”

“This isn’t training.” Lavenza stepped away, and Joker felt his stomach fall to the floor as she went by her siblings’ side, her golden eyes blazing. “This will be your test. The final test to see if you truly have what it takes to defeat Yaldabaoth.”

“You’ll fight all of us at once.” Elizabeth smirked and cracked her knuckles, “We’ve been putting you through the wringer these past two months, now you have to show that all of our effort was worth it.”

“We won’t be holding back.” Theodore pulled on gloves, “So you shouldn’t either, *especially* since the Reaper bestowed a great boon of strength upon you.”

“Show the full power you’ve gained from defeating the Reaper, and from your entire journey beforehand.” Margaret’s body glowed an ominous blue as she floated a few inches from the floor, her Compendium opening with a gust of wind, “Prepare yourselves.”

“My, my, and don’t forget about us.” Mr. Compress and the others came up to him, “Joker’s not the only one you’ve been training.”

“We’re gonna kick your ass as a team!” Spinner cried.

“Merp!”

“I do look forward to winning.” Gentle Criminal said.

“Yeah, don’t cry when you lose!” La Brava chuckled by his side.

“We got this Joker.” Mona looked up to him with a smirk, “Let’s prove to them once and for all we have what it takes!”

Joker returned Mona's smirk before looking back at Hitoshi with a raised brow, "And what are you doing here?"

"Wow, I'm hurt." Hitoshi deadpanned. He looked down at the plush blanket he sat on and then the multitude of picnic baskets around him, "I'm here to watch, and more importantly, to make sure your fight doesn't completely destroy our surprise celebration dinner."

"A surprise...?" Joker's eyes widened.

"Well, not such a surprise anymore." Mr. Compress chuckled as he tipped his hat, "But! We'll have to earn it by winning against these four. Easy as cake, right?"

"Right." Joker grinned as a surge of blue fire swelled behind them, a light *tingle* spread across Joker's face as his mask disappeared and the deep shadows of every Persona in the mindscape draped their shoulders. "Let's do this!"

Lavenza jumped first, the roar of her chainsaw approaching so fast that Joker's teeth chattered.

Everyone *scattered* .

Joker laughed as he ducked under Lavenza's deadly swipe. She spun on her next step and used her weight to continue a seamless tango of deadly strikes. Amaterasu, Satanael, Zaou-Gongen, and Beelzebub darted in with sweeps of magic while Zaou-Gongen used Tetrakarn. The red flash consumed all of their bodies in time to deflect Lavenza's chainsaw.

Mr. Compress met Theodore with Futsunushi, Lakshmi, Beelzebub, and Attis.

Gentle Criminal and La Brava faced Margaret with the aid of Sandalphon, Loa, Hastur, and Mother Harlot.

And finally, Spinner, Lady Stubbs, and Mona faced Elizabeth's bloodthirsty attacks with Mercurius, Messiah Picaro, Cybele, Odin, and Fafnir.

Kohryu swirled in a storm of golden glittering scales above, the dragon shifting between all of the battles at once. He disrupted Elizabeth's next attack with a claw swipe, used his tail to beat Theodore back from hitting Mr. Compress, stopped Margaret from summoning a Persona with a well placed Psy counter.

Joker and his group of Personas jumped back when Kohryu dove for them, Lavenza leaping away from the wall of gold scales as Kohryu pulled his snapping jaws away, the tornadic winds he generated devouring the sound of the chainsaw. The flutter of her dress and the way her hair moved with her was almost mesmerizing, as was the smile on her face when the coast cleared and she charged back at Joker.

But the battles couldn't stay separate forever, not within this closed space.

Elizabeth cackled when she and Theodore switched places with such speed that it left both parties off kilter. The bare second it took to adapt to the change cost Mr. Compress a burn on his arm, and for Spinner to be hit square on in the back with a Concentrated Megido.

Margaret and Lavenza came together and attacked in unison, a mighty spearhead against Joker's group, but a thread of thought was all it took for Odin and the others to weave together their defences, for Gentle Criminal to snap his fingers for his Quirk.

"Now, Joker! Jump!!" Gentle Criminal cried when the wall of Personas stopped the pair of Attendants.

Joker trusted him, and did just that. The stretchy ground undulated under his feet, and he was launched through the air. He bounced around the Challenge Room in jagged lines and, having known

where Gentle had been placing his barriers from Kohryu's watchful gaze, grinned as he dove for their exposed backs.

He combined the power of eight Personas, the intensity writhing under their skin and seeping down into their very soul, as he landed like a crack of thunder, blade and interweaving magics singing through the air. The floor cratered, the walls shook and trembled, chains rattled with the intensity of Fire and Ice swirling together, of Bless and Curse working in harmony as *equal* balancing forces of nature, of the void ripping open to summon Almighty eyes and an inky serpent to lash out at their targets.

Lavenza's startled cry and Margaret's grunt of pain was music in their ears.

The Attendants were tossed through the air, but they caught themselves and landed on their feet, with Lavenza skidding back several meters behind Margaret.

"Good. Good!" Lavenza was panting, the hands grasping her chainsaw shaking. A bruise marred her face, but her grin was split from ear to ear, "This is the true power of the Trickster!"

"But we're not finished yet!" Margaret, despite her words, gave them looks of approval.

Joker matched Lavenza's grin, and the fights continued. His teammates fought back with everything they had. They rose to their feet whenever they were knocked down, pushed their attacks in tune to Joker's. Bodies bruised but not broken, they rushed head first to match Joker in full support, the weight of their hearts and souls backed every step of the way.

In truth, the longer the battle went on, the more he and his Personas melded as one being. He could no longer tell where *he* began, and where *they* ended.

He was Joker ducking under Elizabeth's hurling fireball to swing his dagger in a counter-

He was Lakshmi skirting around the edges of these battles, her long scarf flowing like water, to throw debuffs at the Attendants-

-They were Attis and Cybele combining their magic to form a tornado of fire-

-They were Loa drinking away Margaret's health and magic pools, the taste of expensive wine drifting over their tongue-

- They were Futsunushi and Zaou-Gongen sending blades and fists to protect their teammates-

-Their throat hurt from laughing so much, but the piece of them in the shape of Fafnir's body was having too much fun to care-

-Ice crackling with electricity cascaded from their multi-headed-beast and the mighty swing of their faithful spear-

-The golden wings on their cross spread, and Almighty magic flowed between their thrashing tentacles and their sword shaped gun, pitch-black wings shielding their eyes from the light-

-They were the bountiful sunlight that glinted off their own golden scales-

-From wings that buzzed with flies' decay and wings that shone with heaven's power came the might of their darkness and light-

"Joker!" Mona's voice called to them, "On our signal, finish it with an All-Out-Attack with your Personas!"

"Got it!" Seventeen voices reigned down over the Challenge Room in unison, their bodies glowing with Concentrate.

Surprise flared across their teammates' expressions, and the Attendants hesitated in sheer awe, but this world's Phantom Thieves

covered it by moving together.

La Brava's Quirk empowered Gentle Criminal's barriers to enclose a space around the Attendants. Mr. Compress and Spinner used the abilities from their Persona accessories to push the Attendants closer from either directions. Mona and Mercurius moved in tandem to slice off any escape with blasts of emerald wind.

Mona spoke when the injured Attendants were all back to back.

"Now!!"

Joker stood before them, his eyes shining with the countless shades of his soul. Kohryu floated overhead as he reared his head back, his throat glowing with a Celestial Ray. But it was *more* than that.

Each piece of ***themselves*** poured their power into it. The blinding white within Kohryu's maw gained undulating ribbons of every color- red, sky blue, yellow, green, purple, indigo, gold, and black- which built and built until each color spread out to touch, not a single color overwhelmed the others. When the pressure was at its apex, magic snapping and coursing through every fibre of the Velvet Room, Kohryu released it.

A great beam of multicolored light shot from his jaws and descended upon the Attendants within an instant. The entire Velvet Room shook as if struck with an atomic bomb, a massive mushroom cloud consuming Kohryu and the others as torrents of wind burst around them. Dust and broken pieces of chain and stone were thrown in all directions.

"Wh-what is this power!?" Mona screeched as Mercurius scooped him up and darted behind the stretchy air barrier Gentle Criminal used to protect them from the fallout.

Thankfully, Hitoshi and their surprise dinner were shielded behind it, too.

Hitoshi was bone white by the time the winds started dying down, the dust settled and the chains slowly stopped in their swing. Silence overtook the Velvet Room, only broken as a single chain snapped and crumpled to the floor. Cracks and breaks stained every surface except for a clear area behind Gentle Criminal.

At the head of it all, Joker stood unmarred beside his other selves, staring down into the massive crater as the Attendants groaned.

“Holy shit...” Elizabeth was the first to crawl out, her pristine blue clothes all but covered in dust, burns, and tears.

“I would say watch your language...” Margaret sighed in exhaustion as she primly sat on the edge of the crater, hair dishevelled in unruly waves of blonde, “But in this instance, I agree with you.”

Theodore wobbled on his feet, trying in vain to fix his hat, “I believe the win goes to Joker.”

Elizabeth snorted as she flopped over, limbs spread-eagled, “You think?”

“Such power...” Lavenza abandoned her chainsaw in the crater, expression of boundless happiness shining through all the cuts and dirt upon her body, “I was right to believe in you. Even from the very moment Yaldabaoth cast you away from your world, my faith in you never wavered.”

“Lavenza...”

There was a snap of a finger behind them, and they turned to see Gentle Criminal dispelling his Quirk, “I say, what a marvelous show!”

“THAT WAS TOTALLY BADASS!” Spinner screamed as he threw up his hands.

“Merp!!”

Mr. Compress straightened his hat and coat, "This false-god is surely going to regret the day he was born." He waved a hand at the all but destroyed Challenge Room, "If a single attack did this, then I can't *wait* to see what it could do to an army of those nasty Shadows."

"I actually feel *sorry* for Yaldabaoth." La Brava said with a smirk, "But then again, not really. He deserves every ounce of pain that's coming."

Joker chuckled as his other selves traded looks of victory.

"Every time I turn around, you seem to gain more power." Hitoshi peered into Joker's vibrant prismatic eyes, "Damn. That Reaper guy *really* powered you up even more? Unfair."

Joker gave a sheepish grin and scratched the back of his head.

Hitoshi smiled and shook his head, "Now come on. The rest of us worked hard to make all this food, and after a battle like *that*, I'm sure everyone's hungry."

Elizabeth sat up as if she were electrocuted, "Food? Do you have more of those jam cookies in there!?"

Margaret frowned, "Elizabeth, we have to repair the Challenge Room before-"

"Yeah. Those cookies and more." Hitoshi stated.

Her siblings were left to choke on more dust as Elizabeth scrabbled towards the picnic blanket like a demon possessed.

Theodore's face fell in his hands as Hitoshi lurched back, hand whipping into one of the baskets to throw a package of home-made jam cookies at her.

"You can repair it later. Come and eat with us." Joker said as finally, each of his other selves disappeared one by one, "Although, we could use some healing first-"

Joker paused when the light of a Salvation flowed through the Challenge Room. He blinked and looked at Mona, who hadn't yet said anything. Mona didn't need to as he dispelled Mercurius, the unrivalled *glee* and *elation* in his eyes was so vivid that it struck Joker like it had real, physical weight.

Joker grinned as the two of them shed their costumes in unison, and Morgana jumped up to Ren's shoulder with motorboat purrs while rubbing his face against Ren's chin.

"So, what all did you guys make?" Ren asked as he sat down beside Hitoshi to shield him from Elizabeth, "There are a lot of baskets here."

"After you fell asleep, we snuck over to the Shinsou dorm and spent all night making these!" Mr. Compress sat across from Ren, carefully taking off his Arsene mask, top hat, and balaclava to set them aside. He shook his head and ran a gloved hand through his hair, "Of course, with Hitoshi's parents' help, it wasn't too difficult."

"Yeah, my dad was thrilled to make so much food again." Hitoshi said with a smirk, "He didn't want to get rusty."

"We wanted to do this for you and Morgana!" La Brava beamed, her eyes warm and shining, "It's the least we could do, really."

"I'm sure you've heard this several times in the past few weeks, but ours is just as genuine as a thank you for everything you've done for us..." Gentle Criminal smiled as he sat beside her, his expression wistful and a touch sad, "As well as serving as a private farewell party. I hate to think that we'll say goodbye in a number of days, but..."

Spinner paused, mouth wide open and seconds from shoving a stuffed meat bun down his gullet, "No! No sad stuff!! It'll be the best going away party ever!! Right Stubbs!?"

Lady Stubbs loudly gulped down a small plate's worth of fried fish, "Merp!!"

"Everyone." Morgana's eyes sparkled as the others laid out the rest of the food from the baskets, a veritable banquet of plates and pitchers, "Thank you."

They devoured the food with gusto.

Ren chose a plate of gyoza filled with pork and spices first, the flavors of Ayumu's skillful cooking dancing across his tongue.

"Although," Mr. Compress poured himself a cup of tea, "One question has always dogged my mind when we found out that Ren and Morgana weren't... of this world."

"What do you mean?" La Brava asked after she sipped some miso soup.

Mr. Compress leaned forward and looked around his comrades with a glint in his eyes, "I can't help but wonder how things would unfold for us, all of us, if Yaldabaoth never pulled his underhanded trick."

Gentle Criminal and La Brava exchanged glances before the former spoke, "Without Arsene's harsh words, I would've kept on the same path of being selfish... of doing what I did just for the sake of my fame, instead of lending a helping hand to the people who need it."

"I'll admit," La Brava sighed, "without Joker and Mona's help, the channel would probably not be as popular as it is now. Our fan base totally skyrocketed after the Cultural Festival!"

Spinner hummed and looked down at his dark leather jacket, to his yellow gloves and the golden scarf Mr. Compress gifted to him, "Without two masks to choose from, I would've followed Stain's ideology without question. I thought, even back during the Summer Camp, that I would've joined the League Of Villains and gone down

a darker path.” Spinner frowned at Lady Stubbs, “I probably wouldn’t have met Stubbs, either! And that would be a total crime!”

“Merp!”

“I would be on the same boat as Spinner, staying with the League, that is.” Mr. Compress leaned back and looked up to the dark ceiling, “Without Joker and Mona’s accomplishments... let’s see... All For One would still be alive. The League would still be active. Toga, Twice, and Mustard wouldn’t have gotten the help they truly need, Dabi and Shigaraki would be walking free. Kurogiri would never have regained himself as Shirakumo. This is mostly based on what would’ve happened in the past, and we can only imagine all of the horrors the future would hold with all of these factors still in play.”

“Not to mention the absolute shit show of having nobody around to stop Silver Falcon.” Hitoshi said, brows furrowed as he looked between Ren and Morgana, “There’s no need to repeat what my parents already thanked you for, but aside from Silver Falcon, the hero system itself has improved by leaps and bounds. I... I don’t think I’d be as trained as I am without you two.”

Morgana’s fur puffed up, “I’m sure you would’ve made it!”

“You already had the potential to be a great hero, Hitoshi.” Ren said with a smile, “We just... helped you along.”

Hitoshi snorted, “‘Helped me along’ as if there’s no difference between being the twig of a trainee I’d be otherwise and being fully prepared to join the hero class. Give yourselves some credit.”

Morgana gave Ren an amused look, “I guess we can’t argue with that, can we?”

“I suppose it would be that way for all of us.” Gentle Criminal smiled at the Attendants who sat at the edges of the blanket, devouring any and all food placed in front of them, “We’re much better prepared to go out in the world thanks to their rigorous training regime.”

Spinner cackled, "I imagine we could go up against anybody after all of this is over! Evil doers beware!!"

"Speaking of," Ren placed his empty plate down and reached for some glazed dango, "How is that program of yours going? You guys will be ready to leave, right?"

"Yup!" La Brava beamed as she reached for her faithful laptop still stashed away here, "Actually, we'll be *more* than prepared, thanks to Oracle."

"Oh?" Morgana leaned forward.

La Brava smirked as she turned her laptop around to reveal familiar hieroglyphics phasing in and out of the code, "She slipped me a little something when she was here. As if this virus wasn't effective before, now it'll completely *demolish* any defences and let us slip away undetected."

Ren hummed, "That's a dangerous tool to have."

Morgana flicked his tail as he understood Ren's firm tone, "We're trusting you with this, alright? Oracle does, too."

"I understand, and I'll use it carefully." La Brava sat up straighter, expression sharp, "You don't need to worry! Oracle's program almost seems... sentient, in a way. It refuses to be used for anything evil, or as a way to purposely hurt people. And it won't let just anyone use it, either."

"Good." Ren relaxed with a smile.

"I still can't believe you guys are leaving." Hitoshi sighed as he set his plate and chopsticks down, "You better keep me updated, okay?"

La Brava raised her chin, smiling wide, "We will! I taught you enough about hacking and coded messages to where you won't be left in the dark."

Hitoshi smirked and firmly nodded.

They finished the food and Gentle Criminal began to clean up. Elizabeth and the other Attendants were sprawled out nearby, still exhausted, yet with their stomachs full to bursting with delicious food.

Gentle Criminal hesitated as he stored away the last plate, “Ren, Morgana, there is one more thing we have for you.”

“Two, actually.” Hitoshi added.

Gentle Criminal looked to Mr. Compress as he reached into his coat pockets, while Hitoshi turned to one of the baskets behind him.

Mr. Compress placed a blue orb in front of Ren and snapped his fingers, revealing a small pile of books. Not just any books, but photo albums.

“You finished them?” Morgana asked as Ren picked one up and opened it.

“We did!” Mr. Compress passed the others around so everyone had one, even Hitoshi, “We’ve made additional copies for Eri and Kaito as well. All of the photos we’ve ever taken, and a few extras from Eri, are in there.”

“A present, from all of us, to you.” La Brava whispered as she clutched hers.

Ren’s eyes widened as he looked at the first page to see all of this world’s Phantom Thieves, plus Kaito, Eri, and Hitoshi posing for a group photo. He ran his finger down the edge, his chest flooding with summery warmth. He turned the page and looked over the next few photos; Each a picture of the individual Phantom Thieves(honorary or not), doing random things.

Gentle Criminal savoring a cup of tea in his hands.

Mr. Compress in the middle of a magic trick in the teacher's dorm.

Spinner splayed out on a couch, fast asleep with Lady Stubbs tucked in his arm.

La Brava painting with Eri, their faces dotted with color.

Hitoshi could be seen in the corner of the last one, the smallest of smiles on his face as he watched Eri.

Kaito reading a book, clutching his chin in thought as he did so.

"We'll treasure this." Morgana whispered as he held back tears.

Ren closed the book and hugged it to his chest, "It's a promise."

Spinner and the others beamed at him.

Hitoshi cleared his throat, eyes red as if he was holding back his own tears, "And... here." He held out the black and gold fox mask, "I have no words to express how much you and Morgana did for me, how much I really valued your friendship. You're my best friend and a brother to me, Ren, and without you... I don't even know where I'd be."

Ren grasped the mask in both hands, "I'm glad you found a way to put a fox theme into your hero costume."

Hitoshi chuckled, "Thanks to Mei. We modeled the Persona Chords after a fox in tribute to this mask." His face hardened, "And this time, I'll be there to stand beside you at the final battle."

"We all will!" Mr. Compress handed out saucers of sparkling juice instead of sake, and held his up in a toast, "Let's spend these last days together getting pumped up for our finale, shall we? Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Everyone's voices joined in along with Lady Stubbs' iconic 'Merp!'.

Ren placed the fox mask on top of the photo album, his mindscape singing with the full power of these Arcanas.

Ren and Morgana drank the sparkling juice, and after, Morgana gave him a knowing look.

“We actually have something for you.” Ren stated as he dug around in his pockets for an envelope, “You can think of it as your first mission, once you leave U.A.”

“Oh?” Mr. Compress took it, tilting his head, “What is it?”

“Promise us you won’t open it until... until after we leave.” Morgana whispered, “It’s important.”

This world’s Phantom Thieves exchanged glances.

“Leaving me out, huh?” Hitoshi said with a smirk.

“It’ll be pretty public.” Morgana stated, “Just keep an eye on the news.”

“Fine.” Hitoshi sighed and looked at Mr. Compress, “Whatever it is, make it newsworthy.”

“I’m sure we’ll have no trouble with that.” Gentle Criminal lifted his cup and took another sip, and the small, private party began to wind down.

Within the hour, the precious treasures from the Moon, Apostle, Lovers, Temperance, and Faith joined the others in his costume.

December 24 th - Afternoon

Ren took a deep breath as they stood before the door to the 1-A dorms.

“What’s wrong, Ren-nii?” Eri asked, tugging on his hand.

“Nothing.” He smiled down at her, “This is just...”

“They invited us here, for our last day.” Morgana stated from Ren’s shoulder, “One big party, right?”

“Right.”

Ren reached for the door, but it flew open before he got closer.

Kirishima’s face lit up when he saw them, “Aniki! Morgana! Eri-chan!!” He held the door wider, “Get in here before you freeze your butts off!”

Eri giggled as she walked inside, leading Ren by his hand.

The 1-A dorm was full of hustle and bustle. Students from both 1-A and 1-B meandered around, setting up a tree, hanging lights, making ornaments. Hitoshi was here too, helping Tsuyu hang up tinsel around the kitchen door frame.

“H-Happy Halloween!!” Eri shouted once they were in the common room.

“Wrong holiday, Eri-chan.” Morgana whispered.

“Oh! Um... Merry Christmas?”

Many bright faces turned to them, and several rounds of ‘Merry Christmas!’ went around.

“Are you sure I’m not getting in the way?” Ren ask Kirishima with a raised eyebrow, “If this is between classes-”

“Don’t worry about it, dude!” Kirishima lightly nudged him on the shoulder.

“Agreed!!” Iida marched up to them, chest puffed out and shoulders straight, “We wanted to do this with *everyone!* And... to make it extra special because we all know...”

“That it’s your last day here.” Yaoyorozu smiled, “And how else would this last day go, if not as one big Christmas Party?”

Ren looked to Midoriya, who eagerly nodded.

“Alright.” He matched Midoriya’s smile, “Then what can I help with?”

“Leeet’s see...” Kirishima’s eyes sparkled as he threw an arm around Ren’s shoulders, careful not to dislodge Morgana, as his other hand pointed around the room, “There’s lights, the tree, arranging the presents, making cookies-”

“Ren-nii!” Eri looked at up at him, “Can we... can we decorate the tree?”

“Sure thing. Go ahead, Eri. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“I’ll go with!” Morgana declared as he jumped down and rushed towards the tree with Eri.

Bakugo was one of the students arranging the ornaments, but he hesitated when Eri gently pulled on his sleeve. He knelt down to her height as she whispered something to him, and the action drew others’ eyes as he smirked. Bakugo handed her to small box of ornaments, and Ren couldn’t help but smile when Bakugo lifted her up on his shoulders so she could hang her first ornament closer to the top of the tree.

“Oh my GOSH, BAKUGO!!” Mina clutched her chest and collapsed over the couch where Sero and Kaminari were sitting, “That’s too adorable!”

“Who knew all we needed to tame our resident explosives expert was an adorable little girl?” Kaminari said.

Sero slipped out his phone and aimed it towards them.

“Shut up!” Bakugo called back, “Tape-Face, don’t you dare take a picture or I’ll kick your a-”

Ren cleared his throat.

Bakugo cut himself off and looked up as Eri, who blinked innocently at him, “I’ll kick your butt into next week!”

“Sure, dude.” Sero smirked, and everyone heard the sound of his phone’s *click*. “Whatever you say...”

Bakugo went dangerously still.

Eri sighed as she dug around in the box until she pulled out a small red santa hat, almost matching the one on her own head. She stuck it on Bakugo’s head and then hugged him as best she could, “Don’t l-listen to them, Bakugo-nii! Can we continue decorating the tree? Pretty please?”

Bakugo’s face slowly turned red, but not in rage or embarrassment, rather it looked as if he was trying not to die from cuteness overload.

“You’re right, Eri-chan.” Bakugo stood taller, prouder despite his new santa hat, and turned back to face the tree, “We’ll make this thing look so darn pretty that it’ll be the best Christmas Tree that was ever put together! Right, Eri-chan?”

“Th-that’s right!!”

The unlikely pair put on the next few ornaments with determined fervor, while Morgana sat at the base of the tree, watching.

“Hey,” Iida’s lowered voice grabbed Ren’s attention.

Midoriya, Yaoyorozu, Kirishima, Iida, and Todoroki had gathered around him, giving him strange looks.

“Can we talk... in the kitchen?” Todoroki asked.

Ren smiled sadly, “Sure thing.”

While everyone else was still laughing and taking pictures of Bakugo and Eri, their little group snuck into the kitchen. Naturally, except for Hitoshi, who raised a brow and tilted his head in question. Ren simply gave him a reassuring smile and a gentle shake of his head.

Hitoshi shrugged and turned to watch Eri.

This kitchen didn't look any different to the one in the teacher's dorm.

"Here." Midoriya pulled out a familiar notebook from... *somewhere* . Where was he hiding that? Ren wasn't sure he wanted to know as he blinked at it.

"What's this?" Ren asked as he gently took it.

"It's for you!" Midoriya beamed at him, "The one where I originally wrote all the notes and theories I had about you... before we knew you were Joker. Plus some extra stuff after that!"

"I made sure to get every signature from both Class A and B!" Iida chopped his hand as Ren flipped open the notebook to read through it. "It's a present to you from both classes, as a thank you for... for everything you've ever done for us."

Ren looked up, eyes wide, "You guys..."

"Take it so that one day, I-if you miss us, you can just see our signatures and everything right there!" Kirishima's eyes watered, but he refused to let any tears fall, "Thank you, Ren, for being one of the manliest people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing!!"

"For..." Yaoyorozu cleared her throat, "For pulling the wool away from my eyes, and allowing me the chance to make amends for what my family did in the past."

"For healing my brother and helping me grow as a person!" Iida announced, his expression firm but shaky with paper-thin restraint.

Todoroki bowed to Ren, “You did a lot not just for me, but for my entire family. Thank you.” He stood fully, his dual colored eyes brimming with resolve, “And when the final battle begins, we’ll all be at your side to end this once and for all.”

“That’s right!” Kirishima cried.

“You’ve trained us well over these past weeks!” Iida said with a nod, “We’ll be ready.”

“And we *won’t* falter like we did with the Reaper.” Yaoyorozu’s expression hardened, “We won’t fail you, no matter what.”

Ren was struck speechless. Instead, he read through parts of the notebook. He skimmed through Midoriya’s notes, as he had already read those when they had that talk right before the Cultural Festival, and went to the pages lined with 40 signatures and messages.

From Midoriya’s *‘Thanks for being someone I could always look up to!’* to Todoroki’s simple *‘Thanks for saving my family. I’ll make you proud when I become a full fledged hero.’* all the way to Ashido’s *‘I’ll kick evil’s big, ugly butt in your place, Joker! You can count on me!’*.

Ren snorted at Bakugo’s *‘You better win against Yaldabaoth or else. If you ever forget about us, I’ll come over to your world and kick your ass.’*

Class 1-B’s messages weren’t as elaborate, a few appreciating his short time as one of their teachers, some thanking him for saving them or their friends during the Summer Camp, but Monoma’s surprised him the most.

‘I’ll make sure that our classes unite as one for the sake of this world’s future. We can’t have Shinsou do all the work for us, after all!’

Midoriya and the others flinched back when he summoned his costume, smiling despite the wetness in his eyes as he closed the notebook, and stuck it in his breast pocket chalk full of treasures.

“I’ll take good care of this.” Joker said softly, “I promise.”

Kirishima sniffled as he lunged at Joker with a giant bear hug, “We’ll never forget you! Ever!!”

Joker laughed as he hugged back.

Kirishima turned his head to the others, “Well!? Am I the only one manly enough to hug him, or what!? C’mon! Group hug!”

Midoriya was the next to join, followed by Yaoyorozu. Iida’s face turned bright red before he wrapped his arms around all of them. Todoroki was the last, face not as bright red as Iida’s, but after a moment of shuffling his feet he joined in, grip soft as if afraid to break them.

Joker basked in it until everyone stepped away.

Yaoyorozu straightened her hair, “Let’s not keep everyone waiting, shall we?”

“We wouldn’t want to be missed!” Iida stated.

Joker nodded and dispelled his costume, the notebook and every other treasure bestowed upon him tucked safely away. Together, they went back into the common room to see the tree mostly finished.

Bakugo was on a step ladder as he held up Eri so she could put the star on the very top. They backed away, and Bakugo nodded at Sero to plug in the tree. It glowed with so many colors, and Ren’s heart softened as Eri’s big eyes drank in each and every light reflecting off of them.

Ren helped Hitoshi and Tsuyu finish hanging up the rest of the lights and tinsel around the dorm, and Eri’s eyes continued to glimmer like stars when they were turned on. Music was played and holiday

movies were watched, and everyone in the dorm had a soft smile as Eri absorbed everything.

It was her first Christmas Eve, and they had to make it memorable.

If only her first Christmas wasn't a harsh goodbye from the people she loved most. Bakugo seemed to sense this exact thought floating around Ren's head as, by the time the sun began to set, the boy dragged Ren into the kitchen to begin preparing their dinner.

Feeding forty-one students, plus himself, Eri, and Morgana took a lot of work.

Sato aided them with preparing the turkey and ham. Mashed potatoes and gravy. Cookies, cakes, and brownies. All sorts of bread and rolls. Fried chicken and enough vegetables to feed an entire army. Ren lost count of the amount of pots of coffee and tea he brewed and by the time dinner rolled around the students piled into the kitchen. The ambience was broken by an earth-shattering revelation when Mina held out her mug.

"More coffee, please!" She said, grinning, "Some more of that delicious dark roast stuff! Give me all the caffeine you got, Joker!!"

Ren blinked at her, then laughed.

She pouted, "What is it?"

"Nothing," He shook his head, "But there's a common misconception with darker roasts and the amount of caffeine they have. See, the longer the beans are roasted, the more caffeine is burned off. So to get the most amount of caffeine in a cup of coffee..."

"Wait. Wait wait wait WAIT WAIT!! You need a *lighter* roast for more caffeine!?" She shrieked and flung her arms to the sky, "MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN A LIE!!"

Bakugo rolled his eyes, “Just give her the darker roast. I don’t think she needs anymore caffeine.”

Mina gave Ren the puppy dog eyes, but he smirked and poured her the darker roast she had before. With a dramatic sigh, she clutched her cup of coffee and chose a seat at one of the tables.

They finished cooking with batches of curry and a half dozen steaming containers of rice by then.

The tables were full and crowded, conversation and laughter bounced around the 1-A dorm as every bite of food was devoured without hesitation.

Ren kept up a smile as the final hours in this world withered away in holiday cheer and companionship. Morgana pressed close to Ren after darkness fell in full.

Then, it happened.

Ren, Bakugo, and a few others were helping wash the mountains of dishes and clean the tables, when Morgana’s ears suddenly perked up.

“What is it?” Ren whispered.

“The front door just opened.” Morgana stated, eyes sharp, “But every student is still here, so who-”

The both of them froze when Oracle walked into the kitchen. She spotted them and grinned. They stared, flabbergasted, as none of the others even *noticed* her. She walked right between Iida and Kaminari having an argument about proper cleanliness, and they didn’t even *react*. Their eyes passed over her as if she wasn’t even there.

There was something... off. Her footsteps held no sound, and it was as if they were staring at a shifting mirage of her, rather than her real

self. Ren frowned as he activated Third Eye, which revealed that her whole body was encased in a ghostly image of Prometheus, his main body transparent while the designs on him pulsed with so many colors. Ren let it fade, and the phantom shape of Oracle's Persona followed suit.

Her grin widened as she sat at a stool, her finger soundlessly tapping on the counter.

Ren swallowed as he grabbed a clean mug and poured her some coffee. She wordlessly took it and gave it hearty sip, sighing in contentment.

Ren leaned forward and whispered, "Futaba, what-"

She held up a finger, smirking, and finished the rest of her coffee in one gulp. Then, something *popped* . Like the world shifted, or it just experienced a rewrite in its inner most code. Perhaps this ghostly version of Prometheus lifted from her body. And suddenly, Oracle was fully present with a real weight in the world.

"As usual, Ren, that was delicious!" She cried.

"WHAT THE HELL-" Bakugo startled away from Ren's side, the plate in his grasp shattering on the floor, "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU AND *WHERE THE FUCK DID YOU JUST COME FROM !?*"

Drawn by the sound of Bakugo's screaming and a plate breaking, everyone not already in the kitchen came rushing in. Eri was held protectively within Hitoshi's grasp, but he paled when his eyes landed on Oracle, similar looks of startled confusion drowning the entire room.

Oracle, slow and deliberate, put down her mug with a loud *clink* . Her expression melted from happiness and cheer to one of utmost seriousness. She stood from the stool and turned fully towards the large group of students, and Ren gaped when she showed no ounce of hesitation or fear.

“You can call me Oracle, I’m one of Joker’s original teammates from our world.” Startled gasps broke out around the room before she turned to face Ren and Morgana, “Urahara and I finished the temporary world.”

Morgana inhaled sharply as Ren’s heart stopped.

Oracle adjusted her goggles and held Ren’s gaze with steel, “It’s time for the final battle.”

Y'all, I'll be honest. This chapter was so hard on me. Originally the Reaper bit was going to go on the end of last chapter, but that version was so squished and rushed I felt it would've cheated you guys out on a really good part. This Reaper fight was written and rewritten about 4 times, and since I got really sick a couple of chapters ago, I've been really Tired and Struggling. I know some people expected something to happen in regards to Midoriya in the Reaper fight, but after staring/rewriting/reworking this chapter several times for literally 20 hours or more... I'm just Tired XD

On a much more positive note, I can't believe how the update schedule has aligned for the perfect update dates. Not only for this chapter, but a November 20th update for the chapter called Whims Of Fate? Heck yes. The Nanowrimo gods were at least generous enough to allow me to complete the rough draft of the final 2 chapters.

My wonderful betareaders Ghostdoru and Mystik_Owl can probably attest to how much I was screaming/crying in our little chat when I wrote the very final line for the main story :) The epilogue is still a work in progress, but we're almost there you guys!!

NEXT CHAPTER:

Yaldabaoth - December 24th

Yaldabaath

Chapter 98: Yaldabaath

The dragon slowed once the USJ came into view, and Joker looked around the school grounds. The bare forest. The gyms and city sized training grounds. To the Musutafu cityscape that lay past the gates, its denizens still sleepy from the early morning sunrise. Right before Kohryu descended, Joker gazed at the the iconic school building just as the glass sparkled from the light, almost like a wink.

Joker took it as this world saying goodbye to him, too.

December 25 th - Christmas Morning

Eri clung to Joker as he stepped out of the dorms. Her arms were wrapped around his neck, face buried in his shoulder. Pale pinks and purples colored the freshly fallen snow piles and icicles hanging from the edges of the rooftops, streams of dreamy light filtered through the bare branches.

And in the lull of a crisp winter morning, the sound of footsteps marched through the snow. Heroes. Vigilantes. Students. None of these titles mattered. All of them were soldiers walking, heads held high and spirits tempered by their indomitable willpower by the single goal they shared.

Joker stopped before the edge of the path leading away from the dorms. He turned towards the veritable force he gathered, eyes landing on Nezu.

“Everyone, go ahead to the USJ. I need a moment with Eri.”

Eri tightened her grip and pressed her face further into him, sensing their upcoming conversation would not be easy.

“Very well. We’ll meet you there.”

Morgana rubbed his head against Eri’s before he jumped down and shifted into Mona. Together, with Nezu leading the way, everyone stepped around Joker and continued without him. Oracle squeezed his hand before going off with Mona. The presence of this world’s Strength and Hermit waited behind them when the rest disappeared into the distance, as the last bastions of support.

“Eri.”

She whined as she frantically shook her head, her small grip strong enough to nearly choke him.

“I know.” It took every ounce of strength not to make his voice waver, “But we have to let go, Eri.”

He knelt down so she could stand on her own two feet. Slowly, *gently*, he released his embrace around her and reached up to put his hands on her arms. He didn’t force her away or try to pry her hands off, but he waited patiently for her to do it herself, when she was ready.

For when they were both ready.

He didn’t think either of them would truly be ready, even if they stayed in this spot for an entire lifetime.

Eventually, her arms loosened and she took a tiny step back. The light of the rising sun painted her tears into streams of gold running down her cheeks, droplets falling onto the icy path at their feet. But she didn’t wail or sob loudly, her entire body trembled as the tears simply flowed.

Joker smiled as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to dry her tears, then he put his other hand on the back of her head to press their foreheads together, "I love you, little flower. That won't ever change, okay?"

She hiccuped and pressed her face into the handkerchief as more tears bloomed.

He stood up and turned to look at Kazuya, Risumi, and Ayumu, each of their eyes were already red and puffy, too.

"We'll..." Ayumu cleared his throat, but his voice still trembled, "We'll take good care of her. I promise."

Risumi nodded, "You'll always be with us, right here." Risumi put a hand over her heart, "So you win this battle and reclaim your home. I'm sure there are people who can't wait to see you again."

They both approached him and wrapped him in their arms, and Risumi squeezed extra tight before she let go.

Joker huffed a wet laugh as he turned and met Kazuya's gaze.

He stepped up to Joker and softly chopped Joker's fluffy hair, a gesture Kazuya hadn't done in *months*. This one felt warm and affectionate.

"... Good luck." Kazuya whispered as he pulled his hand back.

They didn't need any more words. Kazuya's body language, his eyes brimming with tears, said enough. Risumi pressed into Ayumu's side, the both of them grasping Eri's shoulders. Joker bowed to them, before he turned on his heel and walked away.

He was close enough to hear Eri take a deep breath, "I love you too, Ren-nii!!" She screamed at the top of her lungs, "I... I won't ever forget you, either! I-I'll be a good girl, so you don't ever have to worry about me, Ren-nii!"

Joker continued walking, his jaw clenched as she continued.

He had to keep moving forward, for if he dared to look over his shoulder, he'd go back to Eri, Kazuya, Risumi, and Ayumu... and never let go. Joker walked far enough away for her voice to fade with distance, feeling as if someone reached into his chest to rip his heart out.

"... Let's go." Satanael's presence in the mindscape *burned* with sorrow, *"Let's make Yaldabaoth pay."*

"Yeah."

"Shall I make the journey shorter?" Kohryu whispered.

Joker pulled Kohryu into reality, the vibrant warm gold of his scales contrasting with the frigid chill of the ethereal snow piles around them. He hopped onto Kohryu's head and the dragon rose into the sky, no doubt being seen by Eri and the others. Kohryu opened his jaws and released a sky shattering roar, a final ode to the world of superheroes. He rose fantastically through the heavens in dramatic sweeps and turns of his body, and the wintry landscape below blended into colorful blurs.

The dragon slowed once the USJ came into view, and Joker looked around the school grounds. The bare forest. The gyms and city sized training grounds. To the Musutafu cityscape that lay past the gates, its denizens still sleepy from the early morning sunrise. Right before Kohryu descended, Joker gazed at the the iconic school building just as the glass sparkled from the light, almost like a wink.

Joker took it as this world saying goodbye to him, too.

They reached the USJ within the next few moments, and Joker dismounted at the entrance with Kohryu returning to him straight after. His soundless footsteps wound their way through the door and down the steps in time to see Oracle and Mona sitting on the edge of the fountain, the students surrounding them with starry eyes.

Teachers and heroes waited around the edge of the group. The Attendants dutifully waited before the rift, the first ones to spot him.

Joker smirked as he compared the scene to a wise teacher sharing an exciting story with kindergartners.

“-and then Ren stepped in front of me to protect me from my uncle. The idiot tried to hit him and missed, and ended up fumbling and falling flat on his face!”

Kaminari leaned forward, “What happened next?”

“Well, he threatened to report to the police saying that Ren punched him, that he would take Sojiro down with him. And I...” Oracle frowned and shook her head, “We couldn’t let that happen. So after some slick Phantom Thievery, we got him to back off.”

“Telling stories, I see.” Joker announced when he got to the bottom of the stairs, drawing every eye in the building towards him.

Oracle snickered, “Sharing prime blackmail material while I have the chance!”

“Oh no, whatever shall I do.” Joker deadpanned.

Oracle smirked, but she and Mona hopped off the fountain and followed him to the line of Attendants, all of them staring up at the rift.

“So,” Joker glanced at Oracle as the small army inched closer, “how are we going to get there, Oracle?”

“And where’s Skull?” Mona asked, “He obviously didn’t come with you.”

“Skull went to get Noir and Panther. Urahara went to get Fox and Queen while Yoruichi is already waiting with the others from the world we were stuck in. Now, for the Keywords!” Oracle grinned at

Joker as he retrieved his phone, “Put everything in like this - Target: World, Door: Velvet Room, Core: Arcana, Location: The End.”

“The End?” Mona’s smile turned wry, “Really? That’s a bit on the nose, don’t you think?”

“What?” Oracle grinned, “‘The End’ sounds final, you know? Blame Urahara for wanting to make it so dramatic.”

Joker snorted as he put the words into the app and, like before, the rift split open in a vast and unending pool of night. The students gasped as reality bent and distorted right before their eyes. But *unlike* before, the descending golden staircase was a bright cerulean blue, and moved like shifting streams of fire. Joker took the first step up before he turned to face the gathered crowd.

“Anyone having second thoughts, this is your chance to step away.” He projected his voice across the central plaza. Nobody moved. Pleased, he nodded and turned around, his coattails billowing, “Stick close together, keep moving, and *don’t* stray from the path unless you want to be erased from existence.”

“Easy peasy!” Oracle said as remnants of horror dotted many of the younger faces, while heroes and vigilante alike hardened in determination.

Joker was the first into the blackness, followed closely by Mona, Oracle, and the Attendants. Hitoshi and the vigilantes were a few steps behind them, then the heroes and teachers sprinkled in with groups of students last.

“What’s this fake world supposed to look like, anyway?” Mona asked as they walked over the undulating fire.

“Muehehehe... You’ll just have to see for yourself. Urahara is really proud of it, and I think it’ll make a fitting final battle arena!”

The path of flame wound through the darkness, thankfully wide enough to have plenty of room for the large group to comfortably walk without fear of being pushed or falling by accident.

“There!” Oracle pointed after a few more minutes, “Pretty close in likeness, huh?”

Joker stopped before the Velvet Room Door floating ominously in the space.

“A decent copy,” Margaret said in a neutral tone.

“It’d fool a lot of people, but not us.” Elizabeth added ruefully.

“It serves its purpose.” Theodore frowned at it, “For an imitation, it’s not bad.”

Lavenza smiled at Joker, “If you will do the honors, Trickster?”

Joker opened it. The rattle of chains resounded through the void before Joker stepped through first, followed by the rest in small groups. He found himself standing upon a rooftop straight from Musutafu and, judging by the gasps of several people behind him, everyone else noticed its likeness too.

Sharp whispers of wind came from above, and Joker’s eyes widened when he saw people wearing black shihakusho... *standing* in mid-air. He recognized Kurosaki and Rukia, and the red-haired man from last time, but the others were complete strangers who kept their distance.

“What the...” Hitoshi trailed off behind Joker, “Now that’s just cheating.”

Two figures appeared in front of them in the same *swish* of air. One was Urahara, but the other woman Joker almost didn’t recognize, if it weren’t for the sharp golden gaze that could only belong to Yoruichi. In this form, she was slender yet fit, her waist-length dark hair tied

back in a ponytail. Like the people standing in mid-air above them, she wore dark clothes, though hers was sleeveless and backless, but Joker recognized one of Ishtar's Goddess Horns hanging from her belt.

"About time you arrived with your war party, Oracle!" The woman stated with a teasing grin.

"Hey!" Oracle pouted, "It's not my fault that time runs differently in all the worlds!"

"Everyone else?" Joker stepped forward, staring at Urahara.

His playfulness dropped with a firm nod, "Your world is the last to arrive. What do you want to do first, Joker?"

Joker looked to the sky. "I'm going to get a sense of this place. Yoruichi, can you gather the other Phantom Thieves and the worlds' liaisons and bring them here?"

"Got it!" Yoruichi winked at him, "Shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

She vanished in another *wisp* of wind.

"Oracle, La Brava, can you start setting up lines of communication?"

"No problem!" Oracle summoned Prometheus around her, and La Brava sat under Prometheus' shadow and opened her laptop.

"Hawks, Nezu, Mona, Lavenza, with me." Joker turned to the group behind him, "The rest of you, stay here until we figure out a battle plan."

He didn't wait for his orders to be followed as he released his Personas unto this false world, bursts of blue flame and deities darting off in all directions to explore their soon-to-be-battlefield. Kohryu was the last, and several of the Shinigami above darted away to give him space.

Joker jumped on Kohryu's head with Lavenza, Nezu, and Mona, while Hawks took off on fiery wings. Kohryu paused to stare at one of the Shinigami, a young boy with white hair and ice blue eyes. Joker shivered as a feeling of *familiarity* and *happiness* poked at him, but he shook it off as Kohryu ascended high into the heavens.

"*What was that about?*" Joker asked him.

"*Nothing, Trickster.*" Kohryu said as he injected amusement into his tone, "*Just one soul of a dragon greeting another.*"

Joker frowned in confusion, but let it go when the buildings became small, and his friends and the Shinigami were nothing more than vague dots below.

"Whoa... this is..." Mona gaped as he looked around.

"Holy shit." Hawks muttered as he floated beside Kohryu's head, the whistling wind threading through their hair and clothes.

"How in the world did Oracle and Urahara just... *make* this?" Joker whispered.

It was as if someone had spliced real pieces of these worlds together. Four total sections spread out like a splayed fan under a stark blue sky, and in total it looked to be the size of Shinjuku. Musutafu lay below them, and in the direction where the Shinigami came from was another city, and if it wasn't for the vast difference in how the buildings were constructed- Musutafu's metropolis styled skyscrapers to Karakura Town's smaller buildings surrounded by greenery and mountains- they wouldn't know any better.

Amestris' cold stones and old time infrastructures melded with Karakura's mountain greenery, and Mephisto's school grounds after that. In the far distance, at the base of this otherworldly 'fan' lay a large indent, rounded and deep like a bowl. The sand dunes surrounding it were bleached of any life and color, but several oval shaped towers and jutting buildings of all sizes rose out of it. These

structures were dotted within the other landscapes, but grew larger the closer they were to the center.

Platforms to climb up, perhaps? The largest of the buildings were clustered all around an enormous dais at the center.

"These worlds aren't just mashed together." Messiah Picaro hovered between the precipice of Karakura and Musutafu, "Rather, they are woven together like the edges of a fine silk robe."

"One piece slowly bleeding into the other at the edges, until each piece regains itself once more." Futsunushi clarified at the borders of True Cross and Amestris, "Urahara's genius knows no bounds. His intelligence may even outmatch Nezu's, and paired with Oracle and Prometheus, they made something truly remarkable."

"Creating an entirely separate world?" Cybele snorted as she and Attis explored Amestris' rooftops, "It's something the rat would never be capable of by himself."

"Bah! Give the Devil some credit!" Beelzebub snapped, "He runs a school the size of a metropolis, and if he had Oracle's aid then there's no doubt he could create something like this as well!"

"But what of this white area with the pillars?" Sandalphon asked.

"Perhaps it's where Yaldabaoth is meant to be summoned. That large indent could mitigate the Malevolent God's size, if only a little." Satanael looked around the melded landscapes, "All of these areas are positioned around it, after all, and those pale structures could serve as suitable stepping stones to reach Yaldabaoth."

Joker was drawn out of his thoughts by the rush of air that signaled Yoruichi and Urahara's appearance.

"Get a good enough look?" Urahara said with a cheeky grin.

"Yeah, it's pretty impressive." Joker said.

Yoruichi elbowed Urahara when he preened like a rooster. He wheezed and stepped away from her, rubbing at the spot with a childish pout. She returned her grin to Joker, "The others are all waiting below. Whenever you're ready, kid!"

Yoruichi disappeared, and Urahara followed her seconds later.

"What a pair they make." Nezu stated as he clasped his paws together.

Hawks snorted as he looked down, "Well? The party won't start without us."

"Right." Joker put a hand to the dragon's horn, "Kohryu?"

The great golden dragon's throat rumbled as he descended, as slow as a flower petal drifting on a breeze. Joker stepped off onto the rooftop to see the various groups mingling together, a soft smile worming on his face when he saw Skull wrap an arm around Midoriya's shoulders, the pair bearing equal grins.

Fox was in a deep conversation with the Iida brothers, with the younger Tenya chopping his arms in rapid discussion. Whatever topic they were on, Fox leaned forward with a hand on his chin, completely engaged.

Noir and Queen chatted with Yaoyorozu, Midnight, and a grinning Miruko.

Panther giggled as she spoke with Hitoshi and Aizawa, with Hitoshi almost turned red while Aizawa held a satisfied smirk.

"Eugh, I *never* want to travel like that again." Edward muttered as he looked a little green.

"That's fine." Yoruichi grinned as she patted him on the back, turning her sharp gaze to Alphonse, "You'd have to be a spirit to learn it anyway."

“... We'll pass.” Alphonse stated as he took an extra step away.

“I'm afraid there's only room for one on this chair.” Mephisto smirked as he tipped his hat at them, “Which I'll be using from now on instead of the vanishing ghost trick you used to drag me here.”

“It's not a ‘vanishing ghost trick!’” Yoruichi cried, “It's Shunpo!”

“Fine then.” Mephisto's smirk widened further, “I'll be resorting to this chair rather than ‘Shunpo’ aka the *vanishing ghost trick* .”

“As the Goddess of Flash,” A challenging gleam sparked in Yoruichi's eyes, “Those are fighting words, you know.”

“Or just grow a pair of wings, like me!” Hawks stated, beaming bright as he fanned out his majestic feathers, separating Yoruichi and Mephisto.

“Right, because everyone can just grow a pair of wings.” Edward deadpanned.

Nezu clapped his paws together, “I believe we have important matters to discuss?”

The sound halted the nearby conversations, and the original Phantom Thieves beamed at the sight of their leader.

“Joker! Mona!” Panther ran to him and wrapped her arms around him.

Joker grinned as he hugged her back, smiling, “I take it your mission went well?”

“Totally!” She hopped back with a warm grin.

Noir ran a finger under her hat, “Thankfully, it wasn't too difficult to gather allies.”

“Same here!” Skull grinned as he looked to the sky, where a few of the Shinigami still lingered. He waved, and Kurosaki returned the gesture, “We’re all ready and rearing to kick ass!”

Fox chuckled, “Indeed. Now, we only need the final guest to arrive.”

“Right.” Queen cracked her knuckles, “What’s that plan, Joker?”

Joker pointed to the sandy white area with the towers, “That’s where Yaldabaoth will be brought, right?”

Urahara adjusted his hat, “That’s right.”

“Placing everybody too close to Yaldabaoth at the start would be a sure way to get people killed, so we’ll use the surrounding areas and close in on him like a net.” Joker clutched his chin, “How’s it looking, Oracle?”

“Great!” Oracle smiled at him, “La Brava and I established basic lines of communication across the four worlds, but it’ll be messy and confusing if we plug everyone in all at once.”

“How do you want to do this?” La Brava asked as she looked up from her laptop.

“By establishing a chain of command, with each part of the chain having separate branches below it.”

“I see where this is headed.” Urahara said, his shadowy eyes glinting, “Who will be the leaders, aside from you being at the top?”

Joker scanned the group, “The world leaders will be Urahara, Edward, and Mephisto. You know your own people best, and will be able to organize them better than me. Nezu, too, of course. Oracle, if you would connect these four to me?”

“Got it!” Holographic screens appeared around her and she got to work. Joker felt his scalp prickle and Oracle looked to one of the

monitors with a map. A single gold dot appeared, surrounded by the four orange World Leaders.

“Connected!” Oracle chirped, “Next?”

“The other Phantom Thieves and the Attendants, put them on the same wavelength.”

Oracle nodded and resumed her work.

“This is so exciting!” Panther said as she clasped her hands together.

“Right!?” Skull shouted, “I can hardly wait!”

Noir’s sweet giggle sent the hair on Joker’s arms standing up straight, and to witness horror on the nearby hero students’ face was gold, “I’m excited to see the agony on these Shadows’ faces. And Yaldabaoth’s too, of course!”

Edward blanched as Mephisto’s devious smirk stretched from one pointy ear to the other.

“Oh?” Elizabeth stepped closer, “How are we to fight in this battle, Trickster?”

“Ideally, one Attendant per world to help push past the Shadows and reach Yaldabaoth in a timely manner.” Joker looked between Elizabeth and Mona, “You two will stay in this region to help. Theodore, you go with Edward and Alphonse to help Fox and Queen. Lavenza, you’re with Urahara, Yoruichi, and Skull. Margaret is with Mephisto, Noir, and Panther.”

The Attendants arranged themselves with their assigned World Leaders, and the other Phantom Thieves followed suit.

The tingling in their skulls intensified for a moment, and several velvety blue dots spread out on Oracle’s map.

“Is that all of us?” Fox asked.

“Yep!” Oracle chirped as she looked expectantly at Joker, “Should I connect each World Leader to the people they’ve brought here?”

“Do it.”

“Understood.”

“What will you be doing through all of this, Joker?” Alphonse asked.

Joker grinned, “I’ll draw Yaldabaoth’s attention, and while I do that the rest of you keep pushing forward. With any luck, everyone will overpower the Shadows and converge in the center for the final assault on Yaldabaoth himself. I’ll meet you all there.”

Urahara hid his face behind a fan, “So many different people from all worlds, and *all* walks of life and death, fighting together against a common enemy... it’ll be a sight to behold.”

“It’ll make a marvelous story to tell over tea!” Mephisto said.

“Hmmm, indeed.” Nezu whispered.

“Just don’t do something stupid and die.” Edward crossed his arms and scowled.

“Too late for that, squirt.” Yoruichi smirked, “Some of us are *already* dead, in a sense.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “You know what I mean, cat lady.”

“Hey,” Oracle interrupted, “We’re ready to connect people to the World Leaders, if you guys are prepared?”

Urahara, Nezu, Mephisto, and Edward exchanged glances.

“Ready.” Edward said.

The others gave their confirmation, and Oracle tapped a few keys. The World Leaders lightly clutched their head as a static chill swept over this false world, there and gone again just as fast. Joker noticed the people he'd brought over from the superhero world shifted too, some rubbing their temples or staring at Oracle in shock.

Several... dozens... *over a hundred* green dots lit up Oracle's map.

"Huh, neat." Hawks muttered as he stared strangely at Nezu.

Urahara snapped his fan shut, "Well, our fighters won't organize themselves! Yoruichi, Lavenza?"

"Right." Yoruichi raised a brow at Lavenza, "You already saw how most of the Shinigami use a technique that lets them stand mid-air. Do you need any help keeping up with us?"

"I do not." Lavenza smiled as she flipped open the Compendium to summon her steed in a flash of cerulean.

Seiryu was a Chinese dragon with beautiful blue scales, a bright red underbelly, branch-like horns, and a vivid green mane. Though Seiryu was smaller than Kohryu, much like a baby snake compared to a fully grown anaconda, he would be no less ferocious, and certainly a fine steed for Lavenza.

She sat side-saddle between Seiryu's shoulders, casting a long gaze at Joker, "If any man could win this unjust game, Trickster, I've always believed it to be you." She glanced at Urahara, "Shall we?"

Urahara grinned before he vanished in a burst of Shunpo. Yoruichi snickered as she followed him, and Seiryu took off towards Karakura Town.

Skull grinned at the Phantom Thieves, "See ya on the flip side!"

He jumped off the side of the building, and Joker's eyes widened when he flew off with Seiten Taisei, balancing on the cloud with

practiced ease next to his Persona.

Fox hummed, "It seems Joker isn't the only one who learned new tricks."

"We learned a lot, too." Queen adjusted her scarf and set off, "Let's not keep the others waiting!"

"Let's go, Al." Edward turned towards the edge of the roof where Fox and Queen were already going ahead, "You too, Theodore."

Theodore glanced at Joker as Edward and Alphonse jumped across the rooftops, "We will see you at the end, Joker."

Joker nodded, and he watched them go.

"We can't be late to our own party, especially one as important as this!" Mephisto smirked at Margaret as he crossed his legs, "Think you can keep up, Miss Margaret?"

Margaret smiled as she let go of her Compendium. It floated by her side, its pages open and flipping rapidly, her feet lifting off the ground, her hair floating as if she were underwater.

"Worry about yourself, Mephisto." She said before she flew towards the True Cross area in a blast of wind.

Mephisto sputtered as he held on to his hat, "H-hey! Wait for me!"

Noir sighed, while Panther rolled her eyes. The pair waved at Joker before they were the last to set off.

Joker shook his head as he watched the purple and orange dots situate themselves on Oracle's map, quickly organizing into formations and different teams spreading out around their respective areas. Nezu and La Brava had their heads together as they directed everybody from the superhero world.

And Oracle listened to it all, lips a thin line of concentration. She glanced at Joker before she tapped a few of her keys, and several white dots appeared on the map.

"I'll keep track of your Personas, too." She said at Joker's raised brow, "Just to keep the World Leaders informed of which Personas are where."

"I have a question, Oracle." Mona whispered at Joker's side, "How are you going to get Yaldabaoth here? You said we would bring him here, but..."

Oracle lowered her head, her goggles eerily reflecting the light of her monitors, "You'll see soon enough."

Mona blinked, "Okay, we trust you." He turned to Joker and looked up, his eyes shifting in concern, "I suppose... we better get ourselves situated, then?"

"Yeah." Joker grinned as he held his fist down to Mona, "But I'm not worried. See you soon?"

"You bet." Mona's gaze hardened as he fist-bumped Joker, "See you soon!"

"As if you'd lose, Joker." Elizabeth chuckled, "I look forward to our victory."

Even Hawks gave Joker one long, hard look before he flew off to his designated spot.

"Joker," Nezu laced his paws together, "I'll be staying with La Brava and Oracle to help navigate our forces, and to provide intel when needed. If you want to draw Yaldabaoth's attention, then you should situate yourself in a central area. Preferably somewhere high up."

"There's a spot here." Oracle pointed to her map. "It's connected with the white buildings in a path that leads straight to Yaldabaoth's area."

“I’ll make my way there.” Joker grinned as he studied this group, with Nezu’s sharpness, Oracle’s grim seriousness, and La Brava’s bravery injected into her glistening eyes as she watched him turn away.

Joker shot out his grapple. He worked his way towards the spot Oracle pointed out, a tall skyscraper near the edge of the Musutafu area. And like Oracle stated, it would only take a good, hearty leap to reach the white buildings arranged in a way that was a clear path to where Yaldabaoth would be.

He stood at the edge of the worlds, a land where time and space were but base ingredients to create the battlefield to take down a false god. Joker’s hands formed into fists as his heart hardened in resolve. This imitation would be Yaldabaoth’s final resting place, a grave soon to be turned to dust itself.

“Which of us shall join you on this final assault, Joker?” Odin asked.

“Satanael, in his full size.”

“Of course.” Satanael smirked as he returned to the mindscape, *“There will be no greater surprise than that.”*

“Amaterasu, if you will?”

Amaterasu whisked herself away from reality, through the mindscape, and appeared at Joker’s side in moments. She placed a soft hand on his shoulder, “It would be my honor.”

With Amaterasu being the life giving heartbeat to keep himself and all of his Personas charged with life and magic, and with Satanael being their beacon to attract Yaldabaoth’s attention...

“Lakshmi, for debuffs and additional support. Zaou-Gongen for overwhelming physical force.” The pair appeared, with Zaou-Gongen opposite of Amaterasu and Lakshmi behind him, “And finally, if Yaldabaoth decides to overwhelm us in Shadows, Kohryu.”

"I will be the spear that breaks through the horde?" Kohryu flew like a golden ribbon towards Joker, the eyes of many across the different worlds looking up at his majesty in awe. He hovered in the wispy clouds, but by instinct he left enough room for Satanael to appear right behind Joker, "Very well, then I shall prepare ahead of time! Allow me to be the stepping stone towards our path to ultimate victory!"

Kohryu's body sparked a light blue from Concentrate, and he began to build a Celestial Ray within his throat. Every Persona offered their magic, swirls of elemental colors bleeding into it as it gathered power.

"The rest of you, fight alongside the people from other worlds. Don't let a single Shadow escape your grasp!"

His mindscape harmonized as one being, a song of battle and victory flowing their veins, demanding recompense from the false god who was finally getting his dues.

"Whoa, Joker..." Oracle whispered, "Your power levels are rising, way waaay off the charts!"

"Just giving my Personas a little pep talk, that's all."

Oracle laughed, *"Well, the World Leaders almost have everyone in position. Do you want to say something before we bring Yaldabaoth here? Maybe give some of that buzzing energy to everyone with an inspiring speech?"*

"Sure," Joker smirked, and took a deep breath, "Patch me through."

"Got it! Aaaaand... you're live!"

"My name is Joker, and I am the Leader of the Phantom Thieves. Whether you forged strong bonds with me, or made friends with Oracle and Skull, steady allies of Panther and Noir, or comrades in arms with Fox and Queen... many of you don't know me personally,

but you know *them* . All of us are here for one reason: To show Yaldabaoth and his minions that he has no right to insert himself as Ruler of our worlds! Our homes, our loved ones, are counting on us to win this battle once and for all!” He waved an arm towards the pale towers that would serve as Yaldabaoth's grave, “Now, let’s unite our Hearts and fight together as one!”

This false world *rippled* with noise. Whether Fafnir’s howls joined with Queen and Edward’s battle cries, or Cybele and Attis as they watched Riza Hawkeye smile in pride next to her Colonel, among others dressed in the blue military attire.

Mother Harlot raised her cup next to a pair of twin brothers, one glowing with blue fire while holding a sword, the other checking to make sure his angelic gun was loaded. Beezlebub’s wings buzzed as Mephisto grinned with Panther, Noir, and Margaret, standing before others ready to fight.

A heavy sea of energy pressed down on Hastur and Messiah Picaro as Urahara raised his blade with the other Shinigami. They witnessed Lavenza smile as the small collections of humans with strange powers did the same, all of them enhanced by pieces of Joker’s soul.

And finally, Joker’s entire being seemed to vibrate under the energy bursting forth from his Arcanas like an open floodgate, both Futsunushi and Loa present to witness their loyalty and love in its purest form.

“Now, Oracle, we can’t do this without the *guest of honor*, can we?”

“*One ‘guest of honor’ coming right up! Get ready, everyone!*”

A pulsating hum trickled through the world like a heartbeat. Joker’s eyes widened when he felt the steady rhythm crawl up his boots and shins, and at the same moment bright green lines of light threaded through each and every surface, every nook and cranny of each world sewn together, looking much like the designs on Prometheus.

The sight was breathtaking. A true monument to Oracle's astounding powers.

The green light converged at the center, in a sigil overlapping the area of white sands and stone, each line lightening and darkening in tune to the magnetic pulse thrumming within the bones, the very fabric that made this temporary world. It twisted and convulsed until the energy flooded the sky and drowned the streets around Joker. A rising tower of beautiful aurora.

Joker's breath caught as a geyser of black shadow coalesced within the green, growing larger as Oracle's power dug its claws in and *reeled* . An ocean's worth of darkness burst like an exploding dam, revealing a form that would've struck true fear within Joker not a few weeks ago.

A screeching metallic wail cut through Joker as a gargantuan being of cold silver appeared, with a faceless mask and a halo of white wings. *Pain and confusion* laced Yaldabaoth's cry as he grasped his head with a pair of hands, one pair of *three* .

He was enormous at the last battle in Tokyo, but this... this was more. A symbol of his new strength. Six wings -two of which were the same red and gold wings from before, while the other four, situated above and below in pairs, were sterling silver- stretched across either sides of the world, the bulk of his silver body encompassing the horizon line.

Something hung from Yaldabaoth's back and the warped angles of silver metal that served as his legs. Cables or perhaps... veins? Hundreds. *Thousands* . Wriggling and thrashing like serpents with their heads cut off, drowning the whiteness under Yaldabaoth with an endless black deluge.

Already, a lake of ink formed in the bowled shape beneath Yaldabaoth by the time Joker squared his shoulders, forcing the powers of the burning Arcanas into a whisper.

“*Satanael* .”

Yaldabaoth zeroed in on Joker with that single uttered word.
Confusion turned to *shock* .

Satanael rose to the challenge in a blue wave of flame, vast black wings rising in contrast to Yaldabaoth’s angelic silver.

“You have six wings now, Yaldabaoth?” Satanael smiled at the irony, “There’s a human saying about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery, but I’m not impressed. Mere copies will never stand up to the original.”

Yaldabaoth... *stared* . As if unable to comprehend the truth before him. He trembled in the purest *rage*, his next scream engulfing the worlds in suffocating hatred. The blue sky wavered as Yaldabaoth poured his power through, choking the blue until it melted away to be overtaken by *red* .

Oracle gasped, “*Shadows incoming! What- their numbers-*”

The lake of Shadows under Yaldabaoth undulated, a thousand ripples that birthed an army of faceless angels, their bodies dripping with black sludge before spreading their holy wings and taking to the sky. So much silver surrounded Yaldabaoth that they blotted out the red sky, just as the first drops of bloody rain pattered by Joker’s feet. The wind turned rotten when the tsunami of Shadows surged in all directions, with a destructive wave headed straight for Joker.

“Kohryu!”

The golden dragon opened his jaws and fired, a searing ray of all elemental magics *burned* away the Red Rain, vaporizing any weak Shadows in its path, and hit Yaldabaoth in the chest. It struck with the force of a hurricane, the sound hitting everyone’s ears like a deep gong. Yaldabaoth screeched as he fell forward, stunned with his wings drooping, and Joker took the chance.

Joker thrust his arm forward, “Everyone, *attack!* ”

The Shadows met his challenge head on, filling in any openings to protect their master while he was down. Their numbers were so great and terrible it was like watching a mountain of angry ants scramble, dousing the skylines in red and twinkling silver.

Kohryu snarled and surged forward, jaws snapping at the swell of Shadows.

“This will be fun!” Zaou-Gongen roared as Joker took a running start and jumped off the building, shooting his grapple to snap around Kohryu’s back leg.

Kohryu reared up as Joker swung across the worlds, white sands and bleached buildings flying under his feet.

“Stay out of our way!” Amaterasu cried as she waved her hand, a small sun burning through the swarm that tried to overtake Joker.

Satanael chuckled as his massive shadow fell over them, grasping his bladed gun with certain *intent*, all of them aware of the sacred duty it shouldered on this day, “Keep going forward, Joker! We’ll cover you as much as we can!”

“Right!”

“None shall stop our advance!” Lakshmi danced through the air when Joker released his grapple and plummeted towards the pale towers, rolling into his landing and bursting forth into a run, “Not now, and not ever again!”

Her rapid debuffs weakened the surging Shadows. Zaou-Gongen snarled and sent forth a devastating wave of Gigantomachia, Amaterasu with her command over the boiling sun, and Kohryu covering their backs with claws and magic alike.

Satanael dutifully followed Joker as he raised his gun and shot, the next small group of Shadows screaming their death throes when the lightning of a Riot Gun eliminated them.

“It is our destined battle.” Satanael said with a smirk, “It would be uncouth for us to be late for it again.”

Joker howled with laughter as he jumped to the next building, “You almost sound corny when you put it like that!”

“I have no regrets.”

“Of course you don’t. I don’t have any either.”

Joker’s footsteps quickened when Yaldabaoth began to stir, the world starting to bloom with bone white spires and crawling bridges of spines and jutting ribs. He glared at Yaldabaoth, his maskless face revealing the full brunt of his emotions, “Let’s go, Satanael!”

“Go, *Mercurius* !!” Mona cried.

Mercurius cut his staff through the air, summoning a raging green tornado to rip the feathers out of Cherub and Angel wings alike, and cracking the delicate glass of the Virtues.

Mona cursed under his breath as the defeated Shadows were replaced just as fast. The swing of his scimitar and Mercurius’ winds seemed to do little to cull their numbers, despite the sounds of battle echoing around the Musutafu area.

He sensed the swells of magic, heard the screaming cries of valor and felt the deep trembles of battle through the earth.

“They don’t know when to quit.” Elizabeth smirked as the next wave of Shadows showed themselves. She opened her compendium, “Why don’t you deal with them, Yoshitsune?”

The famed Japanese general appeared at her back, dual swords swinging. The Shadows didn't have time to scream in agony as eight slashes rent through the streets in front of them.

Mona snickered as all was quiet... for the moment. "Nice work."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, "Please, these guys were pushovers."

"Joker..."

They looked up at Oracle's voice, the fetid wind and hellish skies making them shiver, to see Satanael. The massive Persona advanced towards Yaldabaoth and the rolling clouds of Shadows around him, and from the magic Mona sensed, Joker and a few of his other Personas were battling it out on the white towers.

"Come on." Elizabeth stepped ahead of Mona, "We can't let Joker be the only one to move forward."

"Elizabeth is right!" Oracle cried.

"We all believe in Joker." Nezu stated evenly, "But even so, let's prove to him that he won't face Yaldabaoth alone!"

"All teams have cleared the first wave of Shadows, but they won't hold out forever! Everyone, follow Joker's example and advance while you can!" La Brava added.

"Right. Let's go!" Mona cried as he and so many others pressed the attack.

"Oracle, a question."

"Do you really have the time for a question, Fox!?"

Fox chuckled as he lowered his hands, previously framed towards Joker and Satanael to preserve every detail in his memory. A true Demon Lord facing down a corrupt God and his army of Angels, the

bloody sky casting them in a hazy spray of crimson, but it was the fearlessness in the face of such an overpowering enemy that captured Fox's attention the most.

It would make an enthralling painting among so many others he had inspirations for.

"Fine." Fox jumped down onto the street, Susano-o's magnificent cape billowing as he followed. The *crackle* of ice followed in their wake, frost seeping under their footsteps to lock this part of 'Amestris' in wintry harshness. Susano-o's pleasure was his own as the Persona sliced apart any Shadows captured in the ice, "More of an observation, then."

"Oh, get it over with already! What 'observation', Inari?"

"Did you purposely put Joker in a place where he could easily be seen by each area?"

"W-well, that's-!"

"It's totally something you would do." Queen said, voice breathless but tinged in amusement.

The *rev* of metal and flashing neon blue told him she was just one street over, the other side exploding with fire and the *pop* of gunshots. Cross and her team were behind him by a block or two, finishing off some weaker Shadows.

Edward, Theodore, and the others weren't too far either.

"We have to keep up morale somehow!" Oracle sputtered, *"And what better morale boost is there than seeing our Leader kick ass!?"*

"I suppose you have a point."

Fox stopped at an intersection of cobblestone streets, the beginning of where Amestris ended and the white pillars began. It seems he

was the first of the Amestris inhabitants to reach it, the steps he needed to take to join his Leader in the final assault.

“Of course, it wouldn’t be that easy.” Fox said with a sigh.

At the base of the white pillar, a large black pool roiled. He chuckled as he waved his arm in an arc, Susano-o raising his blade as the shining silver shell of a Shadow burst out. Spires of ice sprouted to trap the angel where it hovered, and Fox ran forward, up the ice, and ripped off its blank silver mask.

He jumped back when the Shadow contorted, black sludge splashing as it turned into a legless angel with blue skin and six yellow wings. A few more Angels that weren’t *their* versions of Angels followed it, making four adversaries in total.

Fox laughed as a cold grin snaked its way on his face, his hand going to his katana, “Hmm, a different lead Shadow compared to the weaker ones from before, but no matter. You’ll be eliminated all the same! Your beautiful death knell will be the stepping stone towards my Leader’s true victory!”

The Shadows’ faces contorted in rage as they lunged. The sound of Susano-o’s blade striking the angels was music to their ears, the frigid *ting* of their natural ice magic and the hissing flames born from the ring on Fox’s finger were but added tunes in the orchestra of battles around them.

“Hey, that one was mine!”

Odin sighed as the corpses of the angelic Shadows disintegrated, tilting his head in the smallest angle for the sandal to hurl past his head and create a small crater in the wall behind him.

“Hiyori.” The blonde man with the pharaoh mask stuttered, “How about we try not ta piss off the god helpin’ us?”

“Shut up, Baldie! That Hollow knock-off was as good as mine and you know it!”

Skull groaned, “Things never change with you guys, huh?”

“My, my...” Urahara jumped down from the rooftop, coat billowing between Hiyori and Odin, “Let’s not anger one god while trying to kill another, hmm? Besides, company incoming!”

As if on cue, more Shadows poured from the writhing cloud above like blood drenched pearls. Urahara smirked as he disappeared in a flash of Shunpo, black blood staining his fingers as their masks were tossed on the ground. The angel Shadows fell with *splats* of black dripping from their feathers.

“Now, Seiten Taisei!”

Skull’s Persona, backed by Odin raising his mighty spear, struck with lightning. Skull grinned as he used his shiny new Gigantomachia Belt, crackles of gold and rupturing earth ripping the Shadows asunder. The small group of Angels who dodged the slaughter cried out in fear as they scuttled away, but there was no escape for them, either.

Urahara stood behind them and raised Benihime to the sky, his eyes glimmering in a hungry, bloodthirsty red. The cursed ring on his finger glimmered ominously. Straw dolls surrounded in balls of fire and bloody handprints appeared before the Shadows, run through several times by needles. The remaining Angels were slain in a rush of blood and cursed energy.

“Show off.” Hirako muttered.

Hiyori scoffed, “I’m going ahead!”

She pulled her bone-white mask onto her face and shot off. Hirako muttered something under his breath before he followed her down the street.

“You good, Hat an’ Clogs?” Skull asked when they were alone, save for the Personas.

The man stared oddly at the ring on his finger, the eager bloodlust in his eyes fading, “Yes.” He lowered his sword, that playful smirk plastered on his face, “I’ll admit, Benihime was pretty upset when I couldn’t rely on her full power for this.”

“Okay. And?”

Urahara shrugged, then turned towards the center of this false world. They were close to the first white towers in this part of town, “She’s still not happy, but at least she’s *satisfied* that this cursed ring is causing so much death in her stead.”

“Riiight.” Skull took a step closer to Odin and Seiten Taisei. “Guess that could be said for everyone, huh?”

In the distance, a Getsuga Tensho laced with a Maieha rose and fell like a tidal wave.

A rising pillar of ice signaled Rukia’s location without having to ask Oracle, and Skull knew she had one of the frozen flowers that Panther and Mr. Compress held.

A mix of gold and white lightning sparked on their other side, among so many others wielding different elements woven into their natural abilities.

Skull never really got used to sensing Spiritual Pressure as well as Oracle did, but even he could tell that the others’ powers and the magic of their Leader’s soul blended together for the sole purpose of winning this war.

“Let’s not dawdle.” Seiten Taisei said, spinning his spiked pole in his grasp, “More Shadows await!”

“Oooh, how fun!” Urahara nodded and walked forward with Skull.

Skull stopped after a few more steps, “Yo, Odin! You comin’ or what?”

“... Of course.”

Odin trailed after them. He refused to be the one to tell that tiny masked girl that her abandoned sandal was ruined in the puddles of red.

“Whoopsie, you missed again!” Mephisto cackled in his throne, wiping away his gleeful tears with a gloved hand.

“Foul demon.” The Shadow hissed, “When my Lord rules over your realm, I can promise that all of your kind will be eradicated first and foremost!”

Mephisto narrowed his eyes. This angel was a little bit tougher than the weird legless ones with six wings, having a full body with four scarlet wings. In one hand he bore a long, curved horn.

“What was your name again?” Mephisto asked.

“Remiel.” The Shadow narrowed its eyes, “And I have seen the future my Lord brings. All demons shall burn in holy fire!”

Mephisto yawned.

The angel snarled and was about to make a retort, when the *tap tap* of a cane echoed nearby. Mephisto blinked when a small fly buzzed by his ear to land on his throne’s arm rest, wings flicking. Then another, and another. More until they grew into a buzzing swarm that surrounded the Remiel.

“What-” Remiel flapped his wings, but the winds didn’t deter the flies as they crawled over him in such a number that their combined *hum* made Mephisto’s teeth chatter.

Black blood dripped and the angel screamed, something raw and *horrible* shrieking from its throat. The crawling form plummeted to the earth, and the flies scattered before they hit the ground. Not a scrap was left of that angel as the pests dispersed to seek out other prey.

“Hmph.” Beelzebub emerged from the shadows, along with another that made Mephisto shiver, “I bet he didn’t see that, did he? Mephisto, stop playing with your enemies.”

“I wasn’t playing! Just trying to gather intel. That one was new, wasn’t he?”

“And did you gather such valuable intel?” Noir asked.

“Well, no. He was being stingy.”

“Hmmm.” Noir balanced her bardiche over her shoulders, the look in her shadowed eyes was one that caused all beings, be they demon, human, or angel, to fear for their lives, “Our goal is to press forward to aid Joker, not mess around.”

Mephisto sighed. “Dare I waste Oracle’s precious time asking where everyone is? The other World Leaders informed me our valiant fighters are becoming more scattered as the battles continue.”

“Oh, Panther stayed with Shiemi to see to any injuries, but they should catch up soon. Yukio and Rin went ahead.” None of them flinched when a Megidolaon shook the ground, the shock wave washing over them in a sickly wind. Noir didn’t even look bothered as the light faded behind her, though she held her hat to keep it from blowing away, “Margaret is in that direction.”

“You don’t say.” Mephisto muttered.

Noir frowned as she looked at the closing distance between Yaldabaoth and Satanael. Reality pulled and contorted in multiple colors as Kohryu eradicated the next cloud of Shadows with powerful Psy magic, only for the Shadows be replaced by more. So many

types of magic ebbed and flowed in beautiful harmony, a kaleidoscope of flashing colors and coalesced *power* thrummed in opposition to the red rain.

Yaldabaoth finally shifted as he recovered from Kohryu's initial attack, his cold, emotionless drone seeping into the air around them.

"Oh?" Mephisto scowled at one of Yaldabaoth's vast wings taking over half the sky over this region. Waterfalls of red streamed from the wing to drown the fake version of his school grounds in red, "Is he finally going to stop hiding behind his Shadows?"

The canisters on Yaldabaoth's body began to glow, and his arms brought out four divine weapons; A gun, a sword, a golden book, and a bell.

"The Seven Deadly Sins..." Noir's glove creaked as she tightly grasped the hilt of her bardiche, glaring at the spires of bone rising through the crimson ankle-deep water, "We must hurry."

"I will go to the Trickster, so don't hold back, little Empress." Beelzebub cackled as he patted Noir's head, slightly displacing her hat. "I can feel it now. Simmering within Satanael is the power needed to kill this foolish pretender for good. We need only hold out a little longer."

Mephisto feared for his brother-that-wasn't-his-brother, but Noir smiled in a calm, *warm* demeanor. She shifted her deadly weapon before walking forward, ripples of her colorful footsteps mixing in the crimson pools. Mephisto's eyes were wide as Beelzebub gave him a smug flick of his wing, and then he disappeared into blue ash.

Bastard.

Satanael flew over the ivory spires jutting out from below, skeletons and rib bones crawling over the blended landscapes like wretched centipedes. An infestation of blood and bone that soured their souls.

Joker and his merry band of Personas kept pace with him on the white towers.

“Look out, he’s bringing out the Seven Deadly Sins!” Oracle warned, “A-and next wave of Shadows, coming fast, Joker! This... this reading is different, so it might be a big one!”

Yaldabaoth, with one of his free hands not holding divine weapons, pointed in the space between he and Satanael, the large halfway platform that Joker landed upon. A ball of red and black energy manifested in front of the building, growing and pulsating with power.

Joker skid to a stop with Amaterasu and the others at his side, Satanael and Kohryu at his back. Joker’s eyes narrowed as the ball split and a warped Shadow appeared in jagged shards of metal. It was much like the angelic form Metatron held before his mask was removed, but this one... felt *wrong* .

It was no perfect copy of Yaldabaoth before he cast them to different worlds, the six wings were all varying sizes and the perfect uniformity of the other Shadows was nowhere to be seen, its shining silvery feathers curved and shifted in all directions. A messy array of sterling silver glimmering with an undercurrent of red.

Oh, and it was nearly the same size as Satanael, the lower half of its body unseen as it rose over Joker.

“No matter who hides behind this mask-” Joker braced himself as Satanael surged forward with outstretched claws, “-We’ll defeat you and move on to your master!”

Satanael’s claws dug under the warped Shadow’s jaw line and tore its expressionless mask off. It bubbled and roiled in slimy black ichor, and the angel that clawed through the muck made Joker’s heart stop.

It was a clearly feminine form covered in layers of gold and silver feathers. A pair of wings spread out from its head, the sheen of sharp

feathers dotted with sparkling jewels like a glorious crown. It's first pair of arms were held in a prayer position at its chest, while the other pair- the right arm being normal- the left was an abomination of feathers, scales, jewels, and a pair of snarling faces lined with fangs. The left arm curled down and under its legs, the snapping jaws of the 'hand' looked more like a ravenous beast. A pair of holy swords floated close to its body, ready to attack at a moments notice.

"What is this... *abomination* ?" Satanael whispered, a sneer on his face as the being stared with bright jade eyes that lacked pupils.

"I am the Lord's chariot, the seraph Merkabah." Despite the feminine form, Merkabah spoke with a decidedly male voice, "You who choose chaos and free will, those whose tainted hearts and souls rebel against the Lord, be smote in his name!"

"Just another of Yaldabaoth's puppets to get in our way." Satanael growled when Merkabah charged, the dual blades at his sides swinging.

Satanael raised his own blade to block, the *clang* of metal resounded across all the worlds. Joker grunted at the force of the attack, and Amaterasu wrapped her arms around him to keep him from falling off the building. Satanael scowled, his other hand raised in a fist-

Zaou-Gongen added to Satanael's cry of rage when Charge lit up their bodies, and a God's Hand soared alongside Satanael's fist.

Merkabah's head snapped back, his body being flung away several hundred meters, only for him to use his wings to flip around and stabilize himself. Merkabah seethed in rage.

"You *filth*! Depraved worms!" Merkabah cried before his glare turned on Joker. "You! You who denied our Lord's hand of salvation, you who perished and came back from the dead, why do you continue to resist!?"

“Because-” Joker pointed at Yaldabaoth, who watched the battle from afar, “Humans don’t need to be ruled over! We’ll let the strengths of our own Hearts decide how we live!”

“Insolent...” Yaldabaoth’s voice echoed before he raised his arms, and the red sky darkened in black and silver.

“Yaldabaoth!” Satanael shouted as countless angel Shadows closed in on them, an entire army forming in seconds, “You know how resilient the Trickster’s soul is! No matter how many pawns you throw at us, it takes more than *this* to stop us!”

“*Hahaha!!* Well said!” Beelzebub appeared in the air beside Satanael, the sky buzzing with flies, “We’ll not lay down and die! No, we’ll fight with everything we have for the sake of free will!!”

Beelzebub’s Death Flies clashed with a small portion of the angels, swarming and devouring a few in a mad frenzy.

“And it’s not just the Trickster who thinks so...” Another Persona reappeared at their side, “All past Wild Cards have risen up when their time calls. No matter what god or entity decides to dethrone humanity, they will always defend what is right!”

Merkabah inhaled sharply, “The messiah... No. It is simply an impostor. It must be.”

Messiah Picaro smiled as he faced the horde of angels, a *flash* of a Megidolaon eradicating enough Shadows to make a small hole in the bubble. Joker smirked as other Personas rose around them in flashes of blue to combat the overwhelming force; Attis and Cybele, Futsunushi, Loa, and Hastur.

Mother Harlot laughed at Joker’s side as her ice formed tall, sharp spires on which Fafnir used to climb. The dragon’s laughter was almost contagious as he leapt from Shadow to Shadow, tearing their throats out in splashes of *black* before leaping to another.

“Let us handle things here, Trickster.” Futsunushi said as his swords sailed toward Merkabah, who batted them away with his own swords, “The others are closing in, as planned.”

“Satanael?” Joker said, looking up at his other self.

“It seems we have no choice.” Satanael smirked, “Let’s go-”

A magnetic power tugged through the land. Merkabah matched Satanael’s smirk as he batted the last of Futsunushi’s swords away as if they were nothing but pests.

“I release upon you the deadly sin of Lust.” Yaldabaoth’s voice drifted through the mass of angels, “The insanity of mankind shall bring forth your demise!”

The Shadows suddenly pulled away, drawn back like curtains, and Merkabah rose over Joker with his blades poised and ready. The way forward cleared- and they witnessed Yaldabaoth shoot his divine gun. The bullet hit Satanael’s chest, he, Joker, and every Persona staggered as Lust’s power crept over their bodies, freezing their limbs as if sharp brambles strangled them.

Kohryu howled when the Shadows took this advantage to swarm him.

“That... was a cheap shot!” Beelzebub snapped as he tried to swing his staff at a Cherub that got too close, but found he couldn’t move.

“Everyone, hold on!” Amaterasu forced her power through the mindscape to burn this affliction away, “It’s already fading, just a few more seconds-”

“Die.”

Merkabah was above Joker with his deadly blades, green eyes alight in zealous glee.

A lightning fast ray of light sliced the ivory building, the air boiling by rising pillars of white-hot flames.

“This is...” Satanael muttered as Merkabah lurched back, the hazy air distorting either sides of the conflict.

The Shadows hampering the Personas cried out and fled behind Merkabah, while the Personas took this chance to rally themselves behind Joker. Satanael pressed close to the building. Two halves, one of light and law, the other of chaos and free-will, paused... and in between them hovered a familiar silver figure.

“Metatron.” Merkabah huffed, “So our missing commander returns at last.”

“You!” Satanael’s eyes widened, “But how did you escape the Velvet Room?”

Metatron’s robes fluttered in the foul wind, his face etched in a scowl as his eyes cooled from the attack.

“Come to my side, Metatron.” Merkabah raised his deformed hand, “And we can return to our Lord’s side together, victorious!”

Metatron stared at him, and remained dead silent.

“I knew we should’ve killed you!” Beezlebub snapped, “I’ll do it myself!”

A prickle went up Joker’s spine as Sandalphon appeared in front of them, arm raised to block Beelzebub’s advance.

“You-!”

“Silence.” Sandalphon ordered.

Joker pursed his lips as shock rippled through the mindscape, but their attention was drawn to Metatron as he finally spoke.

“I remember now.”

Merkabah tilted his head, “... What?”

“I remember. The truth, that is. My only regret is that it took so long to come to my senses.” Metatron’s eyes simmered red as he glared at Merkabah, “I am thou, thou art I. I’m not simply a Shadow lost to the Sea of Human Souls anymore, no longer will I be a puppet to the false god who rules with an iron fist!”

Metatron’s eyes blazed red as he shot another Fire of Sinnai at Merkabah’s shocked expression. Blasts of volcanic heat flooded the battleground. Merkabah’s unholy scream was swallowed by the roaring flames, and Metatron floated on silver wings to hover before Joker.

Metatron’s silver body was rimmed in red, but not the crimson of the distorted realm of Yaldabaoth, but with the fires of rebellion that blossomed in his heart. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at Joker’s slack-jawed expressions.

“I’ll deal with Merkabah and the other Shadows here.” Metatron said, “Go and finish this once and for all.”

“Metatron...” Joker whispered, “Are you sure you should do this alone?”

“He won’t be alone, Trickster.” Sandalphon said as he went to his brother’s side.

“Well, I suppose I’ll throw in my power as well.” Cybele approached the angels. “Can’t let you boys do everything by yourself!”

“Same here.” Zaou-Gongen left Satanael’s shoulder to join them, Lakshmi too after another moment.

One by one, most of the Personas formed a wall between Satanael, Joker, and Merkabah pulling himself out of the flames. Only

Amaterasu remained, hands steady on Joker's shoulder and back.

"Allow us to pierce this final hurdle to Yaldabaoth..." Kohryu whispered as Fafnir and Mother Harlot stood on his back, "You know what you need to do."

"Everyone, thank you." Joker smiled.

Their united soul trembled with power as the shadows surged yet again, Merkabah's screams of rage drowned by the elemental forces gathering around them. Kohryu shot a Celestial ray, Cybele ripped through Shadows with tornadoes while Attis burned them to cinders. Messiah Picaro and Hastur combined their Megidolaon in one blinding flash that tore them apart bit by bit.

Metatron fired his next attack with Sandalphon shooting rays of light, "Trickster, get ready!" Metatron cried.

Satanael set his palm on the building for Joker and Amaterasu to step in, his wings raising like black sails as the constant surges of magic thinned the Shadows' numbers.

"*Now!*" Metatron cried.

Satanael tucked Joker and Amaterasu to his chest and flapped his wings, sailing through the air at breakneck speed. Countless colors surrounded them as the magic of their other selves served as shield from Shadows, wind, ice, fire, lightning, curse, light, nuclear, and psy...

"It's my turn." Amaterasu laughed as Merkabah, charred and wounded and *bleeding black* tried to jump in their way with a distorted scream, deformed wings splayed.

Joker bowed his head to her. "We're counting on you."

Amaterasu gave them her best motherly smile, soft and loving, as she let herself fall from Satanael's grip. Her warm expression didn't

waver as the darkness of the Shadow came over them. Instead, she raised her hand.

Joker shielded his eyes as the light and heat of the sun bloomed before Amaterasu. Any angels close to Merkabah were reduced to burnt corpses, falling into the black ocean's lapping waves under them, or crashing pathetically into the white towers, while others scattered in panic.

Amaterasu held up her other hand, an opening forming in the streams of plasma and fire, "Go!"

Satanael's wings curled around them, a black bullet flying through the center of the sun. They made it through the fiery tunnel, and Satanael turned to see it close, Amaterasu's smile unwavering.

Above, they soared the last stretch towards Yaldabaoth's head, while below the fighters gathered across the worlds crossed the bridges of bone that had grown over the sea of black, many now racing over the rising white pillars around Yaldabaoth. It didn't take long for Shadows to intercept them, but Joker had no doubt they'd make it.

"Why?" Yaldabaoth asked as Satanael stopped before the final dais, a Demon Lord size of a building facing down the False God the size of a *world*, "Why is it you stand before me yet again? I cast you away and brought your world to heel. As the administrator who guides the proper development of mankind, to ensure that humanity doesn't destroy itself, I order you to begone!"

"Don't make me laugh!" Joker snapped as Satanael held his palm out, "You cheated at a game you already rigged, and for what? To satisfy your own desires to rule?"

"Humanity has already proven itself incapable in your world, thus they had no choice but to be subjected to my leadership."

Yaldabaoth countered, "No, there is no world where humanity can continue without an administrator to guide them. Once I'm done with your foolish rebellion, nothing shall stop my reach from extending to

the four worlds and beyond. The Salvation of mankind rests in my capable hands!"

"You've gotten even more fat and arrogant in your unjust rule."
Satanael said. "I didn't think it was possible."

"You think it'll be easy to win against these four worlds when they're united like this?" Joker spread his arms wide, "They don't *need* you to rule over them! No matter what you do, no matter how many times you try, we'll always stand in your way!"

Below, the battles raged on.

...

"Heaven piercing ice wall!"

"Reign over the frosted heavens, Hyorinmaru!"

"Tsugi no mai, Hakuren!"

Ice in all forms, be it a dragon, a glacier, or within heaven piercing spires, flowed together to freeze the angels in unforgiving tombs.

Todoroki exhaled a breath of mist, and turned to look at the two others, "Thanks for the assist."

Hitsuguya flicked his frosty blade, "You were the one assisting me."

Rukia rolled her eyes, then looked at Todoroki with a smile, "I'm glad to see there are other ice users. Which world are you from?"

"I control both ice and fire." Todoroki looked at the dual rings on his hands, then upwards. They stood within Yaldabaoth's shadow now, "I... became friends with Joker and Mona."

"I see." Rukia bowed her head in acknowledgement, "Captain Hitsuguya and I were aided by Oracle and Skull in more ways than one."

"Don't get distracted!" Todoroki silently groaned at his father's voice, a pillar of flame shooting past them to strike another Shadow. Endeavor landed beside Todoroki with a wide grin. "Don't you think you should use both sides, Shoto?"

"Be quiet, father." Todoroki muttered, "I was planning on it, but using ice with these two was more beneficial."

Another voice laughed, and a boy landed on another bone-white pillar close to them, pointed fangs revealed in his grin as he was covered in a layer of blue flames, "Now don't be like that! Us flame wielders gotta stick together, right?"

"Well, I don't usually control flames." Hawks descended beside Hitsuguya, who glared at him as he lifted his blade of fire, "But I hope you can make an exception?"

"Welcome to the club!" Rin's grin widened as his demonic tail bobbed back and forth, "Glad to have you on board!"

*"Speak for yourself." There was a **snap** of fingers, and the six of them shielded their eyes as several explosions cleared the Shadows ahead. A man stood, smirking, as ashes flitted around him, "Stop wasting time and-"*

"Oh, come on now. Don't be such a spoil sport!" Panther, one of the original Phantom Thieves, stepped between the ice users, "I have a new appreciation for ice!"

"And I for fire." Fox jumped onto the same pillar as Colonial Mustang, "You-"

"WOULD YOU ALL SHUT UP AND GET MOVING!?" Bakugo soared over them, scowling, "STOP YOUR STUPID POSTURING

*BETWEEN ICE AND FIRE AND JUST **GO** !”*

Hitsuguya gaped as Bakugo leapt from pillar to pillar, “Why do I get the feeling he and Kurosaki would get along?”

“Because we would!” Another shinigami soared in Bakugo’s wake, bearing a long black sword and a strange mask on his face. “You’re all falling behind!”

“Only you, Ichigo...” Rukia pinched the bridge of her nose, “They’re right.” She looked around, “Whether we use ice or fire, we have a job to do. We need to work together!”

“Let’s go!” Panther cheered.

Hitsuguya was the first to shoot off on draconic wings of ice, Hawks following on feathered wings of fire seconds later. Rukia jumped over to the next pillars with quick flashes of Shunpo.

Todoroki rolled his eyes and jumped after her, using the combined ice bridge as a platform. Endeavor and the boy with the blue flaming sword chased after them. Fox and Panther exchanged amused glances before they set off, too.

Colonel Mustang grimaced, his spirits soured. He muttered something about children stealing his thunder, and no longer being useless in this bloody rain, before he raced forward to fight god.

...

*Gunshots popped from two figures standing back to back, each **bang** piercing through Angels.*

“Not bad.” One reloaded their gun while the other covered her, “What’s your name?”

“Okumura Yukio.” Despite their hellish surroundings and the Angels falling under them, the pair remained calm and collected, “I’m from the world where Panther and Noir were exiled.”

“Riza Hawkeye, from the world where Fox and Queen fell to.” She aimed and fired, another Angel lurched, black blood spewing from its head as it fell over the side of the pillar, “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Yukio adjusted his glasses, his gun smoking, “Likewise.”

They tensed when another wave of Angels surrounded them in a whirlwind of gold masks and fluttering wings. Their guns clicked and they aimed, when several bullets curved through the air to strike down many Angels at once.

“Yeehaw!!” Snipe flipped his guns around his fingers as he jumped to the pillar, “Am I glad there are more gun enthusiasts from the other worlds! Howdy, my hero name is Snipe and-”

A shower of bright blue arrows came from behind them, eradicating the rest of the Shadows Snipe missed.

“Guns aren’t everything.” Another appeared beside them in a blur of motion, similar, yet different to how the shinigami did it. He had blue hair and sharp features hidden behind glasses, and in his hands he held a glowing bow of energy.

“Neat!” Snipe grinned under his mask, “How did you even do that with nuclear magic? You don’t have one of Joker’s weapons!”

“It’s simple.” The boy turned away, his free hand grasping the dragon horn on his belt, “I infused the strange reiatsu from this horn into my bow and arrows, and shoot... ‘nuclear magic’, as you called it.”

Snipe whistled. “What’s your name?”

“Just called me Ishida. My first name doesn’t matter.”

"Stay alert." Riza reloaded her gun, "There are more battles around us, and we can't get careless."

"Agreed." Yukio said as he checked over his guns.

The four of them whirled around to a nearby pillar when it exploded, a cloud of dust, bits of Shadows, and shrapnel falling into the sea of black ichor below.

A figure walked out of the smoke cloud, giggling as she held a grenade launcher like it was her precious child.

"Please be more careful..." Queen said as she emerged with Noir, their Personas right behind them, "That was a close one."

"But did you see the looks on their faces before that grenade exploded?" Noir stated with a cheery tone, "Let's find more!"

Queen facepalmed, and then Anat cleared her voice when it noticed their audience.

"Oh! Hi there!" Noir beamed and waved at them, ignoring how her prim Phantom Thief attire was splattered in bits of black, "Is everyone having as much fun as I am?"

Snipe gulped, "Uh... sure, kiddo."

Yukio sighed and bore the same expression as Queen, "As long as you keep that energy focused on the Shadows, Noir..."

"Of course!" Noir looked up at Yaldabaoth's great body looming over them. They were so close now, "I'm saving the best for last!"

With that, she and her Persona climbed to the taller pillars, walking over the skeletons born from Yaldabaoth's power infesting the area with its greatest strength.

"I'm not going to bother asking if that girl was sane." Ishida muttered.

"It's better to just go along with it." Snipe huffed as he peered up at Joker and Satanael, "You get used to it, after a while. I'm sure as hell going to miss it when it's all over."

Riza snorted, a warm smile softening her face as she watched Queen catch up with Noir, "Yeah. Same here."

"Welp," Snipe stretched as he walked to the edge of this pillar, "Let's go help the kiddos save our worlds. No biggie, right?"

Riza stopped next to him, expression stern, with Yukio following suit.

Ishida adjusted his glasses, "Just don't slow me down."

Snipe balked as Ishida disappeared in a rush of wind, "Hey! That's cheating!"

Yukio Okumura and Riza Hawkeye exchanged weary glances as the other two raced ahead, bullets and nuclear-infused arrows firing by the dozen at the relentless Shadows.

Then they, too, continued their journey towards the Malevolent God, standing side by side by people from worlds different to theirs, yet they were all kindred souls who truly savored the art of gunplay and archery.

...

"Take that, you damned pests!!"

"Merp!"

"Yeah, you tell them, Lady Stubbs!"

Spinner cackled as his trusty scimitar spun, black blood spewing wherever it swung. For now, they found themselves alone, separated by the dozens of other battles happening on pale towers all around

them, but that didn't stop them from charging forward once these pesky angels were slain.

"FOR JOKER!!" Spinner screamed at the top of his lungs as he jumped to the next pillar via a strange bony bridge. He was running too fast to see it move until it was too late.

"MERP!"

"What the!?"

The bony spine undulated, and Spinner screamed as he held onto the spike jutting out of it for dear life.

"Oi, what the hell do you think you're doing on Zabimaru!?" An unfamiliar voice called.

Spinner looked to another pale tower as the moving spine circled it, looking to the tail bone in the red-haired man's grasp, and the large snake head hovering above him. He recognized the giant suit of armor nearby as Alphonse.

"Er, catching a ride I guess?" Spinner said. "What are you guys doing?"

"We were fighting Shadows together, and were about to move on." Alphonse looked between Renji and Spinner, eyes finally landing on Lady Stubbs, "Do you want to join us?"

"I don't see why not!" Spinner beamed, "The more the merrier! And hey, we can use this cool looking snake to go faster, right?"

"Merp!"

Renji rolled his eyes and groaned, "Fine. Fine! Just shut up and hang on!"

"What-"

Spinner squawked as Renji hopped on the bony serpent's head, and Alphonse was smart enough to copy him.

Renji waved the hand with the serpent's tail in his grasp, and the giant bony snake flew off with a loud hiss.

Spinner would deny that he screamed all the way into the next battle, but Lady Stubbs would always keep the truth close to her heart.

...

"Are you sure our classmates are safe?" lida asked.

"Positive." Yaoyorozu put a hand on her temple. The white tower they stood on was slightly higher than the surrounding ones, so they got a good view of the area, "According to Nezu, most of them are grouped with others. Nobody is alone, I think."

"Don't sweat it so much." Tensei put a hand on his brother's shoulder, "You're with me and Best Jeanist! What could go wrong?"

Best Jeanist face-palmed, "Tensei, you should know better than to say something like that."

As if to prove their point, the world trembled and the sky above them darkened as Shadow rained upon them.

"See what I mean." Best Jeanist said as he readied his battle stance.

"It's not like I jinxed it!" Tensei called.

"It's a small group, so as long as we work together we'll be fine!" Yaoyorozu stated.

"She's right!" lida Tenya chopped his arm, "So let's defeat this group and move on already! Joker is counting on us!"

Tensei and Best Jeanist exchanged glances, with the former laughing, "You're right, little brother. Let's do this!"

...

Miruko cackled when the Shadow dissipated under her punch with a scream, but she didn't stop to watch the body disappear as she rounded on another.

"Not bad!" Yoruichi performed an axe kick on another in the swarm, her entire body wreathed in gold lightning from Ishtar's horn. The lightning from her attack snapped around the Shadow and silenced its cry, "How many does that make, now?"

Miruko huffed as the next Shadow fell before them, wiping her brow, "Dunno. I kinda lost count after fifty!"

"Only fifty?" Yoruichi laughed, bright and loud, "Those are rookie numbers! Kisuke would never let me live it down if he got more than me!"

Miruko rolled around shoulders, "Then we better pick up the pace! I'd never hear the end of it from Hawks if he beat more Shadows than me, too!"

"I think I like you." Yoruichi smirked, "Let's show them what we're made of!"

"Hell yeah!"

The pair jumped back when something impacted the tower they stood upon, directly under the shadow of one of Yaldabaoth's wings.

"I've heard your words and honor the companionship between different worlds!" A mountain of muscle stood from the wreckage, shirtless and flexing his bulging muscles. Miruko and Yoruichi stared

as sparkles radiated off of him, "As these Shadows try to pass judgement upon us, so too do we pass judgement on them for being agents of a false god! Allow me, Alex Louis Armstrong, the strong arm alchemist, to assist you in your contest! Behold the techniques passed down through the Armstrong line for generations-"

"Oh my god, it's All Might 2.0!" Miruko blurted.

Armstrong paused, one of his sparkles falling into the abyss from shock, when there was a groan coming from the next pillar over.

"At least your All Might isn't a chatterbox, right?" Skull muttered as he hopped over, scowling.

"Skull!" Yoruichi beamed. She vanished in a flash of Shunpo and appeared behind him, ruffling his hair, "Weren't you with Kisuke?"

Skull sputtered as he tried to shake off her hand, "The last time I saw him, he was still at the base of the towers. But all these fights kinda separated everyone so I lost track."

Yoruichi hummed.

Armstrong cleared his throat and stood tall, eyes focused on Miruko, "Who is this All Might?"

Yoruichi turned her head just as there was a startled cough nearby. Another group had made it to their pillar, having climbed up a bone bridge to do so.

Nighteye, standing behind Yagi with Tsukauchi, adjusted his glasses, "Tell me that was a joke."

"I mean..." Tsukauchi squinted at Armstrong, "I can kind've see where Miruko's coming from."

"Tsukauchi!" Yagi said.

Armstrong puffed out his chest and approached them, the sparkles reigniting with a passion, "Are one of you All Might?"

"That... would be me." Yagi stepped forward, Mjolnir loose in his grasp, "And although I can't really hold that form anymore..."

Miruko hid her smirk behind her hand as All Might puffed up to his muscular form. Skull's eyes nearly bugged out as the man deflated a whole two seconds later, hand waving to dispel the steam.

"Hmm, what a marvelous power!" Armstrong said jovially, "But why can't you hold that form for longer?"

"Well, there was an, ah... injury." Yagi put a hand to his side, and then looked up to Satanael, "One Joker was kind enough to heal, but that power has mostly faded from my body despite it."

The trio stilled when tears lined Armstrong's face, and he held out a meaty hand to Yagi, "Still, it is a pleasure to meet you! Be it a past glory or not, I am glad to have met another perfect physical specimen!"

"Er, you too?" Yagi said as he took Armstrong's hand and shook.

"One of yours?" Miruko whispered to Yoruichi.

"Nope!"

Skull sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "He's friends with Queen and Fox, apparently. And when we met up and I told him who I was, he started cryin' and then he hugged me! What a weird dude..."

Miruko snorted.

*A **bang** resounded overhead.*

"Meet and greet time is over." Yoruichi's expression hardened as Yaldabaoth's metallic cry echoed through the false world, and

*Satanael dropped to dodge the god's bullets and shards of light,
"Just a bit more and we'll be right there! Then, the real fight starts."*

"Hang in there, Leader!" Skull shouted as he threw himself forward.

*Miruko and Yoruichi exchanged grins before they followed,
Armstrong, Yagi, and the others not far behind.*

The wind rushed in Joker's ears as they spun in a dizzying swirl, Yaldabaoth's bullets and arrows of light following their frantic path through the sky. Red rain pattered on Satanael's wings as he flared them to slow their trajectory, he aimed his weapon and fired.

Bolts of golden lightning rained down from the sky, the Riot Gun striking true.

But unlike the fully charged Celestial Ray, Yaldabaoth showed no signs of damage, save for the slight twitch in the arms holding his divine weapons.

"Desist this futile resistance!" Yaldabaoth ordered as he raised the arm holding the massive golden sword, "Or face the Wrath of God!"

Satanael huffed, "Throw anything you want at us, you damned chalice. We'll return it ten-fold!"

Yaldabaoth's laughter sent chills down Joker's spine.

"Very well." Yaldabaoth's wings stretched, "For the sin of rebelling against me, I release upon the world the deadly sin of Wrath! You have no means of escape, humans!"

The blade fell, as precise and practiced as the swing of an executioner's, and yet...

They stared at their own warped reflection in the gold when it sailed past them, striking the border of Karakura and True Cross like a

meteor. A wave of destruction spread out from the crater, flattening trees and buildings alike until there was nothing left. The small mountains in Karakura were ripped asunder, and the burnt corpses of the trees spread fire and death in all directions.

Creaks of metal reached their ears as Yaldabaoth pulled back the sword, "The Passion of mankind shall bring forth ruin..."

"That... that wasn't... ! Didn't he use the book for Wrath last time!?"

"Oracle...?" Joker whispered, breathless. "Was there anyone...?"

"No! Um... M-most people are moving along the pillars now, but that damage... It can't happen again!"

"Friendly signatures are honing in on Yaldabaoth, fast!" La Brava said, *"Keep him busy for just a little longer!"*

"Well?" Yaldabaoth said, "Which sin should I release next, *Trickster* ? Vanity?" The cursed bell rang, the vibrations ringing deep in their skulls, "Or perhaps Pride?" He raised the hand holding the book, snapping it closed to prepare for any sort of counter attack, "The choice is yours! Which facsimile of these worlds shall meet its end next?"

"The answer is obvious." Joker said when his fear faded, and he smirked at Yaldabaoth, "None. Do you know why?"

If Yaldabaoth had a real face, they imagined it would fall into a scowl by the dark scoff the god gave off.

"Because these worlds aren't just the *places* they're supposed to represent. It's not the concrete cities or verdant forests, nor the man-made lakes or streams, that matter." Joker held out his arms, "No, it's the people who live there. As long as their hearts beat as one, as long as they stand together to face any adversity, to support each other and rebuild together, then there's no way you'll be able to destroy them."

“Hmph. How foolish.” Yaldabaoth muttered, “Very well, then I shall make that choice for you. For rebelling against me, I release upon the world the deadly sin of Gluttony! You have no means of escape-”

“Gods, do you ever shut up!?” Elizabeth called.

Yaldabaoth was consumed in an expanse of white, and his cry of rage rained down across the combined worlds when it dissipated.

Elizabeth, carried by Asura, floated nearby. At her side were the rest of the Attendants, Margaret floating gracefully with her Compendium open and ready, Lavenza seated upon Vishnu’s shoulder, and Theodore balanced perfectly in Lucifer’s palm.

A form landed on Satanael’s shoulder in a burst of wind, “Joker!” Mona called as Mercurius landed by his other self, “The cavalry has arrived!”

Voices of courage raged, and all manner of forms jumped onto the last pillar before Yaldabaoth.

...

Nezu cackled as he floated within Prometheus with Oracle and La Brava, several dozen screens around them as they flew through the air. One such screen revealed how Metatron’s final Fire of Sinnai bisected Merkabah, either halves of his body falling to the black sea below.

With their former commander turned traitor, and with Merkabah dead, the remaining Shadows scattered.

Oracle cheered as her Leader’s remaining Personas eliminated most Shadow before they even had a chance to back up Yaldabaoth.

“You got this, Joker!” La Brava cried with all of her soul.

Oracle cracked her knuckles and typed on several keyboards, and Nezu's eyes lit up when the code finished and a holographic button appeared before the three of them.

"On my signal, press your buttons!" Oracle stated, "... Now!"

They slammed their hands, or in Nezu's case, a paw, on their buttons.

"Only a little further." Nezu said as he watched the myriad of lights spread around their comrade in arms' bodies, "You can do this, Joker!"

"We believe in you!" La Brava raised her fists to the air, "So don't lose to that thing!"

Oracle grinned as she sensed their emotions empowering her Leader's final attack.

...

"Aniki!" Kirishima yelled as another Angel fell before his fist, "I know you can win! You're the manliest person I've ever met, so I know there's no way you could ever lose against him!"

"DAMN STRAIGHT, JOKER!!" Bakugo howled, "SO KILL THAT THING AND GET YOUR SORRY ASS HOME ALREADY!"

...

Midoriya panted as he landed on Ryukyu's back, being steadied by Gang Orca's massive hand.

Ryukyu roared a battle cry as the Malevolent God was being hounded by so many attacks, his frustration rising in the divine instruments on his multiple arms.

"Hang in there, Joker!" Ryukyu called as she dove for the arm bearing the bell.

"On my signal, Midoriya?" Gang Orca asked as he clutched a massive bardiche in one hand.

Midoriya, exhausted and slightly injured, beamed, "Yeah! We have to support Joker with everything we've got!"

Gang Orca laughed, "Let's do this!"

Ryukyu collided with the metallic arm, claws scratching and jaws ripping.

"There!" Gang Orca pointed to the exposed joint below as Yaldabaoth tried to shake them off, "A united attack between us both should do it."

"Got it!"

Midoriya leapt with green lightning sparking around his body while Gang Orca dropped. Their combined attacks, a hearty swing of a bardiche and a super-powered kick, severed the bent metal.

Ryukyu cried in victory as the arm was torn off and thrown down below, the accursed bell going with it. But then there was nothing stopping them from falling, too. Ryukyu snarled as she dove to catch them, when another acted on her behalf.

"Santen Kisshun, I reject!"

A yellow shield caught them and lowered them onto a nearby pillar, and Ryukyu landed behind them, breathing hard.

"Are you two okay!?" She asked.

"F-fine! But who...?" Midoriya asked.

Gentle Criminal landed behind them with Mr. Compress at his side, and another girl they didn't recognize. She had long orange hair and a kind expression, the trio of arrows forming the shield returned to her and formed petals on her blue hairpins.

"We met this little lady earlier." Mr. Compress chuckled at their flabbergasted expressions.

"Do any of you need healing?" The girl asked.

Midoriya turned red, but frantically shook his head, "N-No!"

Gang Orca opened his mouth, but they were silenced when the world trembled again. They looked over to see Skull and Fox had joined the furious battle at the main tower in front of Yaldabaoth, ice and lightning dancing alongside the other wild magic.

"Well, well..." Mr. Compress walked forward, "Let's give Joker the power he needs to end this once and for all!"

"He's right, of course." Gentle Criminal smiled up at Satanael, warm and sad at once, "You have this in the bag Joker, of that I'm sure."

Ryukyu chuckled, "Then let's not keep him waiting!"

"Right!" Midoriya called.

"You go on ahead," The orange haired girl bowed to them, "I'll catch up!"

Ryukyu nodded to her, and the group charged into battle in Joker's name.

...

Hitoshi rolled under the Shadow's swipe, one of the only Angels who reached their twisted master on the last pale tower. Unfortunately for it, it was vastly outnumbered.

Aizawa's capture weapon snaked around its body to stop its movements, and Hitoshi threw himself to his feet and jumped at it, his white and black dagger slicing through it like butter.

He wiped his brow as the Shadow vanished, staring up at Joker who stood defiant and confident in Satanael's palm.

He felt in his heart that his Arcana fueled his best friend, his brother, and glancing at Aizawa, he knew the other man felt the same. With mutual nods, they turned towards the God Of Control and added their battle cries to the horde of attacks.

...

"How pathetic." Fox glowered at Yaldabaoth as ice crept up the God's body. "To think you were strong enough to catch us off guard last time, but your strength falters before us!"

"Agreed!" Noir waved an arm, and the ice was shattered by her One Shot Kill. One of the wings snapped, sending a shower of broken silver feathers upon them, "But don't think we'll go easy on you!"

"Yeah!" Panther cried as her whip snapped, "We'll return every ounce of pain you caused for us... every. Single. Bit!"

"How to it feel to be so helpless?" Queen whispered as Yaldabaoth tried to retaliate with bullets, blades, and magic, "For hurting us and our Leader so much... you deserve to be taken down."

"Hell yeah, Queen!" Skull beamed, "Everyone, let's show him who's boss!"

...

Mona snickered at their comrades' words, "This is it, Joker! Are you ready?"

Joker looked into Satanael's eyes, and then they both glanced to the gun-sword in Satanael's other hand. The pulse within the chamber was at its peak.

"Yes. Let's do this."

Mona leapt off in a gust of wind alongside Mercurius to join the other original Phantom Thieves at the head of the battle below.

"We'll cover you as best as we are able." Margaret stated.

"Just hurry up and kill him already." Elizabeth smirked, "We're all waiting!"

Theodore smiled, "It'll be a grand finale for certain."

"I was right to never waver my faith in you." Lavenza's eyes turned warm, "One more push is all it takes. My siblings and I will combine our attacks to give you an opening. Don't waste it."

Joker chuckled, "Well, Satanael?"

Satanael raised his gun-sword, the Sinful Shell loaded, "It's time."

The Attendants' powers threaded together, and Theodore took the lead by raising his hand towards Yaldabaoth.

A star appeared over the Malevolent God, flickered, then rained down a searing pillar of light. The Morning Star collided with Yaldabaoth, the sky splitting at the deep metal reverberation and the crackle of power from the explosion. The other Attendants smiled as they combined their powers and cast Megidolaon in tune with it.

The other fighters never stopped their assault from below, and Joker pushed his shock aside as the Attendants' attack caused Yaldabaoth to stagger, another one of his arms splitting off. It landed in Amestris, crushing a vast majority of it, the book tumbling from its grasp to reduce another few buildings to dust.

"Now!" Joker called.

Satanael flared his wings and hurried forward. The power coalesced in Satanael's weapon, his finger steady upon the trigger as Yaldabaoth raised his head. His metal skin was marred and burned, dented and cracked from the united army unleashing their rage upon him. Feathers from his wings were missing, and black blood leaked from every wound to stain his silvery skin like oil.

Yaldabaoth snarled as Satanael raised his gun, staring straight down the barrel.

"You... it's *you* . It's always been you. You were the one to gather this pitiful rebellion, so I only need to eradicate you and crush these whelps!" Blackness pulsed between Yaldabaoth's damaged limbs. "For the sin of rebelling against me, I banish you to the darkest pits of the abyss! No world shall ever shelter you again as you perish in agony!"

Unbeknownst to Joker and Satanael, within the last few seconds of the battle, Yaldabaoth froze as the power to access other dimensions was suddenly ripped from his grasp.

Other beings had appeared in the fabric between this false world and the abyss, each at a pivotal point of the realm like the arrows of a compass. They'd waited for this *exact* moment.

A red-haired man who bestowed power upon his people, who now pretended to be a human. The one who gathered them together.

A flicker of the purest blue flame.

The smirk from a being of light and shadow, the Truth of all things.

And a small, sentient gem, taking the place of the King of Souls to grant a deeply desired wish.

Yaldabaoth hesitated.

And it was that single second of pause...

That. Cost. Him. *Everything.*

“Pillage him, Satanael!”

Everything stilled as Yaldabaoth gazed at the boy who held the Universe in his eyes.

BANG!

All Yaldabaoth knew was ***pain*** and the sound of a shattering mirror.

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With The Stars And Us

Chapter 99: With The Stars And Us

The bond that we have

Forever strong

I am a friend you can count on

Never forget when we're apart

We are as one, under the stars

It's okay

For us

To say...

Goodbye.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays everyone!!

Here's the song choice for this chapter :')

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fobU-VheouA&ab_channel=Sapphire

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Streams of sunlight glimmered off the fractured fractals in a veil of beautiful colors., and Joker could do nothing but stare at the gaping hole in Yaldabaoth's head.

All fighting below ceased, stopped on a dime as Yaldabaoth spoke in a broken voice.

"So even after all of this... Damn that Igor, damn that lying Nyarl-" Yaldabaoth's laughter was dry and mirthless as flakes of gold peeled off his body and fluttered in the wind, "The true power of the Trickster remains unmatched after all..."

The bone spikes and twisting towers of spines dissipated, and the remaining angelic Shadows evaporated under the blue sky without so much as a whisper. The great sea of black under Yaldabaoth, and the puddles of red, faded into crystal clear waters. Gold glitter showered Joker as Yaldabaoth's body disappeared, leaving behind a tiny chalice in his place.

Satanael followed the chalice's descent down to the large dais where most of the combatants waited. He let Joker hop down first before blue flames consumed his body, returning him to his smaller size. He hovered beside his other self as they approached the chalice.

Joker felt something within himself unravel after so long. Peace, perhaps. Or the feeling of sure victory after a long fought war. He looked to the heavens and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of the fresh air.

"Joker."

Joker opened his eyes and looked at Satanael, at the other Personas as they gathered around him and the chalice. Metatron was there too, lingering in the back with Sandalphon, eyes focused on Joker.

Satanael reached his hand down.

“I know.” Joker forced himself to smile and he placed his hand in Satanael’s, their fingers tightening over their wrists.

Satanael chuckled, warm and proud, “We’ll always be with you, deep within your soul.”

Blue cinders mixed with the gold.

Kohryu was the first to go by deeply bowing his head. Fafnir and Mother Harlot followed. Messiah Picaro and Zaou-Gongen. Hastur, Beelzebub, Loa, Futsunushi. Each one that disappeared added more blue to the gold, gently swirling around Joker with a soft breeze.

Cybele threw an arm around Attis as they vanished together.

Lakshmi’s smile softened before she went, too, tugging Odin with her.

Amaterasu hugged Joker and placed a kiss on his temple before delving back into his soul.

Sandalphon simply nodded, his satisfaction known as he and Metatron vanished.

Joker looked deep into Satanael’s eyes as he was the last remaining. His other self smiled, tightened his grip over Joker’s hand, and then slowly faded away. The cerulean ash sprinkled over Joker when his hand suddenly felt empty and cold.

Joker placed his hand over his heart as every Persona curled together within his soul, each falling into a deep slumber.

Their duty was done, at least.

Joker would never deny them their much-needed retirement.

“It’s... it’s really over...”

Joker looked to the other Phantom Thieves when they approached, smiling sadly at Noir, “Yes, it is.”

Skull took a deep breath, “HELL YEAAAH!!!” He screamed to the false world, tears in his eyes.

Panther put a hand on her chest, eyes watering, too, “I can’t believe we’re standing here, right now.”

Fox looked to the sky where Yaldabaoth hovered previously, “Something so malevolent turning into something beautiful...”

Queen held up her hands as the gold and blue starlight continued to fall, “What happens now that Yaldabaoth is gone?”

Mona put his paw on the chalice, eyes closing, “The next step is to go home, but...”

“About that...” Oracle fidgeted with her goggles, “Urahara and I set this place to start fading after Yaldabaoth was defeated, so...”

Urahara appeared several meters behind her in a flick of Shunpo, frowning. He glanced at Oracle and Skull before he looked down, his hat shading his eyes, “The edges of this world are already unraveling with Yaldabaoth’s defeat. Say your final goodbyes because everyone will be returned to their rightful worlds within the next minute or so.”

One minute .

“That’s it?” Mona whispered in shock.

“It’s better this way.” Urahara stated, “Trust me.”

“What about their status?” Joker asked, “Does anyone need to be... revived?”

Urahara’s smile softened, “A few injuries all around, but no deaths. People are already healing their injuries with your gifts while they can.”

“Good.” Joker smiled when the others stared after him. “Go.”

Skull and Oracle grasped each others hands as they went off with Urahara.

Queen and Fox located the area where their allies were, Panther and Noir did the same.

Mona looked up at his partner, “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Joker grabbed the chalice, surprised at how warm it was, before Mona hopped on his shoulder.

The other heroes and students weren’t far. Like the other worlds’ inhabitants, they split away from the mishmashed teams and gathered with the others who belonged to their individual worlds.

Joker and Mona saw a flicker of movement in the corner of their eye.

Mr. Compress, La Brava, Gentle Criminal, Spinner and Lady Stubbs stood at the edge of a separate white pillar. Mr. Compress tipped his hat before they jumped off the side without another word.

Mona and Joker shared a mutual nod.

They had said their goodbyes that day in the Velvet Room, and Mr. Compress and the others would need the head start to leave U.A.’s confines while they had the chance.

“So...” Nezu stood at the head of the group when Joker and Mona finally made it, paws tightly tangled together, “This is it.”

“Yeah.” Joker gestured with the sparkling chalice in his hand, “So much trouble, for something so small, huh?”

Hitoshi startled with a wet laugh, “Everything was worth it.”

“IT REALLY WAS!!” Kirishima burst into tears.

“Oi, stop crying all over the place!” Bakugo snapped, even when it was obvious that the boy’s own eyes were wet and shining, too.

“Hey, kid,” Hawks smirked as he put a firm hand on Joker’s shoulder, “Take care of yourself, yeah?”

“We will.”

“I’ll make sure of it!” Mona said with a bright smirk.

Aizawa scoffed, “Good luck. All of us will need every wink of sleep we can get after this.”

“That’s more like it!” Midnight cackled, “All it took for you to get some real sleep was fighting a god? Who knew!”

“Maybe fighting god is something we need to do more often?” Present Mic said.

“Hell yeah!” Miruko pumped her fist in the air, “This was fun as hell!”

Ryukyu and Gang Orca traded looks of horror.

“Let’s not make this a normal habit, yes?” Best Jeanist stated.

Their banter halted when they all felt it. A sharp, deep seated *tug*, like a string trying to pull them all away.

Joker looked out to the meshed landscapes, his stomach dropping when the edge of the worlds disappeared, the wave of *nothingness* slowly growing closer to their tower. Multicolored specs of light joined with the gold and blue swirling through the air. Like all the stars in the sky dancing around them.

“Everyone…” Joker turned to the group, but his throat closed.

“Y-you don’t need to say it!” Midoriya gave them a bright and happy grin, despite the tears rolling down his cheeks, “We understand!”

“I agree!” Iida Tenya sniffled as he puffed out his chest and chopped his arm rapidly. “It... it was an honor to get to know you!”

If his hand was more than a bit shaky, nobody dared to point it out.

“We’ll take care of everything, right?” Tensei called as he looked around.

“Yes!”

“We’ll do our best!”

“Damn right we will!”

“Nobody showed us how to give our all better than you, Joker... Ren.” Yagi beamed at them, “I don’t think we’ll ever forget those lessons. Right, Nighteye?”

“Right...” Nighteye huffed as he adjusted his glasses, brow strangely furrowed, “Farewell, Joker and Mona.”

Yagi grinned as he elbowed his old sidekick.

The chalice in Joker’s hands suddenly shone bright, blinding them. The innate, inner *tug* within them was harsher, stronger, and Joker and Mona felt themselves being pulled away by some unknown force. By the time the brightness died down, panic had stricken the faces of the students and heroes as the white light began to separate them. The finer details of the lands below were consumed by the pale void.

“W-wait. I-I’m not ready!” Hitoshi reached his hand out, voice cracking, “Joker!!”

Joker simply smiled as the distance between them grew larger. Other voices joined in, not just by Aizawa, or Yaoyorozu, or even Todoroki, but by the other worlds as Joker and Mona drifted close to their original teammates.

“Goodbye, everyone!” Noir shouted as she waved, “Goodbye!”

“Take care!” Panther called, her hands situated around her mouth to project her voice, “And Rin, don’t you dare slack off on your training, mister!”

“None of you die to any lame Hollows, you hear me?!” Skull bore a large grin.

Oracle was trembling as she sniffled, “I would be so disappointed after all the crap we’ve been through!”

“It has been... an adventure.” Fox bowed, “Farewell.”

“Everyone, take care!” Queen called with a small wave, “Please, stay safe!!”

Joker strained his ears as the voices from the other worlds faded and dulled into a murmur, which then wilted into silence. Their world was consumed by white, and Joker shielded his face when there was a *thrum* of power within his whole body, the other Phantom Thieves crying in shock at the intensity of it.

Ren kept his eyes clenched shut as an odd sensation made his head swim and a pit to fall in his stomach, the same dropping feeling anyone would get from looking down at a great height.

The sound of footsteps.

Car horns and the smell of exhaust.

Ren slowly peeled one eye open, then the other. Four sparkling blue butterflies pranced around him before going off in their own direction, but it was the surrounding scenery that made him cry out.

“You guys!”

The others followed his example- *maskless, in normal winter clothes-* to take in their surroundings.

Futaba gasped, "This... this is... !"

"The Shibuya Crossing..." Makoto's eyes were wide.

"We..." Ryuji cleared his throat when his voice strained, "We're really back?"

Ann whipped out her phone, rapidly scrolling, "The MetaNav is gone!"

"Um... excuse me!" Haru reached out to the closest salaryman, who gave them a narrow eyed look.

"Yes?"

"If you don't mind me asking... what day is it?"

"It's Christmas Day."

"And what about the Red Rain!?" Ryuji blurted, "Do you remember anything about Yaldabaoth or his Shadows!?"

"Ryuji!" Makoto snapped.

"I... have no idea what you're talking about young man. Are you sure you're okay?"

"We are!" Haru put on her best smile, "Thank you."

The salaryman examined them one last time before he shrugged and walked away.

Yusuke knelt down and ran his hands over the cold pavement, ignoring the odd stare or two from the passing civilians, "Yes, we're finally back."

Ann released a shaky sigh, her fists trembling, "We're... we're really home!"

“And it looks like time wasn’t affected by Yaldabaoth’s reign, either...” Makoto whispered in thought.

“Wait!” Haru interlaced her hands and looked around in a panic, “Where’s Mona-chan!?”

“Mona?” Ren looked around, as did the others, when he felt movement on his shoulder. “Mona!”

Ren looked back to see his school bag hanging on his shoulder, wriggling and moving as if something were trying to escape. He chuckled, and the others watched as he moved the bag to his chest and opened the zipper.

Morgana took a dramatic breath as he popped his head and upper body out, “I couldn’t breathe with all the stuff in there!! Oh hey, we’re back in Tokyo!?”

“Mona-chan!” Haru jumped forward and ran her hands over his head, “Don’t scare us like that!”

“For real, dude...” Ryuji muttered as he rubbed the back of his head, “I dunno what I’d do if we lost you in that mess.”

Morgana rolled his eyes, “I’m fine! More importantly, look!”

Everyone looked in Ren’s bag, curious.

“There’s a tiny golden cup in here. That must be what remains of Yaldabaoth.” Morgana said as he nudged the gaudy looking thing at the top of the pile, “But everything else is here, too! I was careful not to crinkle Eri’s picture, o-or Midoriya’s notebook. Or... any of the other stuff.”

Ren dug around, relieved that every gift from his confidants was accounted for, but he felt nothing from the small golden cup. In fact, it was so small it easily fit in the palm of his hand. That it was powerless and minuscule was as funny as it was relieving.

“Ren... Everyone... Now that we’re all together,” Futaba straightened as everyone’s eyes fell on her. “There’s... there’s one place we should all go! Right now!”

Ren grinned, “Yeah.”

“Well, what are we waiting for!?” Ann stated.

“I would be down for some curry.” Yusuke said with a fond smile.
“Fighting a God sure works up an appetite.”

Haru beamed, “Boss’ coffee sounds delicious!”

“Last one there’s a rotten egg!!” Futaba yelled before she dashed off towards the subway tunnels.

“Hey! No fair!!” Ryuji sputtered.

“Please, no running!” Makoto called as she jogged after Futaba, “It could be slippery!”

“Come on, slowpokes!” Ann grabbed Ryuji and Yusuke’s wrist and raced forward, the both of them squawking in surprise.

“Well?” Morgana grinned, sharp and playful, at Ren, “We can ‘t let them beat us!”

Ren burst with laughter as he took off running after them. Normal civilians jumped out of the way of the racing band of teenagers, scowling or rolling their eyes. Complaining under their breaths. But nobody seemed to remember Yaldabaoth’s reign. There were no bony protrusions from the ground or around the buildings, nor any signs of *red* .

The puddle Ren splashed through before all but leaping down the stairs was clear.

No Shadows rose before them in a challenge, leaving nothing to stop them from all piling into the train. Each Phantom Thief bore a warm,

soft grin as they fidgeted in excitement. The train ride passed with a sense of being *too slow* and *too fast* at the same time, and Ren bellowed with more laughter as *he* was the first one off the train.

Morgana wheezed in amusement as the others clambered behind them.

Through the station.

Up the stairs.

Down an *achingly familiar* street.

The first steps into Yongen.

His heart *pounded* when they came across all the familiar stores and houses-

Ren wasted no time bursting through Leblanc's doors, the jingling bell ringing overhead was something out of a long-forgotten dream. He panted for breath with his hands on his knees, only standing when the rest of the Phantom Thieves rushed in after him.

There was a gasp as Takemi and Sae rose to their feet from the chairs along the counter, alongside Chihaya and *so many other* familiar faces. Ren's eyes traced over Mishima, Iwai, Kawakami, and Hifumi when they scrambled out of a booth, jaws to the floor.

But one person's weight held more than the others, and Ren slowly swiveled his head to stare at Sojiro standing behind the counter.

The man who bore the same shock as the rest, but his expression molded into *warmth* and *relief* the longer he stared at Ren, the lighting within the cafe sparkling off his watering eyes as he smiled with the utmost pride. He drank in Ren, Futaba, and the others, carefully setting down the mug he was cleaning.

Sojiro welcomed them home with a wide smirk.

“Ah, you’re back.”

AAAHHHH I can't believe we're finally here. At the end. Holy canoli. What a ride! Sojiro's words have been in my head for so long, and now they are finally on the screen! I'm crying and internally screaming because the journey has been so long and so filled with all sorts of emotions running over *years*. I'll make a more comprehensive end note and proper thank you at the end of the next chapter, the Epilogue. I'm still in shock that this is The End and pretty exhausted from holiday shenanigans :'D

EPILOGUE COMING JANUARY 6TH!

Our Light - Epilogue

Chapter 100: Our Light - Epilogue

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“You promised not to interfere.” Philemon smirked at Ryoto. “I didn’t think you were such a liar.”

They stood at the edge of a building within the falsely crafted world, which was seconds away from vanishing in a funerary shower of glorious prismatic colors. Starlight danced and fluttered around them like playful faeries.

“But I didn’t lie.” Ryoto kept his eyes to the distance, ignoring Philemon’s amusement, “Your Trickster defeated Yaldabaoth with his own power and merit. I simply stopped this *mistake* from turning into an endless cycle.”

“With a little help from the god-like beings in the other worlds.”

Ryoto sighed, “They’re just as tired of this situation as I am.” The landscapes in the distance were swallowed by the light, each world and their natural inhabitants separating permanently. Ryoto turned away from it.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” Ryoto looked over his shoulder. The sharpness in Ryoto’s eyes were honed to a razor’s edge. An ancient and powerful aura emanated from his body, and the shadow at his feet revealed a form not entirely *human*, “And Philemon? If you or Nyarlethotep ever pull another farce like this, the others and I formed a pact to hunt you two down and put you out of your misery.”

Philemon wrinkled his nose, “Is that a threat?”

“No. How did your Trickster put it...? Ah, ‘it’s a promise of mutually assured destruction.’” Ryoto rolled his eyes when Philemon pouted at him, “I suggest you heed this warning with the utmost seriousness. If I ever see your face again, I won’t hold back.”

Ryoto walked into the curtain of starlight.

“So mean!”

Thankfully, the next step took him home before he could strike Philemon’s very punch-able face.

The dorms were empty when they returned, victorious against the God Of Control.

Well, ‘empty’ aside from Kazuya, Eri, and the Shinsou family. But a certain group of vigilantes were nowhere to be found. Risumi and Ayumu rushed to their son when he entered, smothering him in hugs, while Eri sat on Kazuya’s lap. Her face was buried in his chest as she hugged a familiar Lady Stubbs shaped plush that looked suspiciously hand-made.

“They’re not in here.” Cementoss stated once he checked all the rooms. “All of their belongings are cleaned out.”

“Yes... I’m getting similar reports across the grounds.” Nezu stated, his stare never wavering from Kazuya.

“I told you, they’re already gone.” Kazuya said as he ran a hand down Eri’s hair.

“But... the security system was never tampered with!” Power Loader cried. “We would know if they left or not!”

Kazuya smiled, “Are you so certain?”

“I...” Power Loader scratched his head, returning to his laptop with a stream of mutters.

Nezu sighed, “I promise you won’t be in trouble, but we must know what transpired. Where have they gone?”

“I can’t tell you *where* they went, because they didn’t tell me. However,” Kazuya reached into his pocket for a tiny box, hand wrapped with a shiny red bow, “They said to give you this when the time was right.”

“Oh?” Nezu took the box in his hand with a strange sparkle in his eyes.

Hitoshi, who stood next to his parents, checked his phone, “Uh...”

He rounded the couch to grab the television remote and turned it on. He flipped through a few channels before stopping on a news station, and every adult in the dorms froze at the headline.

BREAKING: Kamino Joker and Satanael Statue Stolen! Calling Card Left At The Scene! Is This The Return Of The Phantom Thieves!?

Aizawa buried his face in his hands as Demizu Mika was live on the air, standing in the square that held the statue. Only All Might’s visage stood there now.

“-ameras in the area were hacked and the culprits left no evidence. However, Joker’s Spotlight account has been renamed as the ‘Phantom Thieves Of Hearts’ and they left a message as their first post! It reads as thus: ‘To the people of the public, fear not! While Joker and Mona have officially retired, we’ll carry out our former Leader’s justice in his stead. It was Joker himself who requested that the statue be taken as our first heist, and any other attempts to replace it will be met with similar results!’”

Nezu tuned out the broadcast as he looked to the tiny present in his paws. He tugged off the neat ribbon and opened the box. The next

thing they knew, an explosion of red glitter covered everything in a several meter radius around the rat. Startled yelps and swallowed swears followed as Nezu stood there like a sparkling statue, eerily silent.

Aizawa swallowed, “Nezu?”

With a shaking paw, Nezu reached into the box and pulled out a key chain. *A red herring* charm dangled from the end of it.

Nezu burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter while the rest of the adults could do nothing but watch him descend into chaos.

“Do it again!”

“Kacchan! It’s hard to concentrate when you’re hitting me with my own notebook!”

“IT DOESN’T MATTER! You need to practice before you do something stupid like let it go out of control! How do you expect to save people or fight villains if you’re a liability on the field!?”

“Now, now.” Yagi held up his hands, “Young Midoriya, what did the vestiges say in your last dream with them?”

Bakugo huffed and sank back into the couch with a scowl.

“That... that I could take my time with their Quirks, since the threat of All For One is gone.” Midoriya looked at him, green eyes bright like emeralds glinting from warm sunlight, “I’ll master them! I won’t disappoint you!”

Yagi chuckled, “You’ve never disappointed me, my boy. Now, try again.”

Midoriya zeroed in on the magazine on the table, surrounded by their tea cups. He opened his palm, brow scrunching in concentration.

After a minute or so, a black tendril arose from his skin and shot out towards the table. Midoriya beamed and pulled his arm back for the tendril to return-

When the magazine, the teacups, and the teapot hurdled towards him.

He yelped as he ducked his head, the magazine harmlessly collided with the wall behind them and went *splat* on the floor, but the teacups and the pot shattered against it. Lukewarm tea oozed down the wall as Bakugo burst out in laughter.

"I-I'll clean it up!" Midoriya shot to his feet and gathered tissues and their paper towels, while Bakugo collapsed against the couch laughing so hard he clutched his stomach.

"Kacchan! You could at least help me?"

"No way!" Bakugo barked, "You made that mess, you clean it up!"

"Maybe we can call Nighteye and get his opinion on a better training method?" Yagi suggested, "I'll see if Gran Torino knows anything about the other vestiges... before you get access to their Quirks, too."

Bakugo scoffed. "The last thing we need is Deku breaking his bones again because he can't control his Quirks."

"Hey! I don't break them anymore!"

"No, you just break teapots and make a mess instead!"

Yagi smiled at their banter. This peace and tranquility born without the threat of All For One, without the weight of the world on his successor's shoulders... he knew who to thank for it.

And from the vibrant red top hat charm on Bakugo's phone, to the equally crimson stickers plastered all over Midoriya's notebooks, they knew it too.

None of them would ever forget.

“Why are you here?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?” Natsuo puffed out his chest and stared at the person tied to a chair on the other side of the glass wall, “You’re our brother!”

Shoto pursed his lips, his hand going numb from how hard Fuyumi gripped it. Coming into this room was a shock for his mother and siblings, but for himself and his father... at least they were somewhat prepared. Touya was tightly bound to a chair by a straitjacket, his crazed blue eyes pinning them with pure hatred as his dyed hair was nearly bleached white again. A thick glass pane separated them, and the walls on Touya’s side were charred and burnt black. The purple scarring on their brother’s face and limbs crept further up his body.

Shoto compared it to a slow flame burning away a sheet of paper, bit by bit.

Despite the horrific scenery, their mother kept her spine straight and her chin raised as she sat on the only chair in front of the glass panel, as delicate as a snowflake floating on a gentle breeze.

“You’re my son, Touya.” Rei stated, her soft gaze countering Touya’s, “No matter what you’ve done, that will never change.”

“Stop fooling around.” Touya leaned forward as much as he could in the chair, the restraints creaking, “I hate you. Don’t you understand that? I *hate* all of you!” Black smoke plumed from his chair, and within the dark cloud Touya grinned from ear to ear in a terrifying leer, “If I were free right now, I would set you all on fire and *laugh* while you were screaming and begging me for death!”

Tears streamed down Fuyumi’s cheeks, “Y-you can’t mean that! Touya-”

“STOP CALLING ME TOUYA!”

An alarm rang as Touya’s half of the room burst into blue flame.

“Touya!” Natsuo pounded his fist on the glass at the sudden deluge of water being poured on the other side, of the hiss of pain and the *silence* that came after the automated guns in the corner of his cell shot a tranquilizer.

The thickness of the stench made Shoto’s gut roil.

Streams of water trickled down the glass as the smoke in Touya cell slowly cleared, revealing their brother, unconscious and still wafting with sickly smelling smoke.

“Endeavor,” An emotionless drone of a voice came over the speakers, “It would be best to come back another day.”

Enji pulled himself from the wall behind them, “Yes. Let’s go.”

Fuyumi was the first to run out of the room. Rei rose from the chair in one fluid motion, and Natsuo finally tore his red-rimmed eyes away from Touya when she lay a hand on his shoulder. They walked out together. Shoto turned his back and walked out the door, his father following in his footsteps.

Shoto took a few steps into the stark white hall before stopping, feeling his father’s eyes on his back, “He won’t change.”

“You can’t be certain of that.”

Shoto whirled around to his father with hardened eyes, “Can’t I? Look at what happened in there!”

Enji opened his mouth, but closed it.

“What? Say it.”

“I changed.”

“... What?”

Enji gave his son a strange look, “I changed because a certain someone shattered my entire world view and helped me grow as a person. If someone like me can change for the better, then I know we can reach Touya, too.”

“But Joker went home.”

“Yes, but we don’t need Joker this time.” Enji placed a heavy hand on Shoto’s shoulder, “This is our family. It is *our* responsibility to get through to him, no matter how long it takes.”

Shoto huffed, “Are you insane?”

“Perhaps.” Enji’s expression shifted with a sad smile, “Or just very stubborn. I’m not going to give up on this. One way or another, we’ll reach him.”

Shoto stared at his father for a long while, “... If you want to keep trying with him, then I’m with you. I still don’t think we’ll get through to him any time soon, but I can’t have my old man do all the work himself.”

Enji grinned, “Thank you, Shoto.”

Shoto rolled his eyes and stepped away, cast one last look at the door, and walked down the hall to catch up with his mother and his siblings.

If Joker... if *Ren* imparted anything on himself or his father before he left, it was that accomplishing a goal took a lot of willpower and hard work. Even if it seemed impossible, the only reason they’d ever fail is if they gave up on Touya completely.

Ren started this path for their family, but *they* would be the ones to finish it.

Spring was in the air.

The snow and ice had long since melted, and the plants returned to life in an explosion of greenery and beautiful flowers. Taneo walked down such a street as cherry blossoms cascaded down like rain. Light chatter whispered on the breeze as he passed by a park filled to the brim with people viewing the pinks and whites of the trees.

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the USJ incident, and more importantly, the day a vigilante stepped into this world and changed it forever. The media had calmed down and swiftly moved on after the statue incident in Kamino, and the Phantom Thieves had been relatively quiet since.

People spoke of Joker's mysterious retirement less and less, and as time marched forward they didn't speak of it at all.

The world moved on.

It wasn't until Taneo reached his destination, a bus stop about a block away from the park, that he saw something that made him smile. Reignited that hope of *maybe* people wouldn't just forget about Ren entirely. Next to the bus stop's bench stood a pole littered with colorful stickers. All sorts of logos and brands he either didn't recognize or care for, but one stood out.

Worn and faded, the edges raw from weather, was a red 'Take Your Heart!' sticker. None of the others dared to cover it, and gave it space on the center stage. Almost as if they were afraid, or even reverent of it.

Taneo smiled.

His bus arrived and he boarded it. The other passengers barely gave him a passing glance as he sat near the back, staring out the window as it began rolling forward. Then, he nearly startled as a figure moved and sat next to him, leaving enough space to be polite.

“Um, excuse me.” The girl said staring down at her bag as she clutched, “Would you... um, would you happen to be the author of this?”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a familiar book - all black and red with distinct and vibrant wording.

“Yes, that would be me.”

“I knew it! If it’s not too much to ask for a signature?”

“Sure thing.” He flipped open the cover and signed his name, “I take it you’re a long time fan of Joker?”

“Yeah.” The girl smiled wistfully, “Actually, my grandparents are some of the people he saved from Silver Falcon.”

“You don’t say?”

“They have a small bakery in Musutafu. It’s not as popular as the Blue Lotus, but they get by really well.” She said after he handed back the book, “If you’re ever in town and want to visit, I’ll tell them to give you a good discount!”

“Will do.”

She smiled at him before she returned to her seat next to a small group of girls, all whispering excitedly as she showed them his signature.

It settled him.

Yeah, perhaps the current media moved on, but the sticker and his book served as the true marks of a world that will *never* forget.

“Orange doesn’t suit you, Kunikazu.”

The other man glared from across the table, “What is this about, Ryoto? Come to gloat about your position as the new HPSC President?”

“I’m not so petty as that.” Ryoto interlaced his gloved fingers.

“Then what? The case is going your way, so I don’t get what you could possibly be here for.”

“Hmm, I suppose you could say I’m here to see you witness Joker’s kindness first hand. Perhaps it’ll give you a fresh perspective over your actions.”

The cuffs around Kunikazu’s wrist jangled as he slammed his fists on the table, “That diabolical *brat!* So that’s what this is? Rubbing salt in the wound? I’m sure he’s still gallivanting around Japan, making a mess of things.”

Ryoto sighed, “It’s hard to get news here, I understand. Joker’s gone.”

“Gone? Since when?”

“Seven months ago, on Christmas. Officially retired back to his home. Nobody’s heard a word from him since, which I assure you means that everything is as it should be.”

Kunikazu simply... *stared*, eyes wide.

Ryoto stood, “My time grows short, but I’ll leave you with someone who’s been wanting to talk to you for a while.”

“Who...?”

Ryoto opened the door behind him, revealing an older woman who’s smile was so soft.

Kunikazu turned bone-white, “Mother? H-How...?”

She walked in and sat where Ryoto did moments before, reaching out to grasp her son's hand. Around her wrist was a set of unique rosary, one Ryoto knew was that gift Joker left when they visited that hospital. A treasure from *Amaterasu* herself.

"I had a dream of a kind boy, right before I woke up." Her eyes shone with tears, "And that boy took my hand and told me that everything would be alright."

Ryoto walked out before he heard Kunikazu's shaky reply. He meandered down the hallway and rejoined Commissioner Tsukauchi, along with Officer Sansa and Chief Tsuragamae.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea." Sansa said.

"Why not?" Tsukauchi asked.

"I *mean* isn't dropping this on Kunikazu out of the blue a bit... too much? I hope it won't affect the case overall."

"Everyone deserves closure." Ryoto stated as he clasped his hands behind his back, "Even if that someone is a person like Kunikazu."

"I agree." Tsuragamae crossed his arms, "In the end, if it makes him more open to serving his time and repenting for his wrongdoings, instead of resisting them, then all the better."

"And we know who to thank for this." Sansa muttered under his breath.

Tsukauchi frowned, his hand idly going to his sheathed weapon; a gun in the makings of sterling silver, and decorated with angel wings.

Ryoto sensed nothing from it anymore. The same as he sensed from *Amaterasu's* rosaries. Over the past few months, the magics of these items slowly withered away until they became nothing more than normal items, paperweights without such divine powers. But for

these individuals they meant so much more than that, and kept them still for their practical uses.

At that moment, Tsukauchi's phone buzzed.

Sansa smirked as the man jumped and raced to answer the text, "When are you going to pick out a ring? I want to be there to help you choose!"

Tsukauchi stammered, "What? It's still far too early to think about things like that!"

"Is it?" Sansa narrowed his eyes, "I've seen you two together. You're practically the perfect fit for each other."

Ryoto cleared his throat, "I'll leave you gentlemen to it, then. Do give me an update when you can?"

"Will do, sir." Tsuragamae stated.

Ryoto turned his heel and left.

Yes, this world is as it should be.

Dearest Eri,

We sincerely hope this letter reaches you well, and that you enjoy the gifts in this package. A dress from the finest of French boutiques, high end chocolate from Germany, and a silver necklace from Italy that I'm sure will match your hair and bring out your eyes. We were going to send along a fine bottle of apple cider as well, but Spinner drank all of it.

La Brava and Lady Stubbs were swift to punish him for it, I promise.

As you've no doubt seen Gentle Criminal's latest video, we've taken down a famous cellist who used her musical Quirk to hypnotize her patrons into doing her bidding, leaving an entire host of incidents

where the previous 'criminals' were all proven to be innocent because they were under her malicious spell. Her illegally acquired treasure hoard has been confiscated by the police, but her cello will make a fine addition to our collection. Another prize to be guarded over by the Joker and Satanael statue in our hideout!

While the trail we leave will always be cold to investigators and heroes alike, it seems the majority of Europe has grown wise to us since our latest target, and thus we'll move on.

Who knows where we'll be by the time our next letter reaches you?

Sincerely, Mr. Compress, La Brava, Gentle Criminal, and Spinner.

(And one very large paw print from Lady Stubbs.)

P.S. And Nezu, because we know everything we send goes through intense security and you read these letters personally, we've gifted you a lavish selection of cheeses. One is a large wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano, which was one of the most difficult and ridiculous heists we've ever been on for a dairy product.

No glitter this time, promise! Instead, there's a jar of your favorite pickled herring to compliment the cheese!

Enjoy :)

White walls, white floors.

Sterile and blank.

Sounds so muffled it was like there wasn't any noise at all, only leaving the maddening sound of your own heartbeat thumping in your ears. But the *bang* of the large steel door was akin to standing next to a crack of thunder. The *clack* of his own footsteps bounced

off the too-clean walls as he was allowed through, the door slamming behind him struck through his chest.

The figure in the lone underground cell barely moved, a simple raise of his head so that a blood red eye peeked through the curtain of his long hair.

“Who the hell are you?” The tired, dry voice rasped.

Shirakumo stared at his former charge, his bedraggled appearance and stained, worn out clothes barely fit for a human. Body so thin it was as if he stared at a living skeleton.

“Let me guess, the newest psychiatrist All Might hired? You might as well just turn around and leave now. It’ll save us both the wasted effort.”

Shirakumo shook his head and stepped up to the glass wall, “No, it wasn’t All Might. Actually, I’m the one who begged him to let me see you. Eraser and Mic weren’t happy either, but this wasn’t *their* choice to make. ”

The crimson eye narrowed sharply, “Who are you? I won’t ask again.”

Shirakumo smiled. He sat cross legged so he was level with the dishevelled person huddling in the corner, knees touching the glass, as he raised his hand, “It has been some time, young Shigaraki Tomura.” The smallest wisp of *black* trickled from Shirakumo’s fingers, enough to stain the endless white for but a moment.

Shigaraki startled, both eyes visible as they were blown wide. “... Kurogiri?”

“In some form... yes, I suppose a part of me is still Kurogiri, and always will be.” He idly watched the black mist fade away, “But another part is who I was before being turned into him. My name, my *real* name, is Shirakumo Oboro.”

“How? How are you...?”

Shirakumo’s smile tightened, “It was Joker that healed me.”

Shigaraki went still, and anyone else could mistake him for a corpse, if not for his stuttered breathing.

“I’ve spent the last year relearning how to live again, retraining my Quirk. Trying to blend Kurogiri’s memories with who I was before to make someone new, in a sense. Living at U.A. when the time was right so I could learn to be a hero.”

“Why are you here then?”

“Because when I learned what happened to you...” Shirakumo frowned, “I couldn’t just ignore it.”

Shigaraki did something that made Shirakumo’s heart *hurt* . He didn’t stand up and walk over to the glass. No, he crawled. A shuffling body that used his minimal strength to drag himself across the floor. Shigaraki more or less collapsed against his side of the glass with a weary sigh, and Shirakumo used every ounce of his resolve not to let bitterness or *burning rage* take over his heart.

He could whisk himself and Shigaraki away; right here, right now. Disappear off the face of the earth with his newfound powers. But that wouldn’t allow Shigaraki to get the real help he needed, an extended hand offered by Ryukyu and Gang Orca themselves. And... he couldn’t do that to Eraser and Mic again.

He promised.

“Why?”

Shirakumo blinked, “Why what?”

“Why bother with someone like me? You got your life back, and when you were Kurogiri you were treated like dirt... so why?”

“Everyone deserves a second chance.” Shirakumo pressed a hand to the glass, “And as long as I’m around, you’ll never be alone. I might not be fully Kurogiri anymore, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still care about you.”

Shigaraki stared at him again, long and hard, as if looking for a lie.

Shirakumo beamed at him, “So? What do you say? Do you want the chance to get out of here?”

Shigaraki looked at Shirakumo’s hand, then back to his eyes. The light flickered within his gaze, a bare *tiny* ember, as he raised his hand. He pressed his palm to it, their hands separated by the glass.

Shirakumo’s grin was like seeing the sun rise for the first time after a long, dark night.

“On second thought, maybe this isn’t the best idea.”

Aizawa raised a brow at Kazuya as he leaned against the car U.A. lent to them, “You’re backing out now after all the trouble we went through to get here?”

Kazuya opened his mouth, then closed it. He stared at the gate to a small dwelling, so familiar the memories of it often flitted through his mind, more specifically at his earliest memories. Buried under several lifetimes, but still present.

A small hand grabbed his and gave it a squeeze, “I’ll go with you if you need me!”

Eri had grown so much, now being about as tall as his elbow. Her silver hair was done up in elegant braids(thanks to Aizawa’s efforts), and she wore one of the many dresses Mr. Compress and the others sent to her recently. Even from so far away they spoiled her, but he couldn’t blame them. The horn on her head was more prominent

than ever, but she'd grown to control her powers so well she didn't need a Quirk Suppressant anymore.

His own bracelet glimmered in the afternoon sunlight as he patted her head, "I would appreciate it."

Her spine straightened as she looked to the gate with determination. The grip on his hand tightened as she pulled him forward.

"Take as long as you need." Aizawa stated, "I'll wait here."

Kazuya nodded as Eri opened the gate and marched them through the traditional styled path to the front door. His mouth went dry, and he knew Eri could feel his hands growing shaky and sweaty with each step closer.

She valiantly gave the front door a solid knock, and they waited in silence.

"Coming!"

Kazuya's heart pounded at the soft voice he'd not heard in ages.

The front door slid open, and a slender woman with pale hair appeared. His mother's face gained many wrinkles since he'd last saw her so many years ago, and she just looked... tired. Their eyes met. Her face fell in shock and she dropped a small load of laundry she'd carried.

Eri looked back and forth as the mother and son seemed frozen.

"Dear, are you alright? I heard a noise." Another voice within the house grew closer, and a second figure appeared behind. His father paused, expression breaking as if he'd been punched. "*Kazuya ?*"

He'd never heard his father's voice quake before.

Kazuya swallowed thickly, "I... I can come back another time-"

“No!” His mother reached for him, her hands shaking as she stepped forward, “Is it... it’s really you... This isn’t just another nightmare?”

Kazuya stilled as his mother released a cry and wrapped her arms around him, the tears falling as she buried her face in his chest. His father snapped out of it and seconds later two pairs of arms encased him. The dam finally broke as he cried too, and the family of three slowly sank to the floor from the sheer relief.

After several minutes, his mother pulled herself together and pulled back, hands still on his shoulder, “How are you here? Are you in any danger? The hospital-”

Kazuya held up a hand, “There was a case against the hospital for mistreating patients, and I’ve been discharged. I’m a teacher at U.A. now-”

“You teach at U.A.!? ” His father blurted, eyes wide, then his gaze fell on Eri, “And who’s this?”

His mother rapidly looked back and forth between he and Eri, “KAZUYA!” She chopped his head as she burst into happy tears again, “Did I have a precious grandbaby all this time and you could never so much as write to tell us!?”

Kazuya’s ears burned, “I-it’s not like that-”

Eri giggled, and the sound made both his parents light up like Christmas lights.

“You better explain, mister!” His mother stood, pulling up himself and his father with renewed strength, “I-I’m going to make all of your favorites! A-and then we can... we can all sit down and you can tell us all about these last years!”

“Can I help?” Eri asked softly.

His mother's eyes gained another layer of tears as she held out her hand, "Of course, sweetie! I would love to get to know my precious grandbaby!"

"It's not like-" Kazuya tried again, but Eri and his mother already disappeared down the hallway. He looked at his father and saw nothing but pride glimmering in his eyes.

His father put a firm hand on his shoulder, "Welcome home, son."

Kazuya's heart swelled with warmth.

He didn't know what to expect. To beg for forgiveness over stealing their money and disappearing? For worrying them? To be scorned and kicked off the property, perhaps.

But not this...

And it was all thanks to a certain kid and his talking feline that he'd eventually worked up the courage to change his life for the better, to see his parents again.

Kazuya smiled, "It's good to be home."

"This is Best Jeanist, almost in position with my interns."

"Copy that, Jeanist." Hawks stated as he crouched over the edge of a building, staring down at a large warehouse, "My team has eyes on the target building."

"Hey, we're almost ready, too!" Miruko cackled, *"Say, Mr. Number One Hero, want to make a bet?"*

"Is this really the time?" Iida Tensei stated in exasperation over the comms.

"I agree with my brother!" Hawks imagined the younger Ingenium chopping his arm rapidly, *"Shouldn't we just focus on the mission?"*

“Aw, c’mon! It adds a little fun! And... the winner team gets taken out to dinner! Loser team pays!”

Best Jeanist gave a long sigh.

“Oh, you’re on.” Hawks stood, his hand reaching for the flaming sword at his back. It might not be the legendary divine weapon anymore, what with losing its powers alongside the ring on his finger, but it still worked as a sword and made a striking image. “What’s the bet?”

“Who can take these losers down the fastest!”

“Welp, I hope you all brought your wallets.”

Miruko cackled.

“I might regret this, but Best Jeanist and his team are in position.”
Iida Tensei said reluctantly, *“We have the green light to engage.”*

“Alright! Dynamight, Ingenium, Red Riot! Don’t you dare disappoint me!”

“I’LL KICK YOUR ASS!” Dynamight screamed over the comms, and the first explosion of the battle kicked off.

“Well, you heard him.” Hawks grinned at his team of third year interns, “Deku, Creati, Tsukuyomi, let’s get to it!”

“Yes, sir!”

The four of them descended onto the villains’ lair.

Tsukuyomi used Dark Shadow as wings to fly down alongside him, Creati sprung a parachute from her back, and Deku...

Well, it was a mystery to Hawks.

Deku used snapping black tendrils to swing down, and during their training it was as if the boy... floated, at times. Paired with his green lightning, and outstanding speed and strength, Hawks wondered if Deku would be the one to replace him down the line.

For now, they had villains to apprehend and hostages to rescue.

It wasn't a mystery why this mission felt nostalgic.

He knew Joker would be proud of them.

"-I wish you could've seen Bakugo's face when they lost the bet. It was priceless."

Her mother chuckled.

Even separated by glass and having to talk through rudimentary phones, it was nice to hear.

"How have you been?" Momo asked softly.

"Well enough." She frowned, "Have you spoken to your father lately?"

"No, he hasn't... he refuses to see me. I've sent him letters as well, but he's not replied to a single one."

"... I see." Her mother looked down, "You graduate in a month or two, yes?"

"Yeah." Momo tried a warm smile to lift her mother's spirits, "I'll be a full fledged hero soon, and Hawks offered to officially sponsor Hatsume and I until our collaboration can get off the ground. Mei is certainly excited, and Ichinose's workshop is buzzing with more of her creations than I've ever seen."

A sad smile graced her mother's lips, "Momo, I'm proud of you."

“What?”

“No matter what’s happened, I’m proud. You can do nothing but think in a place like this, and I’ve been reflecting on what your father and I did, how wrong it was.” She tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ears, “We simply didn’t want to raise you in squalor, but that didn’t make our actions any better.”

“Mother...”

The woman finally smiled, and it reached her eyes, “So you go out there and live your life to the fullest, alright?”

“Yes, I will!”

Their time ran short soon after, and Momo walked out of the correctional facility with her head held high. She was halfway to the train station when her phone went off.

[Shoto]

Are you done visiting your mother?

[Momo]

Yes, I left not too long ago.

How about you with your father?

[Shoto]

He’s as insufferable as ever, but we got the paperwork finished today. Natsuo and I escaped before he could drag us into another ‘father and sons bonding session’.

Want to meet up for dinner?

It's my turn to pay.

[Momo]

How about that one soba shop we found last time?

[Shoto]

I'll meet you there.

Momo placed her phone in her bag, her fingers brushing over her grandfather's pocket watch.

She smiled fondly at it before she zipped her bag shut and continued on her way.

"Shiggy, just a little higher!"

"I told you to stop calling me that."

"Just listen to her! She knows what she's doing! *No she doesn't !*"

"Jin! Now your side is too high!"

"Sorry! *Not sorry!* "

Himiko facepalmed.

Ryukyu nudged her with a sly smirk, "It looks great."

"Thank you." Himiko said as the boys finally placed the 'Welcome!' banner on the wall, "We spent all night on it!"

"No, *you* spent all night keeping us up while you did everything yourself." Shigaraki grumbled, "I just wanted to sleep."

She stuck her tongue out at him, receiving rolled eyes in return.

Himiko never expected Shigaraki of all people to join the program, but he's come so far. Despite their... rather intense disagreements years ago, she doesn't hate him, nor he towards them anymore. She was so proud. Of all of them, really.

Shigaraki's complexion and dried skin improved the first week after he was fished out of the *worst* cell in Tartarus, and he'd returned to a healthy weight after a solid month of a careful diet. She'd always wondered if his dry skin was due to his quirk, and without it he seemed to flourish. He kept his hair long and tied it back.

Jin didn't need his mask anymore either, though he still contradicted himself.

As for her, well...

Ryukyu and Gang Orca took Himiko under their wing after graduating from this program. Taught her everything she knew about how to run it so she could be a representative for the people who came here. To stand up for the ones who were trampled on over something they were born with. The ones who had to stoop to villainy just to survive an unfair world. To prove to the public that this program *works* .

Because it did. So many former 'villains' had been brought here and were able to live better lives because of it. Who knew that peoples' lives could improve with just a little bit of strength and support from others?

Their next step was including animals. Dogs. Cats. Perhaps lizards or birds. Creatures for the patients to take care of and bond with to help in their recovery.

"They're here." Ryukyu said after her phone pinged, eyes softening.

Himiko clapped, "Everyone, in your places!"

The nurses scrambled. Shigaraki nearly tripped and fell from the ladder if it wasn't for Jin grabbing his arm and hauling them both down to the ground. Himiko straightened her spine while standing next to Ryukyu, eyes set towards the pair of big double doors.

They opened and streams of sunlight shown through. A nurse pushed in a wheelchair with a familiar form, while Gang Orca's powerful steps thundered beside him.

Himiko's heart turned to ice at the state of their newest addition.

Todoroki Touya, former villain name Dabi. At least, what was left of him. She'd not seen him since the Overhaul Raid years ago. His snow white hair was limp and long, and bandages covered most of his thin body like a mummy.

She felt Ryukyu stiffen beside her, the same reaction even after so many times of pulling former villains from the worst of Tartarus.

Himiko took a deep breath and let it out. Her lone footsteps were loud as she walked to Touya's wheelchair and knelt down in front of him. He lifted his head, icy blue eyes dull and nearly broken, but there was a spark of recognition there.

"Welcome." Himiko stated softly, smiling as she held up her hand, "Let's get you settled in, okay?"

Touya stared at her a long moment, internally debating if he was in a dream or not. Then he gazed around the room, to Shigaraki, Jin, the nurses, other patients who bore understanding smiles, and finally the big 'Welcome!' sign.

Touya offered her a weak grunt, but his hand reached for hers.

Her smile widened as the rough texture of the bandages caressed her own fingers.

This one would take a lot of work, she thought, but her offering her hand, and him *accepting* the help was a solid first step towards a brighter future.

She'd learned from Joker that even the smallest step forward could change a life forever, and she'd be that beacon of Hope for others, too.

The jingle of the door swinging open made Magne sigh.

"Can't you read the sign?" She said without turning her back, the mug in her hands all but clean as she set it down with a hard *thunk*, "We're closed."

The person was quiet for a moment, the only sound was of their rustling clothes as they shifted, "I can't believe you actually kept this bar open."

She whirled around at the familiar voice, gaping at the figure standing at the door, "*Atsuhiro* ? Is that really you?"

Atsuhiro smirked as he sauntered to the counter and sat down at a stool, "As one of our dearest companions used to say... 'The one and only.'"

"When did you guys get back? Why are you..."

Atsuhiro's smirk fell, "We decided to return home for a bit after a particularly nasty encounter with heroes in the Americas." He waved his gloved hand, "Turns out they can get quite tense and angry when it's revealed that one of their most treasured 'heroes' isn't the paragon of justice behind closed doors. They acted like his crimes were *our fault* simply because we revealed the truth!"

Magne pursed her lips.

Atsuhiro cleared his throat and waved his hand again, as if clearing the air, "But that's not important. I..." He sighed and scratched the back of his head, "I'll be honest. One of my biggest regrets was how our last interaction ended. In the heat the moment, it was rather explosive."

"And?"

"And I'm hoping... *maybe*, we could rekindle what was lost?"

Silence drenched the bar.

After an entire minute of stillness, Atsuhiro chuckle dryly, "If not, I understand. Simply say the word and I'll never bother you again-"

"Atsuhiro." Magne chuckled as she turned around, knelt down, and reached into a hidden cupboard close to the ground. Atsuhiro leaned over to watch as she pulled out a particularly expensive brand of whisky, covered in a layer dust. "I bought this after that day, just in case you ever came back. We were both very stupid back then, huh?"

"The curse of being brash and young."

It was Magne's turn to chuckle as she set the bottle on the counter and grabbed two shot glasses, "'Brash and young'? I suppose that gray hair means you've gotten old?"

"Gray hair!?" Atushiro's hands feathered through his scalp, "Where!? I didn't have a gray hair last time I checked! I- oh that is just *mean*, Magne! If anything, Gentle Criminal is the one who has naturally white hair, but we're not really *that* old yet!"

Magne smiled as she poured the amber liquid into their glasses, "Are they coming along, then?"

Atsuhiro, still playfully glowering, lifted his glass, "After a while, yes, if everything goes smoothly here. They had their own business to

check on first.”

“Well, while we wait, you can share all of the adventures and behind the scenes stories that aren’t blasted on the news or buried on Spotlight?”

“I’d love to.”

Atsuhiro raised his glass towards Magne. Their glasses *clinked* as they downed their first drink, with many more to come.

Hitoshi sighed in relief when the back door closed behind him.

He slipped off his boots and hung his capture weapon on the hook beside the door, and his father popped his head through the kitchen door by the time he undid the clasps for his mask.

Hitoshi didn’t even fight the tight hug from his father.

“Long week?” Ayumu stepped back with both hands on his son’s shoulders, “They shared a bit of what happened on the news.”

Hitoshi huffed as he pulled his Persona Chords off, smirking at the ridiculous ‘Kiss the cook’ apron his father wore. Though that softened at the colorful and childish drawings scribbled on it. It was late, so the Blue Lotus was closed and his father must’ve just finished cleaning the kitchen.

“Yeah. The raid is over, so I’ll be taking my normal shifts for a bit. At least I’ll be home every morning. Where are the twins? They usually come running the moment I get home.”

“In the back with Granny Haru. Go see them before dinner is finished.”

“Uh, about that...”

His father raised a brow.

“Off the record, I met up with some familiar faces during work and invited them over for dinner. Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Ayumu’s eyes sparkled, “About time they visit. I’ll let your mother know.”

“Thanks.”

Ayumu passed him and shot up the stairs to their apartment.

Hitoshi smiled as he made his way through the Blue Lotus kitchen. It was everything his parents ever wanted. Top of the line equipment and other tools galore, with enough space for an entire team of cooks to comfortably move about. The new hires certainly loved it as much as his parents did.

He checked the front to make sure nobody else was there. Hitoshi eyed the refined brick walls and warm lighting sprinkled in by low hanging lamps, the front counter and the empty glass showcase that would hold all sorts of treats. Long leather booths and tables took up most of the space, far larger and more in number than they’d ever had before. The earthy scent and the warm, *safe* lighting was the perfect place to settled down and read.

A lot of their customers complimented the full bookshelves which anyone could take from, as long as they returned the book before they left. It was a common denial that most of their more expensive books or international collections came from packages signed by the international Phantom Thieves. Nope.

And of course, the small hints of *red* scattered about was a permanent reminder of who got them there. Stickers on individual menus, bookmarks, a mask pin hanging in the window, the flaming top hat and mask on the chalkboard sign over the cash register.

With a smile, Hitoshi retreated from the front and traipsed through the kitchen. One of the newest additions to their home was a small backyard. Fenced in and safe, with plenty of Granny Haru’s plants to

paint the entire place green. A pleasant coolness replaced the summer heat as the sun set, and Hitoshi walked over the stone path that led to a small pond.

Thanks to a few favors he'd called in, he'd convinced a few people with the right quirks to grow *real* blue lotuses right in their back yard. Fireflies floated around the garden like fairies, painting the blue flowers in pleasant light, while crickets sang their nightly songs.

"Toshi-nii-chan!!"

Two voices screamed before small footsteps raced over the ground, and Hitoshi felt the breath knocked out of them as the twins collided with him with the united force of their tiny bodies.

Hitoshi laughed as he patted their purple hair, "Miss me much?"

"Of course we did!" One of the twins looks up at him, puffing her cheeks, "We always miss you."

The other nodded frantically as she pulled on his shirt. "You were gone *forever* this time!"

They were both identical twins. They'd inherited their mother's eyes and their father's hair color, and Hitoshi liked to imply that they copied his streak of not taking anyone's bullshit. But there was one thing that set them apart from himself or their parents. In their gravity defying purple hair was a streak of lilac so pale it was a few shades away from being stark white.

It served as a mystery to him and his father, but his mother always patted that spot on their heads with a fond look in her eyes. As if she knew something they didn't. She never said anything about it, so Hitoshi agreed with his father it was a mystery best left unresolved.

"Did you kick any villain butt while you were gone?"

"Yeah, yeah! Tell us!"

“I could.” Hitoshi sagely nodded, “But then you’d be so scared you wouldn’t go to sleep tonight.”

“But Hitoshi-nii-chan!”

“We won’t be scared this time, honest!”

“Yeah! Eri-nee-chan taught us how to be brave, so tell us!”

“Pleeeeeeease?”

Hitoshi winced at their honest and innocent little eyes. He wouldn’t tell them that his latest raid with other heroes uncovered a nasty underground black market with live people as their stock.

“Akira, Ren, stop pestering your brother.” Haru-san sat on a bamboo chair beside the pond, cane in hand as she pulled herself to her feet. As always, she had the warmest smile plastered on her face, “Welcome home, deary.”

“Thanks.” He looked down at his baby sisters as they sank in disappointment, “Dinner should be ready soon, so why don’t we all head upstairs? There might be a surprise later, too.”

“Kay!”

Akira took Ren’s hand, and the twins raced inside together.

Haru chuckled as he offered his arm to guide her inside, “They were helping me count fireflies while you were gone.”

“Oh?”

“They’ve gotten so big already. It won’t be much longer before they’re taller than me.”

Hitoshi smirked when they reached the stairs to the apartment, “We’ll really be in trouble then.” He frowned as he helped her up one step

at a time, “My next paycheck I swear I’m getting you one of those moveable chairs you stick to the wall.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.” Haru patted his arm, her hand soft and wrinkled with age, “Just you and your parents taking me in when I could no longer care for myself is enough.”

“Haru-san, the twins call you their grandmother for a reason.” Hitoshi stated, “You’re part of our family now, so I’ll do anything I can to make your life easier.”

“Such a gentleman.” The twinkles reappeared in her eyes as they reached the top.

He opened the door and let her walk in first before he followed. A whole two steps in his own home and he was assaulted by a puff of fur jumping on his face.

“Merp!”

“AHFSN!” He pulled Lady Stubbs off of his face and glared at her when she purred, then scanned the rest of the apartment. “What the…”

Like downstairs, a mixture of brick walls and deep hardwood floors provided no small amount of comfort and safety. The kitchen had many of the same appliances as the downstairs one, though the furniture in their living room was longer, their couch curved like a crescent moon to hold many people.

“I wasn’t expecting you guys for at least another hour.” Hitoshi stated as he tucked Lady Stubbs under his arm. “Where did you guys come in anyway?”

Manami grinned as she sat at the couch with a cup of tea in hand, “Your bedroom window, naturally.”

Hitoshi balked as Shuichi cackled, the twins sitting on his shoulders, "No regrets!"

"I certainly have regrets." Hitoshi muttered.

"Now don't be like that." Tobita said from the open kitchen, standing in front of a steaming pot, "We decided to come early to help out with dinner."

"Exactly!" Atsuhiro held up a finger, "Unexpected guests should help out as much as possible!"

Manami stared at Atsuhiro as he lounged on the couch, "Really? You haven't helped with anything!"

"Atsuhiro, if you don't mind helping with the dishes?" Risumi asked with a stern smile. "I would like to give my son a hug after not seeing him for a week."

Atsuhiro jumped up from the couch, "Uh, r-right away, miss Shinsou!"

"I told you before to call me Risumi."

"Right..."

She handed him the dishtowel and then walked to Hitoshi. She lay a hand on Hitoshi's cheek before wrapping her arms around him, "Welcome back, Hitoshi."

"Thanks." He sank into her embrace, "When will dinner be ready?"

"Soon." She stepped back and gestured towards the couch, "Haru-san, Hitoshi, why don't you sit down?"

Risumi closed the door as Hitoshi helped Haru into sitting comfortably.

"Uncle Shuichi," Ren gently tugged at Shuichi's hair, "Can you tell us a story?"

“Yeah! One with Joker-nii-chan?”

“Of course!” Shuichi beamed, “I got plenty!”

Laughter. Warmth. Comfort. Safety.

... *Family*.

Hitoshi felt something pleasant curl around his heart as the scent of curry and coffee permeated their apartment soon after.

His brother would be so proud.

Ren sneezed.

Sojiro gave him a stern look, “Are you sure you can look after the store for a few minutes?”

“Boss, I’ll be fine.” Ren chuckled as Sojiro kept staring at him, as if Ren’d disappear as soon as Sojiro turned his back, “And I won’t go anywhere. Today, at least.”

Sojiro ran a hand over his head, his eyes flashing with restrained sadness, “Right. You’re leaving tomorrow.”

Ren pursed his lips.

They had a huge party when they’d first returned on Christmas day, but when it died down Sae approached him with an ultimatum. Turn himself in, add his testimony so they could nail Shido with the fullest force of the law.

He’d spent weeks in juvenile hall. It wasn’t bad, really. Iwai used his connections to make sure Ren was safe and even *comfortable* during his time there, while everyone else worked to gain public favor to reverse his original charges. Makoto and the other Phantom Thieves tracking down the woman from the initial incident was the fatal stroke that turned the tide in his favor.

“I won’t be gone forever, but going home for a while is the best option.” Ren said as he traced the wooden counter with a finger, “I’m going to confront my parents on everything they did to me. If they don’t accept me for who I am, fine. I’ll finish school there and move back to Tokyo permanently. I’ll be back before you know it, Boss.”

Sojiro gave off a long sigh, “When did you grow up so quick? You’ve never mentioned your parents before now.”

Ren smirked, “Spending over half a year in a superhero world really gives you new perspectives on certain things.”

“Right...” Sojiro huffed as he turned away, “Alternate world craziness. I’m too old for that.”

Sojiro cracked a wry smile as he retrieved his hat and coat, giving Ren another long glance before he left.

Ren was left to his own devices in an empty cafe. The regulars have come and gone, so Ren busied himself by washing the remaining dishes in the sink. A few more minutes pass before the bell over the door jingled.

He dried his hands and turned around, but stopped in his tracks at the person sitting on a booth right in front of him. Ren heard the door open, but there had been no footsteps. This stranger wore a white suit and tied his hair up in a ponytail. The small curve of his lips was the only thing visible under the butterfly mask, in a frighteningly familiar shade of velvety blue.

A strange tingle trickled through the air and sent goosebumps down Ren’s arms. This must be... Yes, there was no doubt.

Still, he smiled and stepped to the counter, “What can I get you?”

The man only turned his gaze to the menu for a few moments before pinning Ren with his stare again, “I’ll have the Grumpy Cat Blend.”

Ren nodded and got to work. The man's eyes watched Ren's every move, studying it with a deep intensity that was steadily getting harder to ignore. Ren focused on preparing the coffee beans, the familiar aroma bringing forth memories of another Hierophant, as the man's gaze burned into the side of his head.

Ren held in a sigh of relief as the coffee was poured and he set the cup in front of the only customer in the place. That piercing stare lifted as he took the steaming mug and sipped gingerly.

"Hmmm, this is good. I've never drank coffee much, but this sets it at a whole new level."

Ren smirked, "I'm glad you like it... Philemon."

He froze, mug halfway up for a second sip, but his lips burst into a happy grin, "You know who I am!"

Ren gave him a deadpanned stare, "It's not hard to figure out. Nobody else has ever come in here dressed like *that*, and doesn't give off, well..." Ren waved his hand around.

"Quite." Philemon gave his second sip and set the cup down.

"Why did you come here? If you're looking to start something after all the trouble I went through with Yaldabaoth..."

"Nothing of the sort! I just wanted to congratulate you in person, is all. The hardest game I've ever set up, and you've performed marvelously. You're only the second Wildcard to gain the Universe Arcana too, on top of that."

Ren barely kept his scowl in check, and it was *his* turn to give Philemon a long, hardened stare.

Philemon waved his hand, finishing off the rest of the coffee, "Alright, I can take a hint." He set the cup down and stood, "Thank you for the coffee."

“You’re welcome.” Ren shifted his weight as Philemon turned, “There is one more thing before you go.”

Philemon looked at Ren in time to receive a swift punch to the jaw. The man cried out as he tumbled to the floor on his ass, the stool toppling over with such a loud clamor that four tiny paws raced down the stairs at the commotion.

Morgana stood in the hallway, gaping at the scene.

“Truth suggested I did that if you ever came around.” Ren stated in the thick silence that followed, “And I happened to agree with him.”

Philemon burst into laughter. As bright and clear as a bell, even as he lay a hand over his jaw and the small crack at the bottom of his butterfly mask.

“What the-” Morgana looked back and forth between Philemon and Ren, “Who the heck is this guy, Ren!?”

“Don’t worry your little head about it, Magician.” Philemon said as he pulled himself to his feet, leaving Morgana balking, “I was just taking my leave. Second Wildcard to reach the Universe Arcana, and the *second* to also punch me in the face.” Philemon chuckled again as he turned towards the door, “Live a good and long life, Trickster.”

With that, Philemon left.

Morgana gaped at Ren as he went around the counter and righted the stool. “It’s best not to ask questions, Mona.”

Morgana blinked rapidly, “I-if you say so.”

Ren plucked the cup from the counter just as Boss returned.

“Oh, we had a customer?” Sojiro asked as he hung up his hat.

“Yeah, but I took care of it. Everything is fine.”

And for once...

Everything was fine.

Well, that's that! The end! Holy canoli I never thought we'd see the day where this absolute monster of a story is finally finished.

Special thanks goes to the beta-readers of this story, the true heroes behind the scenes: Lofti Lofi, Mystik_Owl, and Ghostdoru. Honestly, without their constant support and reassurances(especially on my bad health days) this story probably would've stalled for a while in the mid chapter 30s or so.

Another round of special thanks especially goes to Sabronda and all of the merch artists! You know who you are <3

And of course we can't leave out the wonderful readers! Yes, you. Reading this right now. Everyone who took a chance with this story and stuck with it through thick and thin, through all the loop de loops and crazy zig-zags and everything in between! Without you and all of the wonderful comments I've received through this story, I never would've found my true worth as a writer. I'm improved my leaps and bounds thanks to this story and all of you, and there simply aren't enough words to show proper appreciation for everyone that stuck through to the end <3

This isn't the last you'll see of me, either. After a good long break the plan is to try and finish Innocence, Malice, & Nihilism, while working on the other Thieves' stories and the Nier Automata AU. Past those are more fic ideas, such as a Bleach/Okami fic that's been dancing through my brain or a darker vigilante style Deku story... or maybe I'll return to some original books that have been sitting in a drive for years and years and fix those up with everything I've learned from this fic alone.

There isn't much else to say, but I'll leave you all on these parting words...

HEE HO!!
